11th January 2013 The Children's Blizzard

THE CHILDREN'S BLIZZARD
HORROR ON THE GREAT PLAINS

On this date, January 11, 1888, an unseasonably warm current of air moved out of the Caribbean and surged north into the American Great Plains. It was the first in a series of events – a perfect storm that would create a blizzard that would change the face of American history forever.

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Early the following morning, a dark cloud appeared on the horizon. The air grew still for a long, eerie moment and then the sky began to roar and a wall of ice dust blasted the prairie. Every house, barn, fence row, wagon and living thing was instantly covered with shattered crystals, blinding, suffocating, smothering and burying anything exposed to the wind. The cold front raced across the open landscape, freezing everything in its path.

It swept across Montana first, and then buried North Dakota around the time that farmers were doing their early morning chores. South Dakota was frozen as children were finishing their morning recess at school and in Nebraska, school clocks were nearing the time for dismissal. In three minutes, temperatures in every region dropped more than 18 degrees. As night fell, the temperature kept dropping steadily, hour after hour, deluged by the cold from the northwest. The cold front brought snow, ice and subzero temperatures – and it also brought death.

By the morning of Friday, January 13, hundreds of people lay dead on the Dakota and Nebraska prairie, many of them children who had fled – or been sent home from – country schools at the same time the wind shifted and the sky was exploding.

It was a disaster created by bad luck and bad timing. The January blizzard – which has become known as the “Children’s Blizzard” or the “Schoolhouse Blizzard” – affected an entire region and its population. There was not a family among the farmers, settlers and town-dwellers on the prairie who was not personally affected by death caused by the storm, or who at least knew another family that was. It was a terrifying event and after it passed, the region was never the same again.

The series of events that created the Children’s Blizzard began in the frigidly cold sections of western Canada, where the month of January is typically brutal. In the winter days of late 1887 and early 1888, the chilling fields of the Canadian northwest were particularly intense and a great mass of arctic air slowly expanded southward and continued to cool over the snow-covered plains. By the start of the second week of January, the cold air mass sat over the western Canadian prairies with temperature readings at places like Medicine Hat in Alberta resting at 18 degrees below zero.

Unfortunately, there was little warning for residents of the American prairie about the cold temperatures that were coming. In the late 1880s, weather observations were few across most of the continent and even sparser in the western lands away from the coast. In those days, the U.S. Army Signal Corps provided weather services for the nation, including a daily weather map series that was started in 1871.

Using telegraph messages, weather stations across the country reported in to a central hub that compiled the readings for the map. While they did not provide the kind of accuracy that we have today, the maps did show the broad features of the march of weather across the continent. Tragically, that was not enough. Those in charge of preparing and disseminating the “indications” (as forecasts were called in those days) did not see the danger of the cold front and the storm until it was too late. But the men of the Signal Corps were not trained meteorologists by today’s level of accreditation -- few in America were. The state of the science of weather forecasting was in the early days of development in 1888.

There was no one to blame for the storm – it was merely deadly bad luck that claimed so many lives.

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In early January, a small storm system developed over western Colorado and it dragged some of the frigid Canadian air into Montana and Wyoming. Meanwhile, on January 11, a mass of unseasonably mild tropical air moved out of the Gulf of Mexico and streamed northward over Texas and Oklahoma. The morning temperatures on the Plains began to rise. Those who lived in the region were thrilled with what they believed was a "January thaw." The temperature continued to rise throughout the night, and on the morning of January 12, it was downright balmy. Children went to school wearing light coats and farmers went about their chores without the gloves and mufflers they had needed for the last few weeks.

The warm air surged north from the Gulf as the pool of cold air to the north remained intact. The proximity of these two very different air masses could be compared to holding a burning match next to a powder keg. High above the earth, a strong jet stream blew over the boundary between the two fronts, pushing the match ever closer to the gunpowder until finally it was lit. The result was an explosive storm that made history.

As the storm finally came together, it moved at a breakneck pace throughout the day, from Montana in the early hours of January 12, crossing the Dakota Territory in the late morning and racing into Nebraska by the middle of the afternoon. The rise in temperature overnight was followed by an even more rapid plummeting of the mercury in the wake of the storm. The winds began to rise in the fury of the storm. A Signal Corps observer named Frank L. Harrod wrote: "Sudden and fierce change of wind from south to north." Then, "heavy blinding snow." The litany of "fierce winds," "blinding snow," "heavy drifting," and "bone-chilling drops in temperature" was repeated over and over again in the Signal Corps reports as the storm system rushed to the south and east.

