

THE PALIMPSEST

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Lost in an Iowa Blizzard

The setting down of this experience of the earlier years of Reuben and David Williams has sprung from a desire to place on record, while they may yet be told by one of the participants, the details of what has always been, in our immediate family circle, an exceedingly thrilling incident of my father's boyhood days. The dates, places, and other facts of the story are historically accurate. David Williams is now 76 years old and, retired, lives in Gridley, California. Reuben Williams died in October, 1898, at Trosky, Minnesota, in his 62nd year.

The vast grassy prairies of northern Iowa which have since made it famous as an agricultural State, were at first shunned by the early settlers. No doubt the chief reasons for avoiding the prairies was the difficulty of obtaining fuel, and the absence of protection against the cold winds of winter. As settlements became closer, the more venturesome began to establish prairie homes. Across the miles

of bleak plain, then essentially destitute of obstruction of any kind, the winds had opportunity to gain their full force. In winter the deeply drifted snow obliterated all landmarks. Travel from one point to another was often possible only on snow-shoes, although at times the solid icy crust of the snow would carry the weight of a horse.

Blizzards were of common occurrence and fatalities not infrequent. In the face of a blinding whirl of snow all familiar objects vanished. Dependence on sheer Indian instinct, an intuitive sense of distance and direction, was often the only chance of safety. And especially real was the danger if night came on. Reliance on native instinct, however, was not always assurance of a safe return to shelter. From these early days have come down vivid accounts of suffering endured and lives lost. The story that follows, however, is of two boys who passed a night in the teeth of a bewildering snow-storm and yet escaped with their lives. I have heard it told by my father many times and I give the details here in his own words.¹

IRA A. WILLIAMS

PORTLAND, OREGON, DECEMBER, 1920

The winter of 1856-57 was the hardest the settlers then in Iowa had ever seen. Father had a large family and was poor. We boys all had to work at

¹ This account in a slightly longer form appeared in *The Register and Leader* (Des Moines) February 23, 1913.

whatever we could get to do. Reuben, who was the oldest, had hired out to Mr. Horace Green for a few months. Green lived over on Willow Creek some three miles from our place and about four miles northwest of Masonic Grove (now Mason City). Willow Creek is the outlet to Clear Lake and runs through Mason City. Mr. Green kept a lot of cattle and always had several pairs of big oxen. His house was on the open prairie, without a sign of a tree or other windbreak for protection. Nor had he yet even been able to build any sheds for his cattle.

It was late in December and Mr. Green had gone to Dubuque to get a load of supplies. Halfway across Iowa and back by team in the middle of winter in those days was a long trip and a hard and indefinite task. Even Mrs. Green did not know when he might return. Green's going left her and Reuben to take care of things and look after the stock, and although Reuben was man-grown, I think eighteen or nineteen, he had his hands more than full. I was only twelve years old, but was fully accustomed to doing outdoor work, so I went over to help until Mr. Green came back.

We had had some real hard blizzards before that and there was lots of snow. One of our biggest jobs was watering the cattle. The house was on a spring branch some distance from where this stream joined the main Willow Creek. There had been plenty of water here all along, but the snow had finally drifted in so deeply that it became impossible to keep it open longer for the stock to get down to drink.

I had been there a few days. It was December 28, 1856. The sun rose bright that morning and the atmosphere was as clear as a bell. It was cold but there was no reason whatever for us to expect any great change before night. Reuben and I did up the chores and along about 11 o'clock Mrs. Green said she thought it would be best to take the cattle across to Willow Creek to water them that day. The old watering-hole in the yard was drifted full and, as the day was pleasant, we would save time and easily be back by noon, we thought.

To get to the creek we had to go down the branch a way and then over the point of a ridge between the two streams. This ridge was covered with new breaking and the snow on it was not very deep. We got the cattle across all right and, after a half hour's hard shoveling and chopping, had a large hole in the ice open where they could get down to the water. Naturally, busy as we were, we paid no attention to the sky nor thought anything about the weather. We were out of sight from the buildings yet not over one half or three quarters of a mile from the house.

