

Blizzards & Snowstorms in Martin County

Blizzards and snow storms are nothing new to residents of Martin County. On the heels of the sixteen inches of snow recorded in Fairmont during Christmas week of 2009, it might be interesting to look back in local history to other big storms and blizzards encountered by Martin County residents.

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 snow events 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 thinking they would be able to get home safely. However, due to the blinding snowstorm, the team of oxen eventually left the road and began wandering aimlessly and, as a result of the difficult wintry conditions, the sleigh eventually became stuck in a snowdrift. The boys in the group then took turns leaving the sleigh and scouting around to try to find the road or a house. As a last resort, one of the boys stayed outside the sleigh in an attempt to hear or see something while at the same time 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 finally subsided. The morning the storm finally waned, one of the families' dogs came to them, and the boys in the group were then able to find 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 sitting in the sleigh were also frozen to death. Ironically, the sleigh was within fifty 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 unseasonably warm temperatures. At about 2:00 p.m., the article stated that a rumbling sound like distant thunder was heard coming from the northwest until it became a white mass estimated to be 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 attributed to the storm locally and many suffered serious frostbite. 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.” However, as history can confirm, that did not prove to be the last major snow storm in Minnesota.

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 remaining twelve miles in the blizzard in little more than three hours in order to ring the school bell on time Monday morning. Miss Hausfeld was a graduate of Fairmont High School Normal Training Department. Apparently, that school district 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. As the storm intensified, display windows were blown out of the J.C. Penney building and Braun’s. Bob Wallace’s fifty 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 end up spending \$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 things that took place 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. Incidentally, there were no takers for the \$10.00 offer for whiskey.

More recently, many will likely 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 roads were gradually beginning to be opened. There were numerous accounts of rescue operations including overworked snow removal personnel, police, and utility personnel, as well as other storm related incidents.

The sixteen inch snowfall registered during Christmas week of 2009 might have recorded as many casualties as earlier storms if not for the advanced weather warning systems in place today. Today, as opposed to the past, we can usually choose to be safe from adverse weather conditions.

To read more about snow storms and blizzards in Martin County, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.