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## The Great Blizzard of 1856

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## THE GREAT BLIZZARD OF 1856.

BY JNO. M. BRAINARD, BOONE, IOWA.

The years 1855 and 1856, were marked by steady streams of immigration from the states east of it into Iowa. The fame of its fertile prairies had come drifting back in letters from earlier settlers and was laid before the firesides of the East through the local papers. The Free State contests in Kansas and Nebraska had called further attention to Iowa, and it was known that her people were true to the doctrines of personal liberty, and had verified this repute by active work in the cause of freedom imperiled in those States.

Among these "Argonauts of the Prairies" was the writer, who had left the foot-hills of the Alleghenies, a short distance east of Pittsburgh, to find what life had in store for him in the region which his school geography marked as the verge of "The Great American Desert." He had youth, hope, and a wife—the three essentials for a settler in Iowa—found the Mississippi at Dubuque, Iowa, and at McGregor, and a home at Charles City, Floyd county, in July, 1856.

About the 1st of November, I was entrusted with the village school, consisting of some seventy or more robust lads and lassies, harbored in a little frame building of one story, on the outskirts of the town. The first school house was always set at the outer limit of improved lots in the early towns of Iowa; partly that it might be the first building seen by new arrivals, and partly from the firm faith that in a few years it would be in the center of population.

My recollections of that school house are confined to the facts that the blackboard was very small, the school books were gathered from every State in the Union, the windows were curtainless, and that green, soft-maple wood was the fuel. However, the work of moulding future society went on therein without particular incident, until the afternoon of December 1, 1856.

The sun rose clear and bright on the morning of that day. It sparkled over the crisp, snow-covered prairies, and sent a million scintillations from the prisms which hung from every weed-stalk, or jutted out from the little inequalities of the smooth surface. The air was quite cold and in it floated small ice needles, at certain angles reflecting the bright sunshine as do the wings of summer insects. In the west there was a faint haze, and an absence of air currents, deceptive even to old settlers. Such was the condition until about 10 o'clock, when the wind began to rise in little cat's paws, continuing for a few moments, and then dying down again. Snow began to fall in an hour or so more, and by 2 o'clock it was coming down fast. The winds were constantly increasing, and by 3 o'clock it began to look decidedly serious, to one in his first experience with the "blizzard." Before the closing hour the largest boys, selected for their strength, had been sent out to find their homes and procure assistance in escorting the younger children to safety. This was not accomplished until it was quite dark, and the teacher was left to find his way across two unfenced lots and a street, each in primitive grass, to his home. By carefully counting off paces, getting once confused—an instant of terror never forgotten—this was accomplished, and groping my way from the rear end of the lot, when I should have reached the front, I found safety and shelter.

The storm continued all that night. It had not the mournful sighing of winds among Appalachian pines; it was rather the fierce shriek of a storm on craggy coasts, a natural, siren fog-horn, subsiding for an instant only to gather greater fury, then renew the attack as though it would rend everything which hindered. It rocked the "balloon" framed house and threatened its destruction. I did not then know the endurance and adaptability of the "balloon" to Iowa architecture. It held, and so did the storm; three days of howling, seething wind and snow; searching its way into every crevice; piling great, white mounds around eddying corners; covering up hay stacks, wood piles, and, in some instances, the little one-and-

one-half storied houses of the new city. In one case the resident found, when the storm had ended, that his front door was covered by a drift reaching to the comb of the roof, through which he tunnelled and, for the rest of the winter, had an entrance to his dwelling *a la* Esquimaux.

The mercury fell to 30° below and the work of breaking out the country roads was something fearful. The neighbors turned out *en masse* with ox teams, each in turn taking the lead until worried out, the others following to beat down the track. Ten miles was a good day's work at this business, nor was so much often accomplished.