We had worked hard and were nearly through watering the last of four or five calves that were in the herd. It must have been about one o'clock in the afternoon. Reuben was down dipping out water for the calves with a pail we had carried with us. Without warning of any kind the storm burst upon us. A blast of wind swept down the bank behind

which we were working and in a second we were completely enveloped in the whirling snow that filled the air full.

This didn't frighten us any for it was a common enough experience. Our first thought was to get the cattle back to the house. Buttoning tight our short coats and picking up the shovel and ax, we tried to drive them back the way they had come. It was straight against the wind, which was already so stiff we could scarcely stand in the face of it, and penetratingly cold. They refused to go. We knew that if only some of the big steers would make a start towards home, the rest would follow. But each time we managed to get them headed about they would veer this way and that, and finally come to a determined standstill, their tails to the wind.

If there had been a nice warm barn at home, or even a shed awaiting them, it would have been different. But outside of the low, hay-covered stable where Green kept his horses there was nothing there to break the force of the wind in the least. Behind this and in the lee of a small hay-stack they were in the habit of huddling together, though little more protected than in the open field. An incentive for the animals to face the cutting wind across the bare field in the direction of home was, therefore, all but lacking. With shelter ahead of him a steer will put his head down and buck almost any kind of a wind that does not actually blow him backwards. But to convince them to move against their inclinations proved quite another matter.

Next we undertook to get the oxen started. They were well-broken and valuable animals. To let them stray, of all times in Mr. Green's absence, was certainly the last thing to be thought of. Obedient and willing brutes though they were in the yoke, our commands in the face of the blinding blizzard went entirely unheeded. It seemed like hours that we toiled with those cattle. Reuben had been left in charge of the stock and felt all of a man's responsibility for their safety. He was determined to take them back to shelter. So we kept doggedly at it until we were both tired completely out. It was of no use. The cattle became so badly scattered and the intensity of the storm had increased so much that we were compelled to give up. It had also rapidly grown colder. We were blinded by the snow, and pieces of ice blown from the old snow crust cut our faces like a knife.

So we struck the ax and shovel in the snow and left them. They were found afterwards out there on the breaking. From there I am certain we could have made our way against the storm to the house. I urged Reuben to go home and let the cattle take care of themselves. But he wouldn't hear to going back without them.

A short distance down the other side of the creek from where we had watered the stock was a small grove of crab-apple trees, underbrush and willows. We knew we could get to this and there be protected from the wind. In the hope that the storm might

soon break so that we could go out and round up the cattle before night, we made for this crab-apple thicket. To reach it we crossed the main road running between Masonic Grove and Clear Lake. It was plainly marked in the otherwise unbroken white by the flanking lines of weeds whose tops still showed above the snow. When we came to the road I again remonstrated. Knowing that Reuben in his present frame of mind could not be persuaded to face Mrs. Green without the stock, I suggested following the road to Masonic Grove to wait until the blizzard eased up somewhat. I was getting fearfully cold. He said "No", that we would be all right, still intending, he confessed, to make another trial with the cattle as soon as we warmed up a bit in the shelter of the grove.

Within the thicket the air was quiet, and by "strapping" our hands and jumping about we were soon warm enough. I suppose it was at least three or four o'clock in the afternoon by this time. The storm continued to increase in violence outside. To think of venturing out again after the stock would be clearly foolhardy, yet I could not gain Reuben's consent to go back without them. It had not occurred to either of us then that we ourselves might be in any danger.

Hours passed. Daylight began to fade and we knew that night was coming on. The wind did not reach us, but to keep up circulation in the biting cold we started a path in the snow around a clump

of trees in the center of the thicket. It was perhaps three or four rods around the circle. We took turns. First one, then the other, would take the path and walk, or trot, or run, till our blood tingled. Between times we squatted in the snow, back against a tree, until beginning numbness warned us it was time to run again.

After darkness came on we could tell little about the progress of the storm. An occasional trip to the edge of the thicket, however, was sufficient to assure us of the unabated fury of the wind, and we thought the temperature was still going down. Reuben was finally compelled to abandon hope of getting any of the stock back before morning. What with our continued exercises and intermittent breathing spells, we kept ourselves quite comfortable, and the soft snow was soon packed solid in our little circuit. We did not know the time, but it must have been about midnight when the stars shone out straight above us, and it looked as if the clouds were clearing away.

