

The Winter of 1948-49

Contributed by Catherine Renschler

Fifty years ago Adams County residents were struggling through the worst winter in memory. Ironically, the first blizzard, which began on Thursday, November 18, 1948 followed the warmest November 15th on record--71 degrees. On the 18th the Hastings Tribune under the heading "Winter Bearing Down on City" reported cold, gusting wind, but no snow fall at 3 p.m. Bert Trausch was picking corn by hand on his farm six miles south of Juniata. When the wind changed and clouds moved in, he decided to make a trip to Juniata to purchase coal, a fortuitous decision as it would be weeks before he reached town again. In Hastings Dorothy June Olson was preparing for her wedding to Billy Gangwish, who lived seven miles southwest of Juniata. It was scheduled for Saturday at 4 p.m. Thursday's forecast called for clearing skies, scattered showers and colder temperatures.

Thursday evening Bert Trausch drove his small herd of cattle, including the family milk cow, into his large barn. The loft was filled with hay. Unlike many thousands of other cattle, they would survive the winter well fed. Near Ayr the neighbors of Don Park, who had injured his eye when he ran a corn stalk into it a month earlier, finished harvesting his corn Thursday afternoon.

By Friday, November 19th Adams County was in the grip of a severe blizzard. Forty mile per hour winds whipped the snow into drifts as high as ten feet. Transportation came to an abrupt stop. The last bus to reach Hastings was at 11:30 Thursday night from Omaha. Burlington passenger train No. 3 was stranded in Hastings until Saturday the 20th. Passengers spent time inside the depot where they were served coffee and food by railroad employees. During Thursday night S. D. Lee and Ralph Hanna drove Mrs. Donald Pearson, who was in labor, to the hospital with a McClelland-Rose Motor Company wrecker, after the ambulance she was riding in became stuck. All hotel rooms in Hastings were filled and the lobbies were packed with persons for whom there were no other accommodations. About 15 people spent the night at the Hastings police station.

As the snow piled up in Hastings the employees of Davidson greenhouse at the east edge of the city struggled to save the buildings. The weight of the snow caused one entire block-long greenhouse, constructed of glass and steel, to collapse. None of the plants in the building could be saved. Neighbors carried all available materials to prop up the roofs of the other two buildings. Two cave-ins also occurred at the Topp greenhouses where five men worked without rest through Friday night to keep snow off the roof and prevent further damage.

Automobiles were stalled in the streets all over Hastings by Friday morning, including one on the Union Pacific tracks at Fifth Street; but no damage was done as the only train that left Grand Island that morning became stuck in drifts just outside that city. One unfortunate motorist left his stalled car with a window partway down. The car filled entirely with snow. Winds were so strong in downtown Hastings that at least four businesses had windows blown in.

Juniata, with a population of 300, was host to about 1,000 stranded travelers by Saturday. Some of them had been in their cars since Thursday night. Cars, trucks and buses packed Juniata's main street. The Juniata gas station sold over 1,000 gallons of gasoline to stranded motorists. The two Juniata grocery stores were stripped bare of anything that could be eaten uncooked in the travelers autos. E. A. Buskirk, proprietor of one grocery store reported that a group of truckers had built a fire on main street to warm themselves and the cans of beans they had purchased.

Juniata lost its electric power which was supplied from Hastings Utilities about midnight Thursday and did not regain it until Saturday about noon. Despite their own problems with the storm, Juniata residents strove valiantly to aid the stranded motorists. The Juniata school auditorium, located on main street, was opened to the travelers and a soup kitchen set up. Women who worked in the kitchen were Mrs. LaVern Gangwish, Mrs. Thane Pease and her daughter, Marian, Mrs. Catherine Swanson and Miss Margie Stubbe.

Saturday a caravan of about 25 cars and trucks pulled into Juniata behind a bulldozer owned by Kansas-Nebraska Natural Gas Company. Their cross country trip from Minden had taken nearly 24 hours. After purchasing gasoline and supplies, they continued on to Hastings often through fields to avoid huge snow drifts on the road. About 35 stranded persons remained in Juniata Saturday night.

The county began digging out from the storm on Saturday, November 20th. Most main roads in central and southwestern

Nebraska were closed. By noon Burlington Avenue, Second Street and north up St. Joseph Avenue to the hospital had been cleared in Hastings. Businesses were operating with employees who were able to make it to work. One Hastings grocer was so determined to serve his customers that he hauled milk by sled for about six blocks. The public could call at the post office for their mail, but no mail trains had arrived in Hastings since Thursday.

