

THE MERCILESS DAYS OF SNOW, ICE, FLOODS - 1880-81

by

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The winter of 1880-81 in South Dakota began early when a storm with the magnitude and fierceness of a blizzard struck on October 15, 1880. The storm lasted only twenty-four hours and was not accompanied by exceptionally low temperatures, but it did freeze the Big Sioux and James Rivers. The effects of the storm were widespread because the damp, heavy snow tied up rail traffic, damaged telegraph lines, trapped thousands of livestock out on the open prairies, and halted the threshing which was then underway all through the territory. Because work on the unfinished railroads in Dakota was halted, the Milwaukee Railroad was unable to reach Chamberlain with its tracks that fall because of the storm.

The blizzard of October 15, 1880 came unusually early according to Indians then living at the Yankton Agency who had lived through 75-80 previous winters. They could recall no previous such wintry visitation during October. Heavy storms and destructive blizzards had been known late in the spring, but the rule for October, and even November had always been pleasant and typical autumn weather. But this early storm was a harbinger for the coming winter. Throughout the next five months storm after storm of a most damaging and disheartening character assaulted the region.

The early storm caught everyone unprepared. On October 15, there were a dozen steamboats out on their last trip up the Missouri River to the forts and Indian agencies. The cold blast struck them, in some instances, in mid river and they sought safety at the bank wherever they happened to be. It was even reported that one man was bodily blown off the deck of a steamship. Thousands of new settlers, with only cramped, exposed quarters, were not prepared for this early blast of winter. To make matters worse the railroads had not yet shipped the winter's supply of coal or other fuel. Train loads of fuel were on the tracks and there wasn't the human power available to remove or dig them out. During the winter the frequency of the storms was such that men shoveling in the railway cuts to clear the tracks, no sooner cleared them when another storm would break loose. Later in the season when trains began running again, passengers found the snow banks high enough to shut out the light. At Yankton an engine was equipped with fifty bushels of corn for fuel which enabled it to run to Elk Point where there was a limited supply of coal. Also during the 1880-81 winter tens of thousands of range cattle perished in Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa, and Nebraska.

One of the most severe of the 1880-81 winter storms came on the seventh of February, 1881. The storm continued for forty-eight hours in some sections of Dakota. At Fort Sully, and in a large area of the country, the snowfall reached a depth of four feet. Pierre and areas east had at least three feet of snow, but there was only eighteen inches of snow in



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the extreme southern region. The snow cover lasted until March.

The flood season came early in the Upper Missouri country in 1881. The melting of the two to four feet of packed snow would fill the rivers and creeks. The early flooding came before the ice in the Missouri River gave way. The flooding was caused by the partial melting of the surface snows in the Missouri valley, including the Black Hills tributaries, thus pouring immense volumes of water onto the still frozen surface of the Missouri River. The extraordinary thickness and strength of the ice enabled the river to resist the weight of water passing over it for a week or more. By March 6, the Missouri River at Fort Buford had risen twenty feet and was still rising. When the ice finally broke up on the Missouri, Big Sioux, Vermillion, and James Rivers, the great flood came. The rising water and ice floes inundated the lowlands and isolated settlements. By March 24 the flood waters peaked and reached the Dakota Southern Railroad tracks at several points between the Big Sioux and the James Rivers. Nearly every railroad and wagon bridge south of the 45th parallel was totally destroyed by the raging ice and water, or so badly damaged, it couldn't be used.

Shut off from the outside world by the incidents of the flood, a large portion of the people in the Missouri valley were on the verge of starvation, with little clothing, or none whatsoever other than what they were wearing. Exposed for weeks to a wintry atmosphere, their homes a wreck, often without bed or bedding, flour or meat, the people somehow bore up through this unforgettable experience.

Those who lived at Fort Thompson and the Crow Creek Agency escaped the brunt of the flood; Chamberlain was slightly affected by it. At White Swan, opposite Fort Randall, the people were not so lucky. The ice in the river broke on March 25. The water and ice went over the banks. The settlers were just able to get out of the valley as water quickly rose to the height of their wagon boxes. Happily, all reached the hills alive, but their livestock, buildings, and household fixtures were largely destroyed and swept away. Nearly all the cattle used in freighting from Pierre to Deadwood perished. The Black Hills for a time were entirely isolated. Some stages tried to travel the route, but either became lost or gave up the efforts. After spending 29 hours to go 19 miles, one stagecoach was then obliged to abandon its trip. On the Pierre route a stage left the Cheyenne Crossing and became lost for sixty-five hours.

