The Mail Was Late

Thursday, January 24, 1867, had been a clear day, but by half past four in the afternoon, when Charles Hale, driver of the North Western stage, started from Twin Lakes to take the mail to Fort Dodge, it had begun to snow. Ordinarily he could reach his destination, some twenty-five miles away, yet that night. But Charles Hale was an experienced stage driver who knew Iowa winters and so, as he took charge of the two horses hitched to the open sleigh containing the mail from Sioux City, he said that he would spend the night, if the weather became worse, at Yates Settlement ten miles east of the lakes. This now forgotten "town" lay two or three miles southeast of present-day Manson in Calhoun County.

The road was a mere track on the prairie, with no ditches, no fences, no markers of any kind to distinguish it from the rest of the level plain if snow covered the ground. The only signpost along all those ten miles was a single abandoned cabin. But the mail must go through, and so Hale started according to schedule.

At first it was a delightful sleigh ride through the gently falling snow, with food and warmth to

look forward to at the next station. Then the flakes began to fall thicker and faster. The northeast wind increased in violence with each passing minute. Still, the deserted cabin had been passed, and so the driver knew he had kept on the route that far.

When Hale thought he must be within a mile or two of Yates Settlement he stopped trying to guide the horses, trusting that they instinctively would find a way to the stage station there. The curtain of snow was so thick, the night so dark that he could see nothing beyond the heads of his horses; the wind blew so strongly that he could not have looked into it if there had been light to reveal familiar landmarks.

The horses plodded on and on. They should have reached the "settlement" by this time. There was but one dreadful conclusion to draw: they must be off the road. But were they to the north? Were they to the south? Could they have passed those few buildings in the storm? It would be hopeless to head into that blizzard to look longer for a couple of cabins on the prairie; it might not be too late to retrace the way to the lonely cabin beside the road. That at least would offer more shelter than an open sleigh. The horses could follow the trail they had just made. For a mile this was not difficult, but the storm was increasing

in fury and all marks in the snow were soon obliterated. Hale realized then that he was lost — lost on the empty prairie in a blizzard.

However terrible his plight, he did not become panic stricken. Experienced pioneer that he was, he had had the wisdom to prepare for a cold trip, wearing two flannel shirts, two pairs of trousers, two heavy coats, double mittens, and buffalo overshoes over his heavy boots. Covering all this, he wore a "large heavy Rubber overcoat". Not even such clothing would keep a motionless person from freezing, with the temperature sinking toward fifteen below and the wind changing to the northwest. The horses had to be kept moving throughout an entire night of storm that paralyzed the region. Farther south and east trains were stalled, no stages left their stations, and drift-blocked streets in towns kept business at a standstill for two days.

All that night and into Friday, while snow was "sifting through every crevice of our best houses," those horses shuffled on aimlessly among the drifts. No sun indicated the east; there was no compass more dependable than the unstable northern gale.

Eighteen slow hours of constant plodding brought the horses to the end of their ability to pull the sleigh. In spite of his own dangerous

position, Hale unhitched his team, hoping that their instinct might guide them to the nearest stable. If he had expected to follow them, it proved impossible to do so in the storm, and they were soon out of sight.

Being north of the trail, as he thought, he could travel with the wind and so keep in a general southernly direction. He hoped for a constant wind. Something — a rut, perhaps, or a familiar contour — might tell him that he had reached the road. He would have to go hungry, for food of no sort had he brought along. His thirst could be quenched with snow, though it would neither warm nor stimulate him.

During the hours of gray daylight the snow continued to fall and drift. The howling wind aggravated the cold that was far below zero as Hale stumbled through the deepening drifts. His nose, face, and ears froze; his feet stiffened; his hands began to freeze, even though he kept moving, moving, moving. The hours succeeded each other until dark day gave way to darker night while still the hungry, exhausted stage driver plodded on. Feeling near the end of endurance, he paused from time to time to rest. Wisely not surrendering to the temptation to lie down, he nevertheless fell asleep standing, only to awaken as he toppled into the snow. This experience was repeated time

after time that Friday night, the second he had spent in the open.

As Saturday's dawn approached, the snow finally ceased falling and the wind died away. But there was no easing of the intense cold. Scanning the horizon, Hale found no sign of tree or smoke or cabin. The sun indicated directions, but that availed little for he did not know where he stood.

This was a crucial moment. Should he do the easy thing — let fatigue and sleep claim him, little caring that he probably would never awaken? No pioneer harbored such thoughts. As long as a man was able to move he had to stagger on and hope. After that decision Hale's mind must have ceased to function actively. He started toward the east, knowing that if he could keep this direction he would in time reach the valley of the Des Moines River. Once at the river, going either upstream or downstream would bring him to some settler's cabin.

Again the stupefying struggle was resumed, step by step with clumsy, stiff feet, through the drifts. A pause, sleepiness, a rude awakening by falling in the snow, and on again. Saturday afternoon passed; evening merged into night; and night at long last was followed by clear, cold Sunday with the north wind blowing again.

