

Martin County Blizzards & Snowstorms

Harsh winters are nothing new to Martin County. Although recent winter weather has been relatively uneventful, residents of Martin County can undoubtedly recall many examples of brutal winter storms. However, before weather predictions were readily available, people were often caught off guard with rapidly changing weather conditions. In some cases, these storms proved fatal.

A sudden winter storm in 1856 resulted in oxen being frozen stiff in an upright position and the owners of a cattle driven sleigh hiding under the sleigh box for seven days after turning their cattle loose. In addition, the body of one man that became lost in December of 1856 was not found until April of 1857. The same storm in 1856 resulted in those attending a party just outside of Fairmont taking four hours to get back into town.

In 1857, an unexpected blizzard forced three couples traveling from Jackson to Elm Creek to stay in an abandoned twelve foot square shack for two days. The same blizzard caused a man and his oxen team to freeze to death after being caught in a snow drift. In extremely dire conditions, people at that time would sometimes be forced to burn their furniture in order to keep warm.

In 1866, two families of young people attending a singing school held at Silver Lake started for home with an oxen team, blankets, and hay. With their backs to the storm, they thought they would make it home safely. However, due to the blizzard conditions the oxen team left the road wandering aimlessly and soon became stuck in a snowdrift. The boys of the group took turns searching the area for houses or shelter, but to no avail. After two nights and one day, the storm subsided. Regretfully, the three girls in the sleigh and the oxen froze to death, and the three boys lost hands and feet.

In 1880, snowstorms started as early as October and snow blockades of the rails had developed by November. By the first week of January, Fairmont was feeding and housing as many as 250 snow shovelers who were attempting to keep the streets and sidewalks clear. Snow arches were cut so pedestrians could get to stores, train service was disrupted for three weeks, mail was delivered on skis, and blizzards hit again in March undoing the earlier work of the snow crews. The snow blockade finally ended on April 29th.

In the early 1900s, Martin County schoolteacher Hulda Hausfeld spent the weekend at her parents' home in Welcome when a winter storm developed. Intent on holding scheduled classes in District 126, Ormsby, she set out with her car before eventually

becoming stuck in the snowdrifts. Consequently, she abandoned her car and being determined she walked the remaining twelve miles in the blizzard in order to ring the bell for classes to begin on Monday morning. One might wonder if all the students arrived on time.

Other major storms took place during the winters of 1909, 1912, and 1936. In 1936, the temperature stayed below zero from January 18th through February 22nd, dipping as low as minus 30 F. on January 22nd. The Omaha Railroad used rotary plows on the tracks cutting drifts up to thirty-five feet high. Albion Avenue in Fairmont had drifts measuring twelve feet high.

The unforeseen Armistice Day Blizzard of 1940 struck without warning causing many problems in addition to fatalities. Temperatures had been relatively mild, but abruptly dropped and snow began falling catching many county residents completely unprepared. An Omaha Bus took an hour and one-half to get from Armstrong to Fairmont, the Fairmont-Blue Earth football game was cancelled, Sentinel newspaper carriers tied themselves together so as not to get lost, livestock perished, crops not yet harvested were destroyed, hunters were in peril, and there were a number of deaths due to the sudden and unexpected onset of the storm.

Other significant storms occurred in March of 1951, November of 1952, the spring of 1965, and December of 1968. The “Storm of the Century” in 1975 resulted in people being stranded in sheds, drainage ditches, basements, and the hospital. The only reliable means of transportation was snowmobiles. To add insult to injury, due to that storm, many were unable to watch the Minnesota Vikings play the Pittsburgh Steelers in the Super Bowl. Maybe that wasn’t so bad, as the Vikings lost by a score of 16 to 6.

The 1991 “Halloween Blizzard” arrived unexpectedly and caught many people unprepared. Halloween of 1990 was a pleasant 76 degrees F.; however, in 1991 twelve to fourteen inches of wet snow fell. Schools and businesses were closed, motorists and road crews were literally paralyzed, and stalled cars blocked I-90.

The preