

Blair, Nebraska
March 2, 2008

BLIZZARD '49
Nebraska Life Magazine
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Norfolk, NE 68702

Dear Editor:

Enclosed are my personal experiences plus pictures, concerning the blizzards of 1948-49. Events of that winter are still vivid in my mind.

They made such an impression, I have a scrapbook of clippings from the Omaha World -Herald, typed 20 pages of the events, and formed a chapter "BLIZZARDS" for my book SAND BENEATH MY SHOES, published in 2005

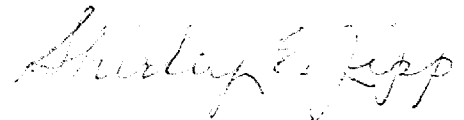
No doubt you will receive many, many stories. My contribution is probably too long, but perhaps there is something you can use.

I heard stories about the blizzard of '88 many times from both my grandfathers. I know you did not ask for stories about that blizzard, but thought you might like to read what I've enclosed. Just toss after reading.

"Etta's Blizzard" was so very interesting, detailed and well researched. I had never before read her story.

Longevity is prevalent in my family (my mother lived to be 93, an aunt 99, another aunt 105 and my dad 83) but anything could happen within the next year. So I am sending my stories to you now. I look forward to the January/February issue of Nebraska Life 2009.

Sincerely,



BLIZZARDS OF 1948-49 IN WHEELER COUNTY

In September 1948, my sister Corinne and I began teaching elementary school in Bartlett, Nebraska, the county seat of Wheeler County. She had the upper room of grades five through eight, I taught the lower room of kindergarten through fourth grade.

That winter began early with its first unheralded blizzard in November that caught even forecasters unaware. On a Saturday of that month, Corinne and I rode a bus from Bartlett to Grand Island to Christmas shop. Planning to stay overnight, we rented a room at the Yancey Hotel. Sunday morning we awoke to snowflakes whirling outside at a maddening pace. We planned to return to Bartlett on the morning bus, but learned via radio blizzard conditions were apparent. Traffic was at a standstill.

Snowbound, we sat on the edge of the bed, alternating this with pacing the floor of our room. The thickening snow was becoming dense. Finally that evening, we were able to board a bus and return to Bartlett.

In December we combined our schoolrooms for an operetta, "The Magi's Gift." The children worked diligently painting the backdrops and enthusiastically assisted Corinne and me with the music, script and costumes. The day of the presentation, snow fell all afternoon and only a sparse crowd of mostly parents came that evening. Dad and Mother drove the fourteen miles from our farm home to attend. With great effort, Dad maneuvered our old Chevy through large drifts. We girls returned home with them to spend Christmas vacation.

During that school year we boarded with Mattie Bishop, whose house was located on a hill in the southern end of Bartlett, and within walking distance of the school. On Monday, November 3rd, not realizing the seriousness of another storm brewing, we bundled up in our slacks, boots and plaid mackinaws. As we opened the front door, the fury of the tempest hit us in the face, and the howling wind was so strong it sucked our breath away. "My stars, there surely won't be school today," Corinne gasped as she slammed the door. "I'll phone Everett Rosso to check on any kids who might already be at school." Everett, a board member lived with his family near the school. There he discovered one brave soul, Kenneth DeLay, a student of Corinne's, huddled against the building.

The storm raged all day and the next. We braced ourselves, read Mattie's books and magazines, listened to the radio, and did some needlework. We were thankful for something to occupy our minds and hands. Across the hall from our upstairs bedroom, was another boarder, Kenneth Outhouse who taught in the Bartlett high school. The three of us were grateful for Mattie's delicious pecan waffles she served with bacon and sausage. During those long hours when the wind shook the house and rattled windows, I thought of Whittier's poem, "Snowbound."

After the storm abated, Bartlett residents began digging out from their mole-like existence. Workers were dwarfed by huge snow banks, some 10 to 12 feet high, as they scooped and shoveled. Drifts were especially large by the high school, firehouse and Methodist Church. In those white mountains, one massive drift was higher than

Mattie's house. For eleven days, only the main street in snow-locked Bartlett was open to travel. County Attorney Art Auserod stated the storm conditions were the worst in the town's history.

The size and savagery of the blizzard caught people unaware, especially farmers and ranchers in Wheeler County. Many were trapped in their farm and ranch homes with inadequate food and medicine. Because people did not have two-way radios then, communications were difficult in rural areas. Ralph Walker, an amateur radio operator in Bartlett, was a life saver on more than one occasion that winter.

One of his messages was: To Governor Val Peterson, State House Lincoln: "We need equipment to open state and county roads so we can get feed to starving cattle and food and fuel for humans. A number of families have been isolated for days. Something must be done at once!"