The forecasters of the Signal Corps had their barometers to warn them that something terrible was about to happen but out on the prairie and in the one-room schoolhouses and on the streets of the hastily built railroad towns, the blizzard took people utterly by surprise.

To those who happened to be standing outside, it looked as though the northwest sky was suddenly bulging and ripping open. In nearly every account of the storm, there runs the same thread, often in the same words – there had never been anything like it before. Settlers who had been on the plains for years had seen plenty of bad storms in the past, including one they called the "Snow Winter" in 1880-1881 that literally buried the region under dozens of feet of snow, but they had never seen a storm come up so quickly or hit so violently.

A newspaper story carried an account by an unnamed Dakota schoolboy who said, "We were out playing in our shirtsleeves, without hats or mittens. Suddenly we looked up and saw something rolling toward us with great fury from the northwest, making a loud noise. It looked like a long string of big bales of cotton, each one bound tightly with heavy cords of silver, and then all tied together with great silvery ropes. The broad front of these cotton bales looked to be about twenty-five feet high; above them it was perfectly clear. The phenomenon was so unusual that it scared us children, and several of us ran into the schoolhouse and screamed to the teacher to come out quickly and see what was happening." When the storm reached the schoolhouse a few minutes later, it hit "with such force that it nearly moved it off its cobblestone foundation. And the roar of the wind was indescribable."

Darkness fell…. "darkness that might be felt," as one farmer wrote. "You could hardly see your hand before you or draw your breath and that with the intense cold roaring wind and darkness it would appall the stoutest heart."

Many wrote that the arrival of the storm was preceded by a loud roar, like that of a train approaching on the empty landscape. It was a roar that they not only heard but felt inside their guts. The sound was the wind at the knife edge of the cold front, smashing the snow into powder. The turbulence behind the front was so incredible that the air was rolling over at the same time that it was coming down. The effect was like putting snow and ice into a grinder.

By 1:00 p.m. on January 12, the cold front had spread over almost all of the Dakota Territory, the western two-thirds of Nebraska and the northwestern edge of Minnesota. Over the next two hours, it picked up speed as it spread over the most populated section of the prairie. There was no way of warning anyone of the danger that was coming. The weather stations hoisted cold wave flags, to warn of impending

temperature drops, but they were useless except for those who lived near the Signal Corps outposts. Even then, visibility was so bad during the storm that the flags were largely invisible unless someone was only a few feet away. The cold wave warnings were meant as a public service, but the people of the region were on their own when the blizzard hit.

This was especially true with the schoolteachers, many of whom were barely older than the children they taught. As the blizzard broke against the northwest walls of the schoolhouses, every teacher was faced with the choice of keeping their children at the school or sending them home. Many of the teachers were familiar with the danger of winter storms but didn't have the necessary fuel for the school stoves that would keep the children warm. They believed they would be safer at home. At some point, it became a choice of freezing where they were or attempting to go out into the storm and seek other shelter.

Others had enough fuel to make it through the night. Teacher Seymour H. Dopp of Pawnee City, Nebraska, kept his 17 students at the schoolhouse overnight. The building stayed warm and the following morning, worried parents managed the snow-drifted roads to find the safe but hungry students had been sheltered from the storm. That afternoon, Dopp returned to his home in Table Rock to find the teacher at the school in that community had made a different decision. His 11-year-old daughter Avis and her classmates had been released from school. She suffered frostbite on her one-block trek home.

But not all of the teachers on the prairie could keep their children warm during the bitter night of January 12. Minnie Mae Freeman, who was still in her teens, was one of the many teachers who faced the problem of freezing or fleeing in the storm. She had 16 students, some of them almost as old as she was, at her country schoolhouse near Ord, just east of the Nebraska Sand Hills. The schoolhouse was made from sod, which was unusual for a school on the prairie, and had a crude door attached by leather hinges and a roof of tarpaper with sod laid over it. Around noon, the first blast of the storm tore the door off its hinges and blew it back into the schoolroom. A couple of the boys helped Minnie get the door back up, but it quickly blew off again. This time, she had them nail it shut. Minnie knew she had enough coal to heat the schoolhouse all night and she was determined to stay there and to keep the children inside.