A few days after the storm had passed rain fell and froze, forming a crust which bore the heaviest teams and their loads. This is impressed upon my recollection by the fact that a "wood bee" was arranged for the Methodist minister about that time. The heavy sledges came across lots, over buried fences, taking the most direct route to the parsonage, and leaving but faint traces on the hardened surface. In making a journey the road was ignored for the rest of the winter, and the compass gave direction, groves being avoided, since the ice-covering was not so good in the open. In the little school house before mentioned the ice left its record; for dry wood was not to be had, and the green, soft-maple was uniformly coated on one side with two inches of ice, so that the fuel for the following day had to be prepared again by piling it about the stove to thaw out.

Another lamentable effect of the ice-cap of that winter was the cruel and wanton destruction of wild game. Prior to that season the groves bordering the streams in northern Iowa were well stocked with deer, elk, hare, foxes, wolves, etc. The ice drove these out from the sheltering timber to seek food about the farmers' stacks. Men and boys, with dogs and guns, made savage onslaught upon these. The sharp feet of larger game cut through the ice and rendered their escape impossible. In some instances they were run down by men on foot, with no other weapon, than the family butcher knife, which was all too effective. A neighbor discovered a fawn in his

back yard one morning, which he captured with his hands. A fine buck could be bought on the street for \$2.50 with its hide on, and the latter readily sold for \$1.00. In one respect this was a godsend for the poor, giving them cheap meat; for beef-steaks were 25 cents a pound. But there were persons who that winter forever lost their taste for venison, through enforced and long continued use of the flesh. Iowa's larger game was lost forever.

The Great Storm of that December day claimed many human lives. The people were not prepared for such an exhibition of angry nature in her worst mood. The later immigrants, those of the current year, were not instructed in the arts of providing for winter. They knew not the value of banked foundations, of heaped wood piles, of preparation for caring for stock in storms; nor did they credit the warnings of pioneers against trusting to the delusive sunshine of a morning whose day might set in blizzards and the loss of life. Even old settlers were caught in its toils, and despite supposedly safe preparations, paid the penalty of exposure by the loss of life or limb. A few instances are recalled.

Two residents of Forest City, Winnebago County, old settlers both, the one Alexander Long, a man of some note, and his companion, Myers, started on the morning of December 1st, to drive to Upper Grove, Hancock County, a distance of twenty-seven miles across the unsettled prairie. They made good preparation, had a strong team, a low sled filled with straw and buffalo robes, extra pairs of stockings, that in emergency boots might be discarded and double woollens substituted. The sun was bright and the air, though cool, was exhilarating. Their direction was south by west. But the storm caught them, the fierce northwest wind could not be faced by their team, which "drifted," and before half their journey was done they found they were freezing. The team was allowed to go free, or broke away, the sled was overturned, and they were found stiff in death, sometime after, by searching parties, a little to the west of the Clear Lake timber. They were on their hands and knees, double stockings on their feet,

not many rods apart. The evidence was plain that they had attempted to walk after abandoning the team and had gradually succumbed to the benumbing cold. The team was found far to the southward, both horses dead.

A mile or two northwest of Mason City was a settler, Horace Green, having in his employ two brothers, Ruben Williams, aged about twenty years, and David, about twelve years old. The farmer had a fair herd of cattle. About noon, the morning being very fine, the farmer sent the boys to drive the cattle down to the Clear Lake Outlet, known as "Willow Creek," some half to three-quarters of a mile away, to be watered: The driving, and the deliberate operation of drinking characteristic of cattle, occupied so much time that when the return home was attempted the lads found themselves bewildered and unable to reach it. A small grove, "Crab Apple Grove," not far from the Outlet became their refuge. Constant exercise was necessary to keep from freezing, and the poor boys walked, back and forth, all the night long, beating a hard path in the limited grove where they trod their weary rounds. This exertion, and hunger, rendered them faint towards morning, and as their strength began to fail the cruel cold gained upon them, and increasing drowsiness warned the elder that his brother was freezing. He grasped him by the coat collar and compelled him to continue the walk. Daylight dawned at last and the sun coming up showed them Mason City in plain sight. They left the grove, the elder brother dragging the younger by the collar. An early rising citizen, Zebina Day, noticed the strange, dark objects on the prairie, went out to examine, and carried them into town. The hand of the older boy was frozen fast about the collar of the younger one, so that the garment had to be cut away. Both had their feet and ears frozen, and lost half of each. Dr. E. D. Huntley, brother of Lieut. Charles Huntley, lost in the battle of Pleasant Hill, and Dr. John Porter, afterwards Judge of the District Court for that district, attended the sufferers, who are yet living. Some years after I met the Williams boys, then full grown men, with the mutilations mentioned.

