

## CAUGHT IN A BLIZZARD

by

Forrest Hintz

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For more than fifty years, G. W. C. Jones rarely spoke of the buffalo hunt that had marked him for life. Even his family knew few of the details because the agony of remembering was almost overwhelming.

Jones, a Probate Judge in Wichita from 1914 until 1925, finally wrote the account shortly before his death in 1928, but only because his family insisted. That simply-told narrative, now in the possession of his grandson, Arthur W. Jones, is one of stark horror, almost inconceivable in scope.

The Jones family had migrated from New Zealand in 1871 and homesteaded near Maize, a few miles northwest of Wichita. In addition to G. W. C., another boy identified only as "George" lived with them.

1872 proved to be a year of bumper crops on the homestead, and when the harvest ended the boys--both 17--decided to go buffalo hunting in a desolate area near the headwaters of the Medicine Lodge River in what is now Kiowa County.

This is how Jones described the start of their journey:

Though we had warm clothes, they were not adequate for the experience ahead of us. With "Smut" and "Polly" for our team and old "Kit" for our extra horse, we started.

To anyone driving over that country today, seeing those prairies with comfortable farm houses, the uplands checked by green fields of wheat and stock grazing on the hillsides, it would be hard to realize that it ever was in the condition that it was on that December morning. Then it was a barren waste. Nothing to relieve its monotony in the way of trees; just a prairie dog town once in a while or an occasional antelope.

Spirits high, the boys headed west until the evening of the third day, when they made their camp on Soldier Creek and began preparations for their hunt.

"Our guns were examined, and with the ammunition made ready, we colled in early," he wrote, adding that ". . . the weather was threatening, (and) we got up in the morning

to find six inches of snow on the ground, though it had stopped falling."

We found a little bump on the ravine and placed the sacks of corn on it, over which we piled our bedding and provisions, then our wagon-sheet over all. We thought this would prevent melting snow from wetting our supplies.

Although it was their first hunt, the boys bagged three buffalo that day. By the time they took the hides and choicest cuts of meat it was dark and they had lost the direction of their camp. However, they gave "Kit" her head and she led them safely back.

That was the beginning of their ordeal. They had built their campfire in a rotten stump, hoping that would feed it while they were gone, but during the day the wind had blown some embers into their cache of supplies. All their extra clothing, their bedding, supplies and even the corn for the horses had burned. Despite that, they decided to stick it out for a week because they had plenty of buffalo meat and could sleep rolled up in the green hides.

They bagged two more buffalo the next day, but by nightfall they were hopelessly lost. They made a dry camp where they were and spent the night surrounded by a pack of gray wolves, getting very little sleep.

After hours of aimless waudering, they found their camp about 3 p.m. the next afternoon. They did manage to shoot "about a dozen" wild turkeys before rolling up in the green hides for a full night's sleep.

They hunted the rest of the week, getting 13 hides, 20 quarters of meat and about 300 pounds of buffalo humps before deciding it was time to go home.

But Fate was not through with the boys. They intended to make their first return camp at a place they had stopped on the way out because it offered considerable shelter and had good forage for the horses. However, they missed the site by at least five miles and had to camp on the open prairie.

That was the real beginning of their terrible ordeal, and this is how Jones recalled it:

It commenced to snow with driving winds from the north. It was so severe we were afraid to try to drive, so prepared to camp there until the storm was over. Our resources were taxed to the utmost. While we had plenty of wood, we could not lie close enough to the fire but what the buffalo hides froze hard as boards. We stayed in this camp for three days, when the storm broke, the wind subsided and we were off again.

The drifts made our travel slow. We had a very heavy load and the horses strained against it. At sundown we came to a place where I had camped before.

There was a spring and good grass in the ravine. By the time we had cooked and eaten our supper, the wind rose again, snow was falling and driven by icy, hurricane blasts.

By morning, we both were chilled to the marrow and hardly able to move. I believe George's feet were frozen then. We had no breakfast. It took us two hours to harness the team, our hands being so numb that we couldn't handle the leather and buckles. Every buckle had to be fastened with our teeth.

After finally getting our team hitched, we started. I was walking beside the wagon, driving the team. George was walking close behind. Sharp, cutting sleet struck us in the face like thrown shot, stinging painfully. By hugging close to the wagon we could keep out of most of it, but not so the team.

One horse, "Smut," was a skittish animal. As the sleet stung her face she would rear and plunge and it was almost impossible to control her. I had to hold the lines very tight, and at the end of a mile my hands were virtually frozen. We decided we would have to leave the wagon and travel on horseback.

First, however, we felt we must try to warm ourselves. On a bare spot on the prairie where the snow had blown away, we tried to start a fire, but the gale scattered the wood and we had to abandon the idea. We unhitched the horses and started off. I was riding "Smut" and George was riding "Polly," leaving "Kit" to follow.

In a very short time we were numb with cold. We dismounted, caught hold of the horses tails and drove them ahead at a run. This limbered us up somewhat. We continued walking and riding alternately. We kept this up for two or three hours, but George began to hesitate about running.

I am satisfied now that his feet were badly frozen and he couldn't run. By the middle of the afternoon he couldn't walk at all. Once, he fell off his horse, but with hard labor I got him back on again.

His legs were frozen stiff, shaping themselves to the contour of the horse's sides. There was a ball of ice as large as a hen's egg on his left eye, the right eye frozen white. He couldn't see and could hardly speak so as to be understood.

I saw some teams and wagons about a mile ahead and tried to whip up and overtake them, but George couldn't stand to ride faster than a walk and told me to go ahead and hold them.

By the time I caught up, I was badly frozen. The men took me off my horse and dragged me backward and forward until I limbered up a little. I could walk by holding onto the endgate of a wagon.

They were all more or less frozen and refused to go back after George. They said they would wait at the top of the next ridge if they saw him coming.

Before we reached the summit, "Polly" galloped up without him and I knew he had fallen off, frozen to death. The men refused to go back after his body. We learned later that it had been 22 degrees below zero, without the wind. We were 50 miles from the only house on the trail home.

We reached the 10 by 14 claim shanty about 3 a.m. and there were 14 other occupants in the hut, all more or less frozen.

When my feet were thawed somewhat, I decided to start again. The others had already gone and I was left with two of my horses. "Kit" had failed to keep up.

"Smut" went on a careful walk and I was getting along, although in intense pain from having my feet hanging when we arrived at the creek. There was a stretch of about eight feet before we could reach the bank on the opposite side. "Smut" took the drifts courageously, but the snow was up to her belly and I was thrown.

I knew I was lost. Whenever she got loose, she refused to be caught. I crawled up to the horse on my hands and knees. She simply stood still so I could hook my frozen claws in her mane. Then she lowered her head so my breast-bone rested on her neck, threw up her head and I slid onto her back. We were about three miles from our house and I rode home with my head to her tail. "Smut" saved my life.

There is no mention of George's body being recovered, but Jones suffered intense agony for the next two months. His feet had frozen so badly and become gangrenous that there was no hope of saving them, and he wrote:

The doctor from Wichita--a crude operator and very drunk at the time--came out to the farm to amputate my limbs, one just below the knee, the other at the ankle. He placed me on the kitchen table and hacked away at the job for a whole day, and those were the days when there were no anaesthetics.

Later, my father met him on a country road, ordered him off his horse and horse-whipped him to within an inch of his life.