But that plan quickly fell apart. A gust of wind ripped off a section of the tarpaper where the sod had fallen away and Minnie realized that they would all die if they tried to stay in the school. The family with whom she boarded lived a half mile north of the school and she decided that the best plan was to take them there for the night. Legend has it that she found a length of rope and tied the children to one another before they set out, but others claim this tale was cooked up by the newspapers in the aftermath of the storm. Regardless, all of Minnie's students stayed together and made

it safely to the home where she boarded. Later, Minnie Freeman always insisted that she had done what anyone would have done that day, but in fact, many older and more experienced teachers failed to act as quickly and as sensibly.

The storm descended on the town of Wessington Springs soon after it hit Ord. From noon until 4:00 p.m., teacher May Hunt did her best to carry on in the eerie, blowing twilight with the seven students who had come to school that day. When the fuel ran out that afternoon, May and the children were suddenly faced with the choice of freezing or fleeing. May Hunt chose to go…

Just 140 yards west of the school, on the other side of a large ravine, was a farmhouse that belonged to the Hinner family. The children in school that day – Fred and Charles Weeks, the three oldest children of Reverend S.F. Huntley and his wife, Abi, and Frank and Addie Knieriem – all lived at least three-quarters of a mile away. The Hinner house looked as though it was the best and safest option.

The ravine was what worried May the most. It was five feet deep and the sides were steep. There was a makeshift bridge that had been placed across it, but it would be hard to find in the blinding storm. If they missed the bridge, the children could fall into the ravine and with the drifting snow, the little ones would have a hard time getting out. May counted herself lucky that Fred Weeks had come to school that day. At 18, he was her oldest pupil, a big, shy, dark-haired farm boy, and when May told him her plan, Fred volunteered to go scouting. If he could find the bridge, he'd clear a path and then come back for the others.

Fred was gone for a half an hour while the rest of the group waiting around the embers of the dying fire. When he finally came back, the younger children cheered. He had found the bridge and had walked back and forth two times between it and the school in order to clear a path. They would do fine as long as they followed close behind him. Once he got them across the ravine, they would be able to make it to the Hinner house.

It was 4:30 before the students were ready to leave. Addie Knieriem, one of the youngest girls, was wearing thin, dainty little shoes (it had been warm when students came to school that morning), so May wound scarves around her feet to keep them from freezing. Fred ventured back outside first and everyone joined hands behind him in a human chain. In just the few minutes after Fred's return, the storm had grown worse. The tracks that he had made in the snow were completely drifted over. There was no sign of the bridge that he had managed to find two times.

The school and the Hinner house were only separated by 140 yards – the length of a football field and a half – and on a clear day, even the youngest child could have walked it in less than 10 minutes. But in the storm,

blinded, deafened and barely able to breathe in the cold wind, the best-laid plans went awry. It was the ravine that brought on the initial panic. Stepping out where he believed the bridge to be, Fred fell through the snow that had drifted into the ditch and dragged the others down with him. They crashed into the cold snow in a tangle that would have been funny if not for the horror of the storm and the terror being felt by the children. As they wrapped themselves back in their coats and scarves and struggled out of the snow, precious minutes and body heat were wasted during their efforts.

Somehow, they managed to make it up out of the ravine, determined to march to the rest of the way to the Hinner house. Fred led the way, praying that he was going in the right direction. With every step, he expected to catch a glimpse of the house ahead of them through the gray snow. By now, the sun had set and what little light remained was rapidly fading from the sky.

Their dogged determination drained the energy from their bodies until they became exhausted to the point of near collapse. It was only 100 yards to the house but they fought the elements in thin cotton clothing with their eyelashes caked with ice and frozen shut and masks of ice hanging from their faces. They plunged ahead in a storm during which cattle died standing up, perishing from suffocation before they froze solid. When they had climbed out of the ravine, the students were soaking wet and nearly blind. Most had lost the use of their fingers. Addie Knieriem had no sensation in her toes. Panic had stolen what little heat remained inside of their bodies and within minutes, all of the children except for Fred and his brother were ready to give up.