A few isolated instances of lost electric power were reported in Hastings, but rural customers did not fare so well. Kenesaw was without electricity and water for two days. Most Hastings residents also had telephone service, but about 35 out of 100 rural lines were without service. A Hastings amateur radio operator, C. B. Wolfe, worked 13 hours relaying messages over the storm area.

Roy Alleman in his book *Blizzard 1949* continued the story of the Gangwish wedding. "In Hastings snow plows pushed out one-lane trails thorough the streets, and Dorothy June could get to the church. But there was no word from Billy. She waited and waited--and waited. Came 4 P.M. and still no Billy. Dorothy June gave up and went home.

But she had not reckoned with Billy's determination to attend his own wedding. Saturday morning he and his parents dressed in their Sunday best, picked up a couple of scoop shovels, and headed for Hastings. They knew that blizzards have a habit of piling up snow in big mounds and leaving bare spots elsewhere....they drove across fields, circling snowbanks, shoveling and driving until they arrived about a mile west of Hastings. Ahead of them was a fifteen-foot drift across the highway. But from there on it looked like a clean sweep into town.

"Don't you think we might as well go home?" suggested Billy's father, Earl. He had been ready to turn back for a long time. "We've gone this far, we might as well scoop our way through," answered the determined Billy. Now nearly exhausted, the men began shoveling at what looked like a mountainous drift. Hours later they drove into town, where they found an insurmountable drift. Billy left the car and walked the remaining six blocks to Dorothy June's house. At 11:30 P.M. Dorothy June heard a knock on the door. There stood Billy, looking anything but ready for a wedding... They called the minister and rescheduled the wedding for 4 P.M. Sunday. It went off without a hitch, except there was only a small crowd and there was no wedding cake."

Crews worked day and night through the weekend and by Monday, November 22nd, trains and buses were operating out of Hastings, although behind schedule. The first train to arrive in Hastings following the storm was the Burlington Zephyr on Saturday, which followed a rotary snow plow that bucked drifts 10 to 15 feet deep and hundreds of feet long.

Rural roads remained impassable in some cases most of the winter. On Monday, sixteen day old Marilyn Kay Shafer was flown by private plane from a farm home south of Rosemont to Hueske's Sky Ranch near Hastings and from there traveled by auto to a Hastings doctor's office.

Communities and farms all across the plains states dug out from the blizzard. December was colder and wetter than normal. A large evergreen north of the Hastings junior high school building that had toppled in the November blizzard became the school's Christmas Tree. But winter had only just begun. Snow began to fall again on December 24th: Nebraska would have a white Christmas. On December 28th more snow fell and was whipped by winds causing severe drifting.

New Year's Day, 1949 dawned bright and cold. Light snow was forecast. Another howling blizzard swept across western Nebraska on January 2nd, then veered south on the 3rd and roared northward across central Nebraska on the 4th, burying the western part of the state in a blanket of snow three to five feet deep. By three P.M. on January 3rd it was sleeting in Hastings. The snow already on the ground absorbed the moisture and turned to ice. Hastings escaped most of the snow from this storm which ravaged western Nebraska, but western Adams County reported several inches of new snow. January 4th sun spots were reported at Hastings, caused by the reflection of the sun on ice crystals in the air. Some people considered them an omen of bad weather to come.

During the night of January 4th an explosion in the basement of the farm home of Roy Anderson, south of Pauline caused extensive damage to the house and sent Mrs. Glen Hewitt to the hospital. The cause of the explosion was not reported in the Hastings Tribune.

Soon reports of suffering, peril and death began to trickle in from western Nebraska where the snow fall was measured in feet, not inches. In Hastings the temperature plummeted and on January 9th the high was only zero. Brisk winds

whipped the light snow and refilled rural roads and barnyards which had been cleared. For three days Glenvil was completely cut off by drifted snow, and rural schools were closed throughout the area.

January 11th the Tribune printed a plea for area farmers to feed starving game birds. The State Game and Parks Commission as well as local groups including the Hastings Gun Club agreed to reimburse farmers for grain fed the birds.