Few people outside the localities hardest hit, realized how bad conditions were until reporters and photographers from the Omaha World Herald ventured into the "sea of white terrain." North of our county, especially around the O'Neill area, a state highway engineer borrowed every snow plow the state of Iowa would lend him. He eventually wore them out gutting state roads. Many side roads were left for enterprising farmers and ranchers plus the spring thaw. Some drifts were reported to be as deep as 35 feet and 100 feet or more wide.

On January 29th, President Harry Truman gave the Secretary of Defense and Major General Lewis A. Pick of the Army Corps of Engineers, permission to take action. Wheeler County was one of twenty-two northwestern and northcentral Nebraska counties declared in the

disaster area. General Pick, faced with clearing 110,000 miles of snow-choked roads in Nebraska, Wyoming and the Dakotas, called the task "Operation Snowbound," a massive rescue operation. Besides large caterpillar bulldozers, the Fifth Army of the Nebraska National Guard brought trucks and army weasels into Bartlett, Often the only place the men had to sleep, was on the floor of our county courthouse. The U.S. Army spent \$100,000.00 in Wheeler County alone.

When several ranch families moved into temporary quarters in Bartlett, they along with the National Guard, nearly doubled the population of this tiny Sandhill community.

At the east end of Bartlett's main street, was a small landing strip for private planes. Everett Rosso, often a passenger, helped pilots check for distress signals. They delivered much needed food, fuel and mail to isolated farmers and ranchers. One time the flyers saw from the air where cattle had hungrily burrowed into snowbanks for hay. When hay was consumed, the animals licked the dirt in an effort to satisfy their hunger. Another time after the plane landed, starving critters attempted to eat rope, mangers and even clothing of the flyers. It was also noted that bark was eaten from trees and fence posts chewed.

The Air Force C-47's and civilian DC-3's dropped tons of hay to starving cattle. In spite of "Operation Haylift" bringing feed to desperate ranchers, many of their livestock perished.

As we treked to school, my sister and I often observed men in army trucks dumping coal near private homes and in various places

around town. High school students who stayed in dorms, were unable to get home for weeks. A brother and sister from one family strapped their suitcase to a sled one weekend, and pulled it over seven miles to their ranch home.

Corinne and I spent six weeks in Bartlett without a weekend break. On a Friday evening when roads finally opened, we went home. Alas, icy winds picked up and piled new drifts on the wind-swept highway and side roads, blowing them shut. We were stranded again!

We phoned a board member and arrangements were made to return us to Bartlett by army weasel. On Sunday afternoon, Dad drove us north of our farm by team and wagon across the property of neighbors. We had to let down part of the pasture fences to get through. In other places the drifts were so high, the team went right over the fence. At the junction of Highway 281, we climbed aboard the weasel and into the back of the strange vehicle with box-like body and wide treads. Inching along, we noticed how weeks of wind and snow had turned the landscape into a huge, trackless, alabaster sculpture. Fences were cradled in mammoth drifts, only the tips of fence posts exposed. We saw no other moving vehicles, birds or animals, not even a pheasant, jack rabbit or coyote. An eerie silence prevailed with only the treads of the army half-track squeaking over that ice-bound road.

Ten miles is not a long distance riding in a heated car, but in a slow, frigid vehicle at 5 miles per hour, it seemed endless. The cold intensified as it crept into our bones and brittleed our toes. But we were thankful for the cumbersome conveyance. I vowed to remember every detail of that ride, realizing this particular occasion

was probably a history making event I would long remember.

The young man driving the weasel pulled out cold baloney sandwiches. "This is my lunch," he laughed half-heartedly. "It's all I have." When the military men arrived in Bartlett, they were given hot meals by grateful residents of the town. But on that unusual afternoon, this man's ration was cold and meager.

Skies cleared, but winter hung on. The slightest wind caused redrafting. As I recall, my sister and I missed only two days of teaching, both in January.

Numerous stories of hardships endured will be told and retold for years to come. Like pioneers, some blizzard folk used ingenuity and courage. Being resourceful and self-sufficient, my parents managed to have ample fuel on hand as well as a well stocked cellar. Like the proverbial ant, my mother had labored the previous summer in her large vegetable garden, preserving produce. Fortunately, my parents lost no livestock. However, Dad and my brothers did more than the usual amount of shoveling and scooping snow. Our dog was snowed in his house (a corner of the chicken house) for three days during one week before the boys could get him out. But he was alive. A small pocket of air enabled him to breathe.

Furious winter storms are no stranger to the Midlands, but like the blizzard of 1888, no one was expecting the terrible fury that whipped down across Nebraska Sandhills and plains in those early days of 1949. Though the blizzard of 1888 was the more severe in loss of lives, many old-timers said these '49 blizzards far surpassed the blizzard of 1888.

Both of my grandfathers experienced the blizzard of 1888 (each had his own unique story) and often referred to that memorable time. They were still living during the winter of 1948-49. My paternal grandfather George A. Baker was 88 when he died in June 1950. Peter C. Peterson, my maternal grandfather, lived to be 100 plus 5 months. In April 1958 he celebrated his birthday of a century.