Within our friendly shelter we could have securely spent the rest of the night. But at the farthest the house was not over a mile away, and we knew Mrs. Green would be exceedingly anxious over our long absence. So Reuben decided that we should leave the grove, the thought that we might not be able to go straight to the Green's house not entering either of our minds. We were warm to start, had our directions true, and knew every inch of the ground.

As I recall it now, I think I begged Reuben to stay where we were until daylight. He was obdurate and we started out. No doubt discomfiture over the loss of the cattle still rankled within him. Outside of the thicket was a raging snowstorm. Confident of our course, we floundered through the drifts, at the start, square against the storm; the sharp hurtling scales of ice cutting our faces and the floury snow filling our nostrils and eyes. On we pushed towards where Mrs. Green's kindly beacon should have guided us to safety. This way and that we turned in the darkness, the sense of our exact whereabouts growing more and more vague, yet certain in the hope that intuition would soon point us to the door. We were lost.

Failing to find the house, our next thought was, of course, to return to the crab-apple thicket. But it, too, was not to be found. The wild blackness of the night had swallowed it up. Once voluntarily scorning its kindly protection, it now eluded us; and we were left to fight alone our one-sided battle with the elements.

It was almost impossible for us to realize that we were actually lost. Here we were in a region, every foot of which was familiar ground in time of calm. And yet, so completely was the recognition of all familiar landmarks closed to us that, in our bewilderment, we knew neither north, south, east, nor west. The realization, however, that shelter must be found was not slow in coming, for the exertion

of merely keeping in motion was rapidly telling on me, and the gripping cold was sinking to the marrow. To stop anywhere within the sweep of the wind we knew must mean certain death. To go aimlessly on and on in the face of the storm was equally certain to mean pure physical exhaustion, and then — but although Reuben's maturer mind may have sensed already the tragic possibility, through his cheering encouragement no thought of such an ending came to me.

We went with the storm. Long, long we blundered ahead. Reuben half dragged, half carried me on. One step the snow bore our weight, the next we floundered in it. At last, after what seemed miles, we tumbled down a steep bank. I had been begging Reuben to let me stop. I was tired out, cold and sleepy. Only too well did my big brother recognize these symptoms. He had urged me on, talked to me, chaffed me, dragged and pushed me along, all but kicked and pommelled me, anything to ward off and stay the progress of the cold which was slowly but surely stiffening my very blood.

Behind the bank where we had fallen the wind did not reach with its full fury. I told Reuben I was going to rest here. I could go no further. All of his arguments were of no avail. My feet were numb. I was completely exhausted. I could not walk, and he, though strong as an ox, saw disaster ahead for both of us if he undertook to carry me. I wanted to go to sleep.

Out of the wind a little I lay down in the snow. All the way along Reuben had clung to me with first one hand then the other. I do not think I had any mittens. I know I tried to keep my hands from freezing by walking with them in my pockets. Reuben's hands were bare. While he was dipping water for the calves he had soaked two fingers of the glove on his left hand and they had frozen stiff. He took his gloves off while we were in the crab-apple thicket and stuck them up in the crotch of a tree. We found them there afterwards where he had placed them.

I do not know how long I lay there. The snow quickly drifted over me. Reuben did not give up, but kept moving all night long. He paced back and forth in the snow. I can only recall that he constantly talked to me. So long as I would answer, he knew I was awake. We had heard of persons saving their lives by burrowing into the snow out of the biting wind. In my benumbed condition I did not reason. But I am certain that Reuben was thoroughly conscious of the danger of this. It was plainly now a drawn battle for our lives. Chagrin over the loss of the cattle had nerved rather than weakened him for the struggle. And an indomitable pride of responsibility for me bore him up against the almost irresistible desire to rest and to sleep that now beset him.

