

## Winter of '49 – Patrick's Been a Problem Forever

By Billie McGooden Johnson.

When I think of the winter of 1949, my mind starts at November of '48. We had quite a snow but still could get around. Then on Christmas Eve '48 we had an eight inch snow with no wind. Even on the wire fences the snow piled up. Christmas morning Bud said: "Pack us lunches, we are going after cows. One breath of wind and we'll have a blizzard." The dry cows were still "up west" in summer pasture. The closest pasture they could be in was 11 miles to the west of home-place. Off they, Bernard and Paul Sheets and Bud, went on horseback hoping cows are wanting to "come home" or near the closest fence. An 11 mile ride found most at the gate waiting. Now the cows had been up and back for nine years on the trail, and as soon as the gate was opened they started home. The men just had to round up a few (probably younger cows) and start them. The gates had been opened as the men went up; the neighbors cows were all out of their pastures. Just as the sun went down the herd of cows reached our meadows, and the wind came up. The men headed for the barn, yet two miles away. When they arrived at the house everyone was covered with snow and cold but home safely.

We still could get around with horses and tractor after a night and day of wind. It's now December 27<sup>th</sup> or 28<sup>th</sup>. Bud had ordered a freight car of cotton cake. Since the November and December storms had been worse south of us the "cake" deliveries were coming in slow. The cake dealer, Pug Riggs, called on the 29<sup>th</sup> and told Bud a car of cake had come in. He was leaving it unlocked so whoever wanted to could have it. He trusted the ranchers to let him know how much they took. Bud called two men in town who had trucks (Sam Spittler and Lee Glidden) and asked them to the haul cake. The first truck got to a spot in the road close to our place where they had to be pulled through the snow drifts. So a tractor was left there, and as two men were with each truck everything worked. They hauled all night. Whenever I saw them pull up to barn I would start some coffee. I fed the men each trip – pancakes, meat, eggs and coffee. I always wondered if they thought that's all I knew how to cook. By morning we had our car of cake in the barn – Bud always said we stole our own cotton cake.

Rest of ~~Week~~ went about par – feeding hay and getting all the cows onto winter pastures. Then came New Year's Eve day. Some of the neighbors visited each other as usual for a holiday – the three-day blizzard started then – later known as the "Blizzard of '49". Some never got home for a while. The wind and snow blew constantly for three days; some times we could see a cow or two on a knoll southwest of the house. The drifts around our house covered the west side and south west corner including the living room windows on the south. The men prepared to go to the barn to milk the cow – I insisted no one could go out alone. They walked up the drift around our house and made it to the barn. Sometimes I could see them and sometimes not. After that first trip they didn't need coaxing to go in pairs and only once a day.

We didn't have electricity yet but did have water in the house. We had just moved into our house in June 1948. The men played cards, slept, teased the boys for those three days.

The plastic KEM cards were played with so much you can see the numbers and suits through the back of the cards to this day.

After three days, skies cleared, and the sun shone brightly, but all we could see was a few tree tops and snow, snow, snow. Men dug out and started to do what could be done. Since our telephone line stayed up we could talk with neighbors which helped. After about a week the men all met at a certain corner two miles from the house with tractors, a truck and Kerm Collier's half track and started to town shortly after daylight. It took all day to go 14 miles to town, load up the groceries and mail, and get back to corner. We were the farthest out, so Bud, and I think one of the Sheets boys, made the last two miles after dark to get home.

Now the plot thickens. I was seven months along with Patrick. The pregnant women right in town were going to stay in Anselmo – where a midwife lived, or go to Broken Bow close to the hospital. We decided once the train got thru from Alliance, I would go the 145 miles east to Grand Island and then back west to Benkelman 200 miles away to stay with my folks. The next day on the 10<sup>th</sup> we would go to Dunning when the train came through, and Jim, Mike, and I would head to Benkelman.

The men made a sled of boards nailed on posts big enough for me, two boys and suit cases. We sat on bales of hay. Hitched a team to it and with two men on horses breaking a path for the team and sled, we started out. Since sometimes the horses broke thru a drift, we had to go by the way we knew the gates were open. When free of them, we headed across the meadows toward Swingles five miles away. Sheet boys went back home from there, and Marion Downing and Swingle took their place taking us to town. By now a tractor and jeep were the transportation. Sometimes the men would scoop a quarter mile of road to where we could go through. We were about three miles out when we saw the train going east – so we knew I'd have to wait until next day. By now everyone in country and town was wanting me gone. Other "to be's" had already left town.

The men stayed in town and headed home the next morning. They got all the groceries and mail for everyone along the route. I wished Bud had taken our mail, but I opened a package from my folks. They had sent "Roy Roger" white hats to Jim and Mike. I didn't want a "to-do" over leaving them so the hats took the trip with us. Silly me. I later regretted this!

About noon on the 12<sup>th</sup> I boarded the train to Grand Island. The track was surrounded with drifts so high one couldn't see the highway that ran parallel. I had the whole neighborhood helping me get this far; now I was on my own. It was warm on the train so off came coats, caps, gloves and overshoes, and on went the hats of course. We reached Grand Island about supper time. Since I had to change transportation here, all those clothes had to go back on. I got to the bus depot so I could go to Hastings and catch the trains west. I had quite a wait so off comes all the outdoor clothes, and oh yes, on went the hats. Bus time was coming so we donned the winter grab again and boarded for the ride to Hastings only 28 miles, but a 1 ½ hour ride which meant coats needed to come

off. At Hastings I could get a bus to McCook, no train. We had quite a wait in the depot, and of course, the coats came off, and yes we still had the white hats. Boarded next bus to McCook – 125 mile trip - so the coat and hat routine again; all hotels full in McCook. Taxi driver said that he would find me a place to stay which he did; also promised to come get me the next morning and get me on the train. Boy, it was good to get the boys to bed even if only for four hours.

Taxi driver showed up – put us on the train and we arrived, hats and all, in Benkelman about 11am on January 13<sup>th</sup> – Mike's second birthday. The folks were waiting for us; boy was I ever ready to share the chores of boys, hats and suit cases.

Stayed with my sister and family until March 3<sup>rd</sup> when Patrick was born. Bud had made it down to see us on the 2<sup>nd</sup> so was there for the occasion. He took Jim home with him after several days and came back for the rest of us in a month.

Now comes the rest of the story. Bud came back in three weeks to get us. My Mom and Dad (Boone & Etta) followed us home. We went from Benkelman to Hastings north to Grand Island then back to Dunning so we could stay on the highway. Roads still bad and full of snow – stayed all night in Grand Island. Got out to ranch mid afternoon. When I put Patrick to bed that night he had a fever, so we went the 74 miles back to Broken Bow to doctor. He had pneumonia so my mom and Mike stayed in Broken Bow with me. On the way we had to “cut the hell” out of Kerm Collier's chicken fence. My dad went on back to his ranch north of Hagler. Bud took Jim and went back to ranch. In two weeks we got to our own homes and life got back to as normal as it could be with snow, sick calves, three kids and lots more winter. It was April 17 when we got home to stay.