All the lowlands--those at Greenwood (Yankton Agency), White Swan, the new town of Pierre, and the bottom lands near Bismarck were inundated and many of the improvements destroyed. The flood caused such disaster on the bottom lands bordering the Missouri River between Yankton and the Big Sioux River, a distance of sixty miles, that it was almost beyond belief. On March 28th an ice gorge formed below Vermillion causing water to rise rapidly shortly before nightfall. The entire city was flooded in less than an hour and the residents had to flee to higher ground.

At Yankton the river broke up about four o'clock in the afternoon of the 28th. There were a number of steamboats at the levee at Yankton, where they had passed the winter, and the owners, who expected a busy time when the break-up came, had made preparations and taken all the usual precautions. The heavy ice which covered the river was the chief cause of any apprehension felt for the safety of the boats. There was, therefore, considerable alarm felt when but a few minutes after the ice began moving, a heavy cake struck the steamboat Western near her stern and opened a hole in her hull about 20 feet long through which water poured into her hold. All the men who could work at the pumps were set to work hoping to keep the water level down until the fissure could be closed and the boat moored nearer the shore. Unfortunately, this could not be done. The water poured in much faster than the pumps could take care of it, and in the course of an hour the boat settled down, her stern going to the bottom of the river, her bow remaining partially out of the water. All the movable property on the boat was taken out, but the machinery could not be reached. The hull became a wreck.

At Vermillion the destruction was most complete. The city contained a population of six to seven hundred people and there were about 150 dwellings, hotels, churches, banks, and business houses. The town had been built on a rather narrow strip of the Missouri bottom land, just under the higher land where the present city is established. The flood with its moving ice attacked the city about midnight of March 27th. A grove of trees west of the city obstructed the ice for a time. The people were awakened by the alarm rung out by the bell of the Baptist Church. Not many minutes later the streets were thronged with many women and children, who had been hurriedly

clad, all making their way to the road leading up the hill to the high land. Some were leading horses or driving cattle, some moving along with their arms full of clothing picked up in haste as best they could when leaving their homes. Some of the last of the refugees were compelled to wade through three feet of icy water in the darkness of midnight to reach that steep bluff road. Conditions remained practically unchanged for the next three or four days, although the water rose gradually and submerged the railroad tracks and the depot.

On the 31st of March the water reached nearly to the roofs of many of the smaller structures in Vermillion, and in the morning they began to float off their foundations. During the day of the 31st and the following night, forty structures floated away and dashed against the ice packs lower down the valley. A few people had trusted their safety to the second story of two brick buildings, but the next day they were taken out of the second story windows by rescuers and carried ashore in skiffs. For a week the Vermillion people had been untiringly at work removing everything removable, that is, everything they could reach through the flood of waters. There remained much property which could not be recovered because their only mode of transfer was a limited number of skiffs which made the work slow and difficult. On the 6th of April the water again rose rapidly. Up until this time the growing trees west of town had kept the ice, in a large part, from entering the town. But this renewal of flooding was accompanied by ice floes which entered the desolate town which yet contained a hundred or more of its best buildings. The Baptist church bell again rang out its frightful clangor announcing new danger. At about midday the procession of the buildings started. Some steadily and majestically faced their fate, others tottering, partly tipped over floated away. In the course of a couple of hours, 56 buildings floated off or wrecked near their foundations. Twenty buildings in stately procession, like swans, were observed floating off in one fleet. The scene was an imposing and exciting one, but those whose homes were being wasted and property destroyed did not then appreciate the grandeur of the tragedy.

There was one night during this long peril when a blizzard struck, making it impossible to row a boat or to remain long exposed to the freezing blast. The weather was uniformly uncomfortably cold throughout the long weeks of the flood. Extreme cold was not infrequent, and rescuing parties complained that the most serious danger was freezing to death. Captain Lavender, of Yankton, mentions an instance where he was obliged to spend one night with his men on an ice block owing to high winds. It was with the greatest difficulty that he kept some from going to sleep. He whipped and pounded and threatened though he was half frozen himself, while he stamped about on the icy block to keep his men moving and alive.