Throughout the night his vigil did not cease. I must have fallen asleep. It seemed to me I was

warm and comfortable. The snow had covered me over completely, only the toe of one of my boots remaining in sight to show where I lay buried. They were new boots with red tops that my uncle had given me when I started to walk to Iowa from our old home in Illinois the summer before.

Daylight slowly came. As surroundings began to be visible, the place appeared more and more familiar. Yet it was not until near sunrise that Reuben could make out that we were within calling distance of one of the houses in Masonic Grove (now Mason City). It was fully four miles back to the little crab-apple grove, though how much farther we had wandered since leaving it we would never know.

I was brought back to a drowsy consciousness by being pulled out of the snow by Reuben. The air was so cold it seemed fairly blue, and its cutting bitterness struck into my flesh like steel. The rising sun shone large and the guardian sun-dogs, one on either side, betokened the keenness of the opening day. I tried to walk, but my feet were dead. As if wooden, my benumbed body refused to respond to a still more feeble will. Reuben's efforts to get me towards the house were fruitless. The last I recall was hearing him shout to some one.

When I came to I was in bed. My hands were being rubbed with snow. My new leather boots had been cut from my feet which now rested in melting ice. As full consciousness returned, I learned how we had at first been taken for Indians; and how,

when it was known that we were actually in distress, Mr. James Jenkins and Mr. Tenure had come out and carried me in. Dr. Huntley had been at once sent for. Reuben had followed me into the house and had gone straight to the fire. Both of his hands were frozen stiff, as were mine, and his feet were clumps of ice. I have heard him say that he never again suffered such anguish as the soul-crazing pangs of returning feeling that racked his chilled body while he stood there beginning to thaw out. All attention was at first given to me, of course, and it was only after I was seen to be out of danger that it appeared to any one that Reuben might be at all badly frozen. The torpid pallor of pain and exhaustion already showed in his twitching face and he reeled at every step. The doctor at once applied ice to his hands and feet. Though belated, this measure probably saved to him the use of these members. Casings of solid ice formed around our feet, then slowly melted away as the blood sluggishly gained its way into them again.

It was hours before the frost was all drawn out. Much of this time I was in a partial stupor. I think neither of us suffered much severe pain after the first aching paroxysms were over. But the very joy of relaxation after the terrible strain of the past night was in itself overpowering. I roused repeatedly from a disturbed sleep in which I was again struggling with the raging storm, again going through, in all its horror, the frightful experience of the night before.

Word was at once sent to Mrs. Green that we were safe. She was thus prepared to break the news to mother and father who happened to drive over early that morning. It had been one of the hardest storms of the winter and they, knowing that Mr. Green was away, had come to see how we boys were getting on. As he unfastened the ox-team, father jokingly called out, "Don't see anything of the boys this morning; frozen up, are they?" "Guess they must be", Mrs. Green replied, in the same bantering tone, "They've been since eleven o'clock yesterday morning watering the stock over on the Willow, and they're only four miles away in Masonic Grove now". Even she was not then aware of how perilous an experience traversing that four miles had been to us.

So father at once came on down expecting to take us back to Green's to hunt up the lost cattle. Mrs. Green's anxiety was one of genuine motherly interest in us boys, as much as of responsibility for the security of her husband's property. She told mother that morning how she had kept a light in the window the night through, and of how she rang the old cow-bell for us. When darkness came on and we did not return, she knew we were in trouble. All through that wild night she kept up the vigil. She had gone out into the storm and clanged the old bell until out of breath, and until the sting of the frigid blast drove her back to the fireside. Over and over, and as long as strength held out had the plucky

woman kept it up. We have never wondered that its feeble tones failed to reach our ears in the howling storm, though how close to its call we may really have been we shall never know.

The days that followed were languishing ones, but physically sturdy as we were, recovery was fairly rapid. Medical attention was of course necessary. Although present day anaesthetics were then unknown and surgical instruments crude, we have never attributed to their absence the fact that we found ourselves crippled for the rest of our days. The ministrations of a devoted mother through the long days of convalescence, and encouragement and care from a father of stern but devoutly religious temperament, were the inspiring influences which made seem so much worth while the life that had been spared us.