

Blizzards in Martin County

Blizzards are nothing new to residents of Martin County. Throughout the history of our county, there are many accounts of deadly blizzards and snowstorms that have played a dramatic, and sometimes tragic, role in the lives of Martin County residents, as well as creating some interesting memories. The following is an account of some of these memorable blizzards and how they affected residents of the county.

In the latter 1800's, singing schools were quite popular social events and people would travel long distances to attend them. On February 14, 1866, a singing school was being held at Silver Lake. A storm came up during the evening of February 14th, and it became very cold. Two families of young people attending the singing school started for home that evening. They had an ox team and sleigh filled with blankets and hay. They left with their backs to the storm, and they thought they would get home safely. However, the team of oxen eventually left the road and began wandering aimlessly. The boys in the group would take turns leaving the sleigh and scouting around to try to find the road or a house until the sleigh became stuck in a snowdrift. One of the boys stayed outside the sleigh trying to hear or see something while trying to keep himself warm by lying between the oxen. The storm eventually became so severe that they couldn't see anything, and they didn't dare leave the sleigh. It was two nights and one day before the storm subsided. Then, the next morning, one of the families' dogs came to them and the boys in the group found their way home. However, the three boys lost hands and feet from the freezing cold, the oxen were frozen to death and, tragically, the three girls were also frozen to death sitting in the sleigh. Ironically, the sleigh was within 50 yards of a farmhouse.

"The Worst Blizzard," as reported by then Mayor Swearingen in the January 8, 1903, Sentinel, was January 7, 8, and 9 of 1873. January 7, 1873, started out as a very warm day for that time of the year. The two feet of snow on the ground was rapidly melting. People were out working and away from home visiting neighboring towns, many without their overcoats due to the warm conditions. At about 2:00 p.m. a rumbling sound like distant thunder was heard coming from the northwest until it became a white mass a hundred feet high bounding across the prairie at a terrific speed. Those unfortunate individuals that were out in the prairie found themselves

facing an avalanche of whirling, blinding snow coupled with an intensely cold wind. Hundreds of people and livestock in the Minnesota prairie were frozen to death by the sudden storm. Although Martin County was a sparsely populated region at the time, there were several deaths and many were seriously frostbitten. In closing, this article states "There will probably never be such a storm again in our beautiful well settled state, and all should sincerely thank God that the possibility of such a calamity is forever passed." I think that was wishful thinking.

Another interesting story, probably taking place in the early 1900's, tells of a Martin County schoolteacher walking twelve miles from Welcome to Ormsby to open school in a blizzard. Hulda Hausfeld had spent the weekend with her parents in Welcome when the blizzard hit the area. School children in District 126, Ormsby, thought they were going to get several days of vacation. However, Miss Hausfeld apparently felt school should be in session. She drove two miles in her car before becoming stuck in the snow. From there she walked the twelve miles in the blizzard in little more than three hours to ring the school bell on time Monday morning. Miss Hausfeld was a graduate of Fairmont High School Normal Training Department. They must have used up all their snow days before this blizzard!

The Armistice Day storm of 1940 was entirely unexpected as temperatures were relatively mild, however, by 3:00 a.m. on Monday, November 11, 1940, the temperature dropped and snow began falling. Display windows were blown out of the J.C. Penney building and Brauns. Bob Wallace's 50 foot sign was blown down and landed on a car. Al Menke's Orchestra van was stranded three miles west of Sherburn. All means of communication and transportation was halted and the city would eventually spend \$500.00 per day in snow removal. Estimated losses in the county included 9,400 turkeys valued at \$18,000.00, 236 cattle valued at \$13,960.00, 209 sheep valued at \$1,672.00, 200 chickens valued at \$100.00, one horse, and thousands of pheasants. Some other interesting happenings as a result of the blizzard was a snowdrift on highway 15 south of Truman that measured 300 feet long and 12 feet high, a three year old boy that broke his leg and couldn't get medical attention for three days, and a man from Mitchell, South Dakota that was stranded in Fairmont and called the Sentinel office offering \$10.00 for a pint of whiskey in a flawed attempt to keep warm. By the way, there were no takers.

More recently, I'm sure many of you recall the 1975 "Storm of the century." The January 13, 1975, Sentinel reported that the Martin County area averaged a foot of snow and winds of 50, 60 and perhaps 90 mph. The storm started with a steady snowfall on Friday morning and visibility became near zero by late Friday night and early Saturday. Then the temperatures began a steady descent and the winds began to blow. By Monday, all area schools were closed and only main traffic roads were gradually beginning to open. There were numerous accounts of rescue operations, overworked snow removal, police, and utility personnel, and other storm related incidents.

To read more about blizzards in Martin County, visit the Pioneer Museum.

By
Lenny Tvedten
Executive Director
Martin County Historical Society