

## THE BLIZZARD OF 1949

By Dorothy Richmond

Scenes of the '49 blizzard are etched in my memory. Verification of events and forgotten statistics from 1949 newspaper stories brought them into focus.

A pleasant holiday vacation from teaching math at Hay Springs High School for Mother and me with relatives in Chadron, Nebraska, was ending. We had enjoyed mild weather as the storms east of us, especially in Central and Northeastern Nebraska, on November 18<sup>th</sup> and December 29<sup>th</sup> had bypassed us.

Sunday, January 2<sup>nd</sup> was mild at 38 degrees and with only light snow forecast for later that night. My friend and I decided that we had plenty of time for an afternoon movie and light snack before returning Mother and I to Hay Springs. Plans had been made for the next day—school for me and returning by local bus to Gordon, Nebraska, for Mother who was staying with her parents there.

On the road east of Chadron decreasing visibility due to the approaching night and increasing snowfall and wind velocity, accompanied by a falling temperature, warned us that we were in trouble. We had no car radio, but we knew we were now in a blizzard. The encounter with state patrolmen who were closing the highway verified our conclusion. All three of us were very familiar with the 23 mile stretch of Highway 20 as we had traveled it many times. We crept along with Mother and me watching out of the windows to help the driver stay on the road.

After a seeming long time, shadowy glimpses of the lights in the village brought sighs of relief. A welcoming landlady took us in out of the storm even though that meant she would have an unexpected guest for the duration of the storm. It was impossible for Mother to go further. The vigilant patrolmen let my friend go with the confident assurance of a safe return home to Crawford. Later the promised phone call let us know that the destination had been reached safely.

That winter I had a room with Mrs. McAlister, a widow, and ate my lunch and dinner with an elementary teacher, her lawyer husband and children several houses north on the other side of the street. The only meal I had with Mrs. McAlister was a simple breakfast. She did not have enough food for all of us for the duration of the storm.

We were completely isolated. The whirling snow blocked out everything outside the windows. The interior of the house became our small world for the rest of the blizzard. The high wind erased all radio reception so the telephone was the only way to keep in touch with others. The storm intensified on Tuesday morning with a shrieking wind of 50 miles per hour and gusts of 60 and 65 miles per hour recorded at North Platte. The inability to block out the overwhelming sound of the shrieking wind day and night kept us very tense. Phone lines in the country were down but miraculously the lines in town remained intact.

We wondered and talked together. "How long will this blizzard last?" "It seems like forever." "How are others managing?" "Are some lost in the storm?"

The family of one of my students who lived across the street to the south realized that we probably did not have any food to cook. They called with the promise of food. During a lull in the storm they brought us cooked food which we welcomed gladly as we were getting very hungry.

Relief came at last on Wednesday noon. The wind died down and the snow ceased. We peered out the windows and the front door in wonder at the remade landscape of huge drifts and patches of bare street and lawns.

Putting on my ski-suit I ventured out to explore, climbing over the huge drift blocking the door to the house. I gazed in wonder at the wind swept street to the north up the hill which is topped by the school building. I wandered about the village. Making my way along Main Street I marveled at the stores that were displaying new fronts made of sculptured snow and the oval-

shaped mounds obscuring all the parked vehicles. That evening I went to the family home for dinner and brought food back to Mother and Mrs. McAlister.

Soon there was a great response by the citizens of the village. They dug out their homes, stores and vehicles and checked on the needs of the people. They assessed the quantity of supplies and pooled their equipment in the effort to open roads in all directions. Pilots with private planes responded by taking supplies to the snowbound rural families who had radioed their needs and instructions of how to find their location.

We marveled at the success of the railroad crews from Chadron in opening the line to Hay Springs. They had the drifted 40 inches of snow to remove. We citizens realized this was made possible as there were no deep cuts through which the railroad passed on the level ground paralleling Little Bordeaux Creek.

We opened school the next Monday although 50% of the high school students were rural. Those near US Highway 20 and the north-south Highway 87 were able to get to school but those living in the more isolated Sandhills were stranded for another two weeks.

Frustration mounted as the attempts with inadequate equipment could not cope with the strong winds and more snow that continually clogged the one lane paths on the roads. In the cuts there were drifts up to 50 feet long and 20-25 feet high. There were still abandoned vehicles buried on the highways. The deep cuts along the railroad east of town were impossible to clear. We heard reports of the railroad snowplows being derailed in the attempts to clear them with some of cuts full of snow to a 30 foot depth. The railroad line was closed the 100 miles between Cody and Hay Springs for a long time although it had been opened between Omaha and Cody by January 13<sup>th</sup>.

There were desperate calls for help. On January 11<sup>th</sup> Gordon's mayor declared a state of emergency. The next day the first food, medicine and fuel arrived on 2 trucks with the drivers slowly making their way behind bulldozers, and a plane from Scottsbluff. The ranchers around Gordon lost a large number of cattle. They decided to butcher some of them and give them to the Native Americans who were living in their tepees in town. The men had been doing work for the local merchants.

On January 12<sup>th</sup> the Omaha World Herald newspaper reporter J. Harold Cown was flown from Omaha to Gordon by Council Bluff's veteran pilot Bill Poncelow to take pictures. Later Bill Poncelow served as pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Norfolk 1964-1988.

Bill returned to Omaha and Harold Cown continued the trip to Harrison with a pilot from Chadron. Other reporters were working throughout the state.

One helpful pilot from Chadron had assumed great need in Hay Springs and attempted to drop food at the little airport. Citizens came to watch and laughed to see the bread wrappers bursting and the slices flying around like popcorn. We had been getting needed supplies by rail from Chadron.

Frustration continued as travel between towns remained restricted. Coal and oil supplies were running low in Northeast Nebraska.

Help arrived with private planes, some with skis, and some with wheels. They were aided by the Civil Air Patrol and military pilots in larger planes from Kearney and Lowery Field in Denver, the National Guard Tenth Air Force in Indianapolis and helicopters in the northern parts of the state. The Red Cross was supplying food and medicine that was dropped or delivered to need persons. Pilots were bringing expectant mothers to towns, ill persons to hospitals and hay to hungry livestock. The isolation continued with disrupted services at the end of the month.

Then "Operation Snowbound" was set in motion. Governor Val Petersen had frantically called President Truman begging for Maj. Gen. Lewis A. Pick to be assigned to help. His plea was answered on January 29<sup>th</sup> as the president ordered the Secretary of Defense to use all the

money and resources required. Action began on February 1<sup>st</sup> with a well-organized plan that tackled the problem with heavy equipment. There were army bulldozers from Kansas City, Denver, Billings, the Twin Cities and smaller places. To this array were added Fifth Army weasel and construction earth movers from within the state. Local organizations were mobilized to supply equipment and personnel. Three days later we heard the news releases of Gen. Picks that gave a remarkable record: miles of roads cleared, persons liberated from the snowbound homes, cattle given access to feed. However, the winds with blowing snow closed the roads again and the equipment had to circle back to reopen them.

The railroad cuts remained a challenge. The strong wind which blended topsoil and snow and the continual thawing and refreezing kept them intact with miniature solid glaciers. Finally, dynamite was used with success.

At last spring arrived and we were freed from the agonizing winter of 1949.

**Information sources:** Special sections from the January and February 1949 issues of the **Omaha World Herald** from the Research Center, EVHM, and articles from **The Gordon Journal** in my private collection.