The often miraculous delivery of hundreds of people from the jaws of death was the topic of many stories of the time. Volumes of stories could be written from experiences settlers reported about the flood and their rescue from peril. Imminent danger beset hundreds and possibly thousands of farmers' families who inhabited the river valley lands. One such story was told about Ole H. Larson, his wife and two



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children, H.J. Hanson and wife and two children, and two children of Judge Bottolfson, of Clay County. These people were fleeing the flood in a skiff with scant clothing and no food whatsoever. After hours of rowing about in the ice field, they sought refuge on the roof of a partially submerged stable not far from their starting point. There they remained for six long days and nights, exposed to the weather, their only food an uncooked chicken found in the stable, and raw beef taken from a drowned animal. The nights were freezing cold. It was remarkable any were found alive. A searching party discovered them the sixth day and carried them to a place of safety. They were all more or less delirious. At first they thought they would be seen on the roof, but when no sign of help came, they gave up in despair. A house, where ten people had gone for refuge, lifted from the foundation and floated away. After the house got started on its voyage the men folk, realizing their peril, made their way to the roof where they built a large box to serve as a lifeboat in case of further emergency. The house moved along, but had settled nearly to the eaves when the lifeboat was finished and the ten passengers found places in it. Then with much paddling, the passengers made their way to solid ground. They finally found refuge in the house of Mr. Thompson on higher ground.

Flood conditions remained over a large area of the overflowed country until early summer. There were cases where families, or a small group of settlers, had taken refuge in the more substantial buildings of neighbors, but made no preparation for a long stay, presuming the waters would subside in 2 or 3 days. Here, after the lapse of many days and even weeks, provisions would give out and starvation faced the imprisoned people. Relief parties were out searching for

these isolated people, but it was slow and difficult to work through the ice fields of the water waste especially with the accumulation of ice around every building or obstruction.

Gunderson's Mill, seven miles west of Vermillion, was one isolated settlement. As late as the 25th of April parties had been unable to make their way to it owing to the heavy ice that obstructed every avenue--cakes of ice that stood up in great sheets 10 to 15 feet in height. This mill was built on one of the highest points on the Missouri bottom, and was regarded as "floodproof." Nearby in the area were two farm houses, those of Thomas Thompson and Mr. Johnson. At the mill during the flood there were 42 people, 36 in Thompson's house and 47 at Johnson's--125 in all. This was the number when Captain Grant Marsh made his way into the settlement. They had been living for some time on mostly flour, with a very light diet of everything eatable that could be scraped up in the building. The flood did not reach them; but for miles all around them, they could witness the destruction of the farmers' homes and improvements, and the struggling herds of cattle, gathered upon every point that was out of the water, only to be engulfed and swept away by a succeeding rise that covered their place of refuge.

Tens of thousands of domestic animals were swallowed up in the icy waters. Thousands of tons of hay were swept away, and it was a common remark later that there was not a spear of hay left "from the Jim to the Big Sioux." The mess of the flood left the bottom lands strewn with blocks of ice, in all dimensions, frequently 4 feet thick.

The big bend in the Missouri River a few miles above Vermillion was cut off by the flood of 1881, and the Missouri shortened about 17 miles. The peninsula formed by this bend was the largest on the river excepting the Great Bend, mentioned by Lewis and Clark, near Crow Creek. The new channel saved the steamboats 18 miles, less a half. The cut-off left Vermillion about 3 miles north of the navigable channel of the river. The farm of Mons Nelson was situated near the line, or on the line of the cut-off, and where the channel cut across it, took his barns, sheds and all his out-buildings, and a dwelling house nearly new. An observing party had gathered on the Nebraska bluff opposite and was watching the ravenous work of the waters as they devoured the narrow strip in the neck of the bend. The small circle occupied by the cattle was right in its path, surrounded by a sea of water. But a little more than a few feet of land was left for a footing for the cattle when suddenly this disappeared as if undermined, and with a mighty crash sank into the water, hurling the cattle with it. They soon disappeared.