Numbed and weak, Hale still kept his frozen face toward the east. A little before noon he saw a grove in the distance and moved on with renewed hope, if with no greater speed. He neither knew nor cared that he was approaching Lost Grove, the patch of trees that gave Lost Grove Township in Webster County its name. This meant that he was west of the present town of Harcourt, some seventeen miles south of Fort Dodge and more than twenty-five miles as the crow flies from Twin Lakes. Hale, of course, did not know this; trees to him meant the edge of timber along the river and the possibility of a cabin. At worst, it would mean shelter from the wind, even though he could not make a fire in the snow.

Inspired to new effort, he struggled on. With strength gone, progress was tragically slow. Darkness closed in while he was still on the prairie, faced with another night in the open. By continuing, if his strength should not fail completely, he might reach the trees; on the other hand, a small grove could easily be missed in the dark and it might not be regained on the morrow, even if he were still able to walk. Hale realized that it would not be wise to seek the grove in the dark. Nor could he continue to keep in motion for even part of another night, the fourth since leaving Twin Lakes, so he selected a huge drift, scooped out a

small cave, crawled in, and pulled snow on top of himself. Falling asleep he dreamed that he finally had reached Fort Dodge.

Fortunately the driver did awaken in the early dawn of Monday, exhausted, crippled, and scarcely able to dig his way out of the snow. The morning light showed Lost Grove a mile away. He tried to start toward it, only to discover that his frozen limbs would no longer obey his mind. The only way he could "walk" was to use his frozen hands to lift one foot, move it forward, set it down, and then repeat the gruelling process with the other foot.

A mile of this painful progress finally brought Hale to the trees, where he made the awful discovery that they formed only an island on the prairie, containing neither inhabitants nor shelter. The one thing that must have saved this tortured man from collapse was the sight of a house a mile and a half beyond the grove. Forward again, but now his feet gave out entirely. He could only crawl through the deep drifts. Occasionally he tried a few steps, but inevitably he fell into the snow. Eight terrible hours were consumed in covering the two and a half miles from the place where he had slept to the cabin on the prairie beyond the grove.

For four days and four nights, through the

winter's worst blizzard, this lost man had struggled many more than the airline thirty miles from the lakes to this claim of S. Hicks, five miles west of Dayton, then known as West Dayton, where willing hands gave him first aid.

While Hale was being treated and fed, the news was sent as soon as possible to Fort Dodge. The messenger, Mr. Rifenbary from West Dayton, reached Fort Dodge on Wednesday night. The next morning, E. H. Albee, manager of the local stage station, sent a team and wagon to bring the injured driver to Fort Dodge, if he could be moved. Once in Fort Dodge, the frozen and exhausted man was placed in the care of Dr. Stephen B. Olney, the town's first physician, who believed he had a chance to live, though scarred, crippled, and lacking an ear.

It should not be supposed that during all this time the citizens of Fort Dodge were calmly sitting beside their warm stoves waiting for the mail to come in. That is all any one could have done during the day of the storm, and no one worried at first. The people at Twin Lakes took it for granted that the driver would have reached Yates Settlement; at Fort Dodge it was supposed that he would not have left the lakes in the face of a storm. If he had lost his way he would be beyond help and it would be hopeless and dangerous for

others to go out on the prairie in such a blizzard to search two counties for him.

As soon as the storm abated and it was learned that the stage had never reached Yates Settlement, searchers set out from Twin Lakes, and the news was sent to E. H. Albee at Fort Dodge. Within a mile of the Yates home, some tracks were found. How these survived the storm is not explained, but apparently surface snow had blown away, exposing frozen ruts to give evidence that the team had made several circles and then started off to the northeast and into oblivion.

The pathetic hunt went on, not with any hope of finding the stage driver alive, but to save his remains from the animals and to salvage the mail. The search was still in progress when the news came from Dayton that Hale was alive and being given the best care that a pioneer home afforded.

Before the end of the following week the stage itself was found, not north of the road as Hale had mistakenly believed when he turned the horses loose, but several miles south of it and about halfway between Yates Settlement and Fort Dodge. The spot was approximately two or three miles southeast of the present railroad junction of Tara. Only one horse was found, and it had frozen to death near the sleigh.

Hale's recovery was slow. On February 23rd,

a month after the start of his adventure, Doctor Olney found it necessary to amputate parts of both feet. The driver continued to show the same courage in pain that he had shown on the prairie in the blizzard. A. E. Haskell, superintendent of the North Western Stage Company, whose only loss was two horses, "with his accustomed liberality . . . spared no expense in providing the best of treatment, care and medical attendance that could be procured."

Even in those hardy times, Charles Hale's exploit was considered remarkable. It was news, even in the East. A New York clergyman, having read a newspaper account of the stage driver's experience, immediately mailed him a donation of ten dollars.

Since Hale was a poor man hitherto dependent on his wages for a living and now hopelessly crippled for life, the editor of the *Iowa North West* suggested that the ladies of Fort Dodge give a benefit entertainment or concert for him. Whether the ladies took the hint is not known, but the young men of Fort Dodge organized a "musical band" to give benefit concerts for Hale, the first of which netted thirty dollars. After that the unfortunate man, in the opinion of the local editor, ceased to be newsworthy. And so his saga ends.

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