Fred pushed them on and when suddenly he stumbled on the flax straw pile that belonged to the Hinners, he believed they were saved. The party could shelter inside the straw for a few minutes while he went to look for the farmhouse. Then he could come back and lead them to safety. The group huddled inside while Fred and two other boys searched for the house. They went back into the storm and began to walk around the straw pile in ever-larger circles. One time around, then a few steps farther, and they'd circle it again. They shouted as loud as they could and held out their arms in front of them, hoping to brush against the side of a building, a piece of equipment, anything at all. They looked as hard as they could but could see nothing. They heard nothing but the howling wind. At least they had the rope from the aprons to guide them back to the hay pile because without it, they would have surely wandered into the storm and froze to death.

May Hunt refused to give up. All eight of them shouted for help, praying the Hinners would hear them, until their voices gave out. No one came to their rescue. When the smaller children began to shiver, May directed Fred to dig deeper into the hay pile, making a larger cave where all of

them could pile together and ride out the storm. Without being asked, Fred took the place at the mouth of the hay cave, which was the coldest and most exposed spot. He did the best that he could to shelter the others. They had not eaten since noon. They had no adequate clothing, no blankets or gloves, and few had even worn hats. For a while they told stories and sang songs, but eventually the children began to fade. May did all that she could to keep them awake, even when they wept from fear, hunger and cold.

Fred Weeks, whose extraordinary bravery would be lauded following the storm, kept guard at the mouth of the hay cave and climbed out every few hours to check on the progress of the blizzard. At 4:00 a.m., he went out to see that the air had cleared, there were stars overhead and there, less than 100 yards away, was the Hinner farmhouse for which he had searched so desperately. He staggered to the house on frozen feet and shouted and pounded on the door until Mr. Hinner answered.

May and the children were rescued. They toddled into the house, except for Addie. In the excitement of the rescue, no one noticed at first that something was wrong with Addie Knieriem. She was unable to stand up and had to be pulled out of the hay pile. They quickly realized that it was her feet. They had gotten wet when she fell into the ravine and after taking shelter in the haystack, her shoes and stockings had frozen solid. As she huddled in the cave, the warmth drained out of her feet and they remained encased in ice, wool and leather all night. At some point, her feet turned into ice.

Fred carried her into the house and they removed her shoes and stockings. May Hunt was appalled – she had never seen human flesh that looked like that before. Frostbite had set in and Addie's feet looked like grayish purple marble. In those days, the standard home remedy for frostbite was to rub the frozen flesh with snow and then let it thaw gradually in warm water. Things would be done differently today, using warm water, rehydration with warm fluids and antibiotics, but even modern medicine likely could not have saved Addie's feet. Eventually, gangrene set in and one foot was amputated. The other was saved, but she lost all of her toes.

We will never know how many spent the night out on the prairie, but it was likely in the thousands. They were stranded in the southern and eastern parts of the Dakota Territory, in the eastern part of Nebraska and in southwestern Minnesota. The northern section of Dakota was largely spared because the storm came through so early that people stayed home and kept their children inside. Iowa, although it received the heaviest snow, suffered few casualties; the storm didn't arrive there until late in the day, when night was falling and the farmers and their children were safely at home. But in southern Dakota and Nebraska, the timing of the storm could not have been worse and many of those overtaken by the storm

perished – and more than 20 percent of them were children.

Their suffering was terrible. They froze alone or with their parents or died in a mad, frantic search for loved ones. They died with the frozen skin torn from their faces, where they had clawed at the mask of ice that covered their flesh with numb fingers. Some had died within hours of becoming lost while others lived through the night and then died at first light. They were found standing waist deep in snow drifts with their hands frozen to barbed wire fences, clutching at their clothing, buried under wagons, on their backs and facedown in the snow with their arms outstretched as if trying to crawl to safety. Women died sitting upright in their homes with their children gathered around them. Their fires had gone out when the last bits of wood, hay and broken furniture had been exhausted and the hearth had gone cold.

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Before dawn on Friday, January 13, 1888, the blizzard blew itself out over the Dakotas, Nebraska and southwestern Minnesota. The last gusts of wind pushed at the drifts and hollows of snow and then a high pressure system moved in and the air grew pure, dry and bitterly cold. The temperature plunged even further and when morning came, a bright sun made the landscape shimmer with white light.