Meckling was a railroad station on the Dakota Southern Railroad, about 7 miles west of Vermillion, four miles from the bluffs, where a large community of farming people resided and not more than 14 miles from Yankton, where there were a number of steamboats and scores of men skilled in handling rowboats and pike-poles. As someone remarked, "Though the condition of Meckling was known to the ends of the earth, yet all civilization could only stretch its hands in pitying

sympathy without being able to reach them." Many attempts were made from Yankton with the best of boats, manned by the bravest of hearts, but they were turned back unable to penetrate the barriers of ice. Within 1 1/2 miles of Meckling 1,600 head of cattle were lost. There were six lives lost due to the flood. The people at Meckling were finally rescued April 28th through the daring and determined efforts of Captain Grant Marsh, who had been doing heroic relief work all along the line, in the ice and water, and who finally resolved that Meckling must be reached and its imprisoned inhabitants relieved. The Meckling people had spent 19 days in the second story of the elevator and in one or two other buildings adjoining. There were 125 of them. They were all comparatively well.

The ice broke up in the Sioux River at Sioux Falls on the 20th of March, and the water began rising. In 24 hours it gained a height of about 16 feet above the low water mark, the highest ever known. A torrent over 500 yards wide ran through the town. The flood extended to the bluffs on the east side of the river and washed away over 30 buildings. The Milwaukee Railroad bridge was washed away and the track badly damaged, as was the track and yards of the Worthington line. The Queen Bee Mill suffered \$15,000 in damages. The lumber companies all lost heavily. Other companies and one other mill suffered a combined loss of \$150,000. The rise of the river above the falls swept away about 100 buildings. At Dell Rapids the bridge was washed away, and the mill seriously damaged.

Three of the bridges across the Big Sioux at Sioux Falls went out within 15 minutes. The upper wagon bridge, a new iron structure, was the first and went whirling down the flood and struck the lower wagon bridge, throwing it in the air, and then the combined wrecks dashed into the Pembina Railroad bridge, tumbling it from its foundation, and the three bridges floated away in company. The big bottom prairie just west of the town was at one time under 10 feet of water, and the farmers and all persons living on these bottom lands had been compelled to seek safety from the flood, so suddenly did the overflow come upon them. The farmers lost everything but their land and their lives. Many of them who possessed a small fortune in grain and livestock, buildings and improvements found themselves reduced almost to a beggarly condition. From the highland, buildings could be seen floating in the water, and others were submerged to the top of their roofs. No human lives were lost but the people, refugees from farms, had sought shelter in a town which was already overcrowded and the people growing desperate over the growing scarcity of food supplies. Soon the supply of staple articles was wholly exhausted. The merchants were out of sugar, coffee, syrup, oils, and candles. There were no vegetables of any kind, and there was a low stock of flour for so many people. Stores had next to nothing that the people wanted to buy, and little attention was paid to storekeeping. A quantity of flour was stored in the Cascade Mill but could not be approached while the torrent of water and ice raged.

There was no relief in sight, for there was no way of getting out of Sioux Falls nor any method by which relief could be sent in. The railroads were helpless, they were

powerless even to help themselves. Their coal was exhausted, and their tracks and bridges destroyed. It would take two months or more of work before they could be ready to resume the running of any kind of train. The Sioux City and Pembina from the former place to Canton was said to be in such a wasted condition that it would have to be rebuilt. The destruction of property in the Sioux Valley below Sioux Falls, extending through Lincoln County was immense. The roads were closed by the destruction of the bridges. The only practicable method of traveling to any place for several weeks was either afoot or on horseback.

Lower Canton was flooded and a number of buildings washed away or wrecked. The river at Canton was 2 1/2 miles in width for a time; the railroad grade was entirely destroyed and the ties with the rails spiked to them, floated off to the bluffs. About the 20th of April the Sioux River broke up at Brookings and in a brief time inundated the valley. The railroad extension from near Brookings up the Sioux Valley to Watertown had been partially graded the previous fall. The culverts under the railroad embankment proved too small to accommodate the increasing flood of water from above, and channels were cut through the dirt to increase the culvert capacity. This was accomplished but the continued rise of the water forced its way through these channels washing away so much of the bank as to destroy it, and the result was that several miles of the track was left without support. The water covered the valley as far as the eye could see and formed a lake of remarkably large dimensions. There were miles and miles of the railroad embankment that was washed away and the rails and ties left suspended.

