

The Armistice Day Blizzard of 1940

Minnesota winters can be treacherous, but they can also disguise themselves as being relatively mild and tolerable. Nonetheless, they can change quickly and unexpectedly, which was the case involving one of the most devastating and storied snowstorms to ever hit the Midwest and Martin County, the Armistice Day storm of 1940.

The fall of 1940 was pleasant and mild, apparently very similar climatologically speaking to the autumn of 2010. The war in Europe was in the headlines, the Minnesota Gophers football team was ranked number one in the nation, and winter seemed to be far from the minds of most everyone. However, that serene and tranquil autumn would soon make an abrupt transformation. On Monday, November 11, 1940, one of the deadliest blizzards to ever hit the Midwest struck without warning leaving death and devastation in its wake while carving a 1,000 mile wide path through the mid-section of the country. Especially vulnerable were the many unprepared duck hunters who found themselves in a life and death struggle for survival. The storm took its toll killing 49 in Minnesota and 150 nationwide.¹

Locally, the early Monday morning of Armistice Day in 1940, now called Veterans Day, started off mild following a couple of unseasonably warm and rainy days. Snow began falling shortly after midnight that Monday morning, but melted as quickly as it fell. However, weather conditions were soon to change as about 3:00 a.m., the temperature began to drop. It fell twelve degrees during the day, and the wind kicked up to gale forces. By 9:00 a.m., the streets of downtown Fairmont were impassable, travel was treacherous at best due to the poor visibility and snow drifts, and outside communication had all but been cut off. The November 12, 1940, edition of the Fairmont Daily Sentinel's headline read "Blizzard Leaves Death, Loss in Wake." It further stated "Old timers of 1960 will talk about it, measure events by it, as do those of yesterday recall the great storm of October 1880." Of course, we're well beyond 1960, and many today will likely measure snow events as compared to the historic 1975 "Storm of The Century." However, due to the sudden and unexpected onset of the Armistice Day storm, coupled with the lack of preparedness on the part of the public, the 1940 storm was extremely perilous in Martin County and throughout the Midwest.

The storm was especially hazardous for the many that were unprepared, primarily as a result of the relatively mild conditions that preceded it. An example of this involved County Treasurer, Pete Cory, who had gone duck hunting with some friends near Hand's Park. He and his friends ended up spending from 8:30 a.m. until 2:30 p.m. in their car keeping the motor running in order to keep warm. Due to the intensity of the storm, they had no idea they were a mere fifty yards from a farm house, nevertheless, they felt they were lucky to have the protection of the automobile and to be alive.

Another account concerned an emergency medical situation in Truman in which Truman Dr. E. A. Thayer, who happened to be in Fairmont at the time, left Fairmont for Truman by car. He was forced to abandon his vehicle for a horse in Northrop, and he finally abandoned the horse when he encountered a snow drift measuring ten feet deep and forty feet in length. However, he

¹ http://minnesota.publicradio.org/display/web/200011/10_steilm_blizzard-m/

successfully made his way to Truman on foot in order to treat to a lady that had accidentally broken her arm.

There were also a number of unusual, if not somewhat humorous, accounts regarding the storm that were reported in the November 12, 1940, edition of the Fairmont Daily Sentinel. One involved an incident concerning a hat on top of a snow drift at the intersection of North North Avenue and Blue Earth Avenue. Apparently, no one was concerned enough to stop to determine whether or not there was, in fact, anyone under the hat.

Another rather amusing story told of twin daughters, referred to in the article as “L’il Fatso” and “Peewee,” who were without milk and consequently proceeded to wail without stopping during the storm, thereby causing a great deal of anguish to their parents. Their tantrum continued until their father “mushed” to the Nelson Ice Cream Company for a gallon of milk. It was said that “the way they tore into it would have been a sight for the dairy industry.”

The storm also resulted in some interesting and rather peculiar clothing being worn. Included was headgear made up of gunny sacks, and white sheets with holes cut in them for eyes. It was said that the white sheets resembled “Kluxers” in full regalia, an apparent reminder of the Klan presence in Martin County in earlier years.

Yet another bizarre request came to the Sentinel office from three men that had battled the storm for five hours to get from Blue Earth to Fairmont. After they had found a room in a local hotel, they called the Sentinel to see if anyone could supply them with a pint of whiskey in order to help them “warm up” a bit. Their request was unsuccessful.

In the days that followed, the newspaper reported many other incidents resulting from the storm. Included in these reports was the significant loss of livestock and poultry, the fact that transportation and communication came to a standstill, the account of an elderly lady attempting to shovel her walk only to be later found dead of an apparent heart attack, local musicians missing their engagements, the many hunters caught off guard having to spend the night in restaurants or bars, people that were stranded either in their place of employment, if they made it to work, or at another’s home, the projected costs of snow removal, and many more harrowing experiences.

The extraordinary Martin County snow storms of 1873, 1880, the Armistice Day storm of 1940, the “Storm of The Century” in 1975, and the “Halloween” storm of 1991 account for some of the most memorable and recorded snow events in Martin County’s history. Nevertheless, Martin County residents are accustomed to winter storms, and they know that it’s not a matter of “if,” but rather “when” the next one will strike.

For more information on this topic, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.

Here's That 12-Foot Truman Drift



This is a part of the 300-foot long, 12-foot deep drift that held up traffic 1½ miles south of Truman on State Highway No. 15. The drift was opened at 8 a. m. today. Atop Mister Guckeen's car is Uno Nelson, Sentinel advertising man, who got up there to see what he could see. "Just more snow is all," was his laconic reply. He must have been impressed, as he usually doesn't waste that many words in telling things. The one word "snow" ordinarily suffices.