Two men, Charles Weeks, and Abbott, froze to death at Owen's Grove, in Cerro Gordo County. The particulars have passed from memory.

John Van Aiken was lost that winter and his remains discovered at East Grove, south of Clear Lake. The discovery of his body was made by two hunters, who saw, out on the prairie, wolves gathered in a bunch, and on coming to the spot found they had been feasting upon the exposed arm and elbow of a corpse buried in the snow, which proved to be that of the lost Van Aiken.

On the Shell Rock Creek, not far from the present site of the town of Plymouth, a man and wife lost their lives in a storm. They had left their home near lake Albert Lea, Minnesota, for food for themselves and destitute children, traveling with an ox team. As night fell and the blizzard was in all its fury, their team got down in a snow drift, and the husband exhausted himself in trying to extricate it. His wife, the stronger of the two, went out on foot for help and succeeded in reaching a house when her strength was about gone. The man and team were rescued. They secured the coveted food and started for home, but were caught by another storm before reaching their destination and both perished, the brave wife within a half mile of a house in search of succor before her strength gave out and she fell and died in the snow.

These are a few instances, rescued from fast-fading recollection, of the disasters which befell pioneers in Iowa on that fateful blizzard day. They have had their repetition in the experiences of settlers in the Dakotas of later years, which, as told in the papers, bring vividly to mind the like in early Iowa days. Our first settlers took claims along the streams, in shelter of the timber belts, and the prairies were for years open and unsettled. Without a compass, and in a storm, these were fully as trackless as the sea. The distances, in the portion of the State referred to in these memoirs, were, from timber belt to timber belt, an average of from ten to fifteen miles; frequently rising to from forty to sixty miles.

A weekly mail was carried from Clear Lake to Upper Grove,

in Hancock County, across an open prairie of twenty-five miles; thence to Algona, crossing a wider stretch of open country, a total distance of sixty miles. The contractor for this work was Hewitt, an old Indian interpreter and thorough pioneer. He was sixty-three years of age, but strong as a man of forty; with ruddy face, bluff, hearty manners, and physically as "tough as a pine knot." In preparation for his winter journeyings it was his custom to set up, in the fall, oak poles at intervals of about three-hundred yards, their leafy tops being retained; and these were his guides when the storm howled across his path. His mail cart was canvas-covered on all sides, with small port holes for the reins to pass through, sockets for candles on the wooden supports, and plenty of fatty provisions. Thus armed, if his team gave out after nightfall, it was sheltered on the lee side of the canvas; he lit his candles for warmth, ate his provisions, and wrapped in buffalo robes stood out the siege until morning. With such thorough preparations death need not have happened to any settler; but the proverbial heedlessness of frontier people seldom impelled them to make them. They trusted to luck and to their "judgment" of the weather, much as sailors are reputed to do, and often with like results. But these were the men who pioneered the way for our modern farms, with artificial groves, furnace-heated houses, and defiance of the worst storms. Their memory and their fate are worthy of a better pen than mine.

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## AN INDIAN TREATY AND ITS NEGOTIATION.

BY HON. ALFRED HEBARD.

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In compliance with a partial promise, I now venture to make a few statements, entirely from memory, relative to a treaty made with the Sac and Fox Indians some fifty years ago—a treaty hardly second in importance to any one ever made with the Red Man—especially if judged from the stand-point of the present day; because the large amount of land then acquired,



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