Towns and cities across the region were paralyzed. The streets were drifted over, the stores and schools closed, the railroad yards deserted. Residents later wrote that no team or vehicles of any kind moved about. There were reports of drifts that were 20 feet high. Trains were

abandoned on impassable tracks. Locomotives equipped with plows set out from Aberdeen, Sioux Falls, Omaha and Lincoln along the major routes but were unable to break through the wind-packed drifts. Heavy snows pulled down the telegraph wires and not a word came or went from most of western Iowa.

Across the prairie, nothing moved. Every object that was large enough to raise a profile above the landscape had been turned into a drift of snow. The exposed northern and western faces of these objects, though, had been scoured clean by the wind. The first rays of the sun brought color to the open fields, but no warmth. At odd intervals in the vast, smooth white surface, dark and irregular specks could be seen – these were the cattle that had not been brought to shelter the previous day. They had frozen in the pastures, still standing upright. As the sun gleamed, smaller objects began to appear in the whiteness – the gray sleeve of a coat, a boot, a tangle of hair, a child's small hand.

For most, the suspense of the night ended on that bright sunny morning – one way or another. In the clear light of day, husbands tracked down wives who had wandered out into the storm. Wives found husbands who had gone out to bring in the cattle and had not come back. Dogs returned home, with or without their masters. Parents rushed to country schools where their children had spent the night huddled around fires made from burning desks and chairs. Or the schools were empty, the children missing, the teachers frantic with grief and remorse. News of the missing, the living and the dead was carried into towns on foot or on horseback and spread from the hotels, the Western Union offices and the railroad station agents.

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There was a cruel aftermath to the blizzard. In addition to the hundreds of funerals, there were the surgical amputations of those who lost fingers, ears, toes, feet and noses to frostbite. There were also those who survived the night, only to die soon after from illnesses caused by exposure to the elements.

The precise number of the dead was never determined. Estimates published in state histories and local newspapers have ranged from 300 to 500 souls. The southern and eastern parts of the Dakota Territory suffered the majority of the casualties. Undoubtedly, many of the deaths that occurred in the lonely places that were far off the beaten path were never reported at all. Many died in the weeks after the storm from pneumonia and from infections contracted after amputations. For many years afterward, gatherings of any size in Dakota or Nebraska always included people who walked on wooden legs, held fingerless hands behind their backs or hid missing ears under hats. They were all victims of the Children's Blizzard – but were those who had escaped with their lives.

The Children's Blizzard left an indelible mark on the history of the American prairie and its effects lingered for many years after the last physical effects of the storm had long since passed. It can perhaps be best summed up by the words of Sadie Shaw in a letter to her relatives back east. From her Douglas County homestead, she lamented: "I have seen the Dread of Dakota. Oh, it was terrible. I have often read about Blizzards but they have to be seen to be fully realized."

Posted 11th January 2013 by Troy Taylor

Labels: Children's Blizzard, Fred Weeks, Great Plains, Montana, North Dakota, Schoolhouse Blizzard, Signal Corps, South Dakota, tragic death

View comments

Anonymous January 29, 2013 at 5:37 AM

I loved watching Little House On The Praire . It took me back when I was growing up in the 1950's as a child . We had to fend our own way thru bad snow storm's as well . I sit here with my eye's closed and remember what we had to do . We lived on a large farm with alot of animal's . My step father worked miles away from home , using the only vehicle we owned , many time's getting stranded at his work place , at night , and had to spend the night there , cause of the amount of snow we were getting .
Back then when the weather called for a snow storm , you got a big snow storm , not just a couple of inch's here and there . My sister's

and I had to take care of the animal's in the barn , milk the cow's, feed the chicken's , pig's , etc., make sure we got in alot of wood so my mother could tend to the fire's during the day Then we had to scramble around and get cleaned up and get read for the school bus , if the bus even showed up at all . Being so small at the time we could only shovel small foot step's for a path , and the snow pile's and the snow drift's were quite high for little kid's to try and shovel snow up any higher than they could reach . We had well water and during the cold winter month's the water pipes would freeze up on us , leaving us without any water . We had to take bucket's over to our neighbor's house to get fresh drinking water . We took snow from outside and melted it in pot's for flushing the toilet's and for washing dish's . I loved watching it snow inside the warm livingroom thru the pitcher window .As the year's went by , the less snow accumilation we got .If the weather call's for a snow storm now , just use your broom and swish it away , thats about the extent of it . (lol)

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