A working party composed of one hundred men left for Pierre about March 1st for the purpose of shoveling out the snow and ice filled cuts of the roads which had defied the efforts of snow plows, and had blockaded the roads for weeks. The party was thoroughly equipped with the necessary tools, including explosives, to succeed with the task before it. The men dug their way through about one-half the distance to Pierre, and were then overtaken by storms and severe cold weather. There were no towns or relief stations on the line, and no settlers. The party ran out of provisions and the entire road gang was reduced to one biscuit a day to each man. A rescue party was sent out from Huron and found the men in a perilous situation, but they succeeded in getting them back to Huron alive. Many of them had their feet and hands frozen to such an extent that amputation became necessary.

At DeSmet the people were living on flour and potatoes, with nothing but hay for fuel. At Volga hotels and boarding houses were closed. At Huron there was a twenty foot rise in the James River when the break up of the ice came, and the bottom lands were flooded. The Northwestern Railroad was finally opened to Huron May 7, but there were a number of bad places east of town where an engine was not permitted to cross. The cars were pushed over soft spots, and taken along by a relay locomotive. In the James River valley the flood was disastrous. The ice was not a serious enemy, but the high water and its rapid current did the damage.

There had been much suffering and hardship endured during the winter by families living on their claims who had come the previous fall, and where provision had been made for nothing more than an ordinary winter season. The acute stage of deprivation for many came later with warmer weather in the spring and the breaking up of the heavy ice in the streams. Peter Shearer, an early pioneer, had built a substantial sod and clay house, a story and a half, on Twelve Mile Creek, a tributary of the James River in the northern part of Hutchinson County. He had accumulated much livestock, had a fine farm and was living comfortably. An ice gorge formed above his house near Twelve Mile Creek, and turned the channel of the stream, now a raging torrent of ice and water, so that it flooded his land. He managed to swim his livestock across to a high point and his family were taken out in boats to Milltown. The water continued to rise until it reached the top story of the Shearer house. The structure began to crumble because the walls were softened and weakened by the battering of the ice pack against them. In a brief time the structure disappeared and became mingled with the flood. Little was left to mark the spot where it stood. All his out buildings shared the same fate. There were hundreds of these sod and clay structures along the valley, and all shared a similar fate.

The mail service had been immobilized for many months through the stormy winter, but when the ice and floods came in the spring, it practically isolated the Dakota settlements and towns from the outside world. For thirty days no mail, whatever, reached the settlements in the southern half of the territory. Sioux City was in a similar condition. Mail finally reached Sioux City from Yankton by skiff on April 30. This mail had seen much going here and there previously. It had been sent up to the Milwaukee Road where it was erroneously reported that it was opened, and then went back to Yankton and to Sioux City by skiff. The steamboat Niobrara, which left Sioux City April 29th, took over two tons of mail for Vermillion and Yankton. Among this mail were 118 sacks which had been brought to Sioux City from Sheldon, Iowa a few days before. A part of this mail was discovered to be a lot that was made up in the Sioux City office several months before and had been knocked about during the ice blockade in unsuccessful efforts to get to Yankton.

It is not surprising that the great heart of the country was moved to benevolence as soon as the story of the calamity became known. The United States Government began issuing rations of flour and bacon to the destitute through military channels about the first of April. The central point of distribution was at Yankton, where Captain D. Wheeler, commissary and quartermaster, supervised the issue. Twenty-five thousand Government rations were distributed by April 27th, and supplies were exhausted. The Chicago Board of Trade gave General Terry, \$1,500 to continue this relief work. Clothing continued to be issued by the Government, each needy person receiving two shirts, two pairs of drawers, a pair of pants, shoes, blouse, and blanket. Two tons of tents, blankets, and clothing were sent from Fort Leavenworth. The Produce Exchange of far away New York City even became active in securing funds for Dakota sufferers.

The calamity passed, leaving many scars in the form of ruined homes, wrecked fortunes, destroyed transportation links, and lost lives. There were instances where the privation and hardship and near starvation left an indelible mark on the survivors. Still many would recall experiences and the hardships with pride in the valor and heroism of so many of Dakota's sons, who at the first call, bravely dared the discomforts and hazards of the blizzards, floods, and ice to help one another. In conclusion it is difficult to believe that after the danger was passed, immigration set in again and swelled. Railroads were almost "swamped" by this traffic. Life renewed.