Temperatures remained low and on January 22nd, volunteer firefighters in Juniata battled a fire in the Bud Renschler family home. Many of the family's personal possessions were lost, but no one was injured. January 23rd Adams County was hit with ice and more snow. Ice two and three inches thick coated eastern Nebraska, knocking out telephone communication over much of the area and closing schools. The State Patrol, declaring driving conditions to be the worst in Nebraska history, requested that everyone stay off the roads. Governor Val Peterson called the continuing blizzard conditions "One of the greatest catastrophes ever to hit Nebraska." On January 26th Operation Snowbound, conducted by the Fifth Army, was born. In response to a plea from the governor for snow removal equipment, Hargleroad Van and Storage Company of Hastings dispatched an 18-ton bulldozer by truck to western Nebraska. Two bulldozer operators, Don Briggs and Lewis Vontz, were sent along to work on a 24-hour schedule. Wayne Meyer drove the truck. The Naval Ammunition Depot also sent equipment west, a caravan of trucks hauling bulldozers left Hastings for Valentine on January 29th. At the request of the Red Cross, Floyd Marian piloted a ski-equipped plane owned by Packard Flying Service from Hastings to Atkinson where he joined in the airlift of supplies to snowed in ranches. He spent ten days dropping yellow instruction leaflets and flying emergency supplies of food and medicines. He recalls one ranch house completely covered with snow with only the chimney protruding. The snow cover was so complete roads and fence lines were obscured. The greatest danger in landing was the possibility of catching the planes skis on unseen wire fences. One day during a blizzard Floyd made a forced landing near a ranch house, whose occupants hadn't seen anyone for two months. He had flown in Europe during World War II and never made a forced landing there.

On January 28th Adams County was staggering under another four inches of snow driven by high winds. Highways were again blocked, Burlington trains were stalled both east and west of Hastings, and telephone service was disrupted. Those rural roads that had been opened were again drifted shut. The Tribune's headline read "Ho, Hum! Hastings Digging Out Again."

February was little improved over January, with four additional inches of snow on February 12th and 13th. Again winds caused drifting. In February the county received its first rotary snowplow, and immediately began the task of widening narrow lanes that had been scooped through drifted roads. As the snow began to melt Hastings tallied the winter damage to city streets. Many streets would need repaving and a frozen storm sewer would need replaced. The city's budget was already strained from huge snow removal costs.

Toward the end of February a new menace was added--mud and standing water made rural roads and unpaved streets impassable. The first week of March the rural roads were so bad Roseland's school buses were unable to make their rounds. Some students were forced to walk in the mud as far as five miles to school. One rancher quipped "The army got us out of the snow, now it'll take the navy to get us out of the mud."

Bert Trausch recalled the many cars he pulled out of the mud that spring on the Assumption Road, an arterial east-west road running from Assumption to Glenvil. Snow had drifted 10 to 12 feet deep across the road and when it melted the road became a quagmire with ruts 15 inches deep. Cars became high-centered and almost impossible to extricate. Each time someone came to the door for help he spent several hours working with his teams of horses and was covered with mud from head to toe, overalls, coat and all. His wife Edna had to wash these mud encrusted clothes in a gas powered Maytag. She was tired of all this extra work and instructed him to take money if it was offered. He hitched up four horses and worked until after dark on the third stuck car of the day. When Bert returned to the house he had 50 cents for several hours effort and Edna had another batch of muddy clothes to wash.

But the infamous winter of 1948-49 wasn't over yet. On March 12th winter did an encore, dumping snow over much of central and southern Nebraska. When the warm weather returned in a few days the Republican, Big and Little Blue, Elkhorn and Platte Rivers were all flooding. The only flooding reported in Adams County, however, was in low lying areas and no homes were flooded. March went out like a lion. Heavy snow, high winds and floods threatened weather-beaten Nebraskans. Hastings merchants had to postpone their "Spring Preview" which had been planned for March 31st. South Central Nebraska saw the last snow of the winter on April 14th, when a combination of rain and snow fell. It would be several more weeks before all rural roads were passable.

For those living in rural Adams County, the unsung heroes of that winter were the rural mail carriers. They drove around drifted roads through frozen fields, and often backtracked making their routes many miles longer. Despite their efforts, some farmers were without mail for weeks at a time.

The winter of 1948-49, an almost continuous series of blizzards, was the worst winter in Nebraska history. As soon as one storm had subsided and communications and transportation were restored another storm followed in its wake. Six Nebraskans died, none of them in Adams County. An estimated 500,000 head of cattle also perished. The Burlington railroad called the blizzards the most prolonged, intense, widespread and costly in the line's history.

"In reliving that winter through memories and fifty years in retrospect," says Roy Alleman, "we now realize it will be recorded as the worst winter in U.S. history, maybe in the world. So many people related their experiences to me and I apologize that I didn't record more of them. I do remember people who worked at the Mary Lanning Hospital telling how they struggled heroically to get there because so many depended on them, even for life-giving care. We see Bill and Dorothy June Gangwish in church nearly every Sunday and often discuss their struggle to get married, walking over waist-high snow banks. Today, the minister who married them, the Rev. Frank Schroeder, resides at Perkins Pavilion, Good Samaritan Village. Like lots of other Nebraskans, they still recall with pride: We survived the worst winter on record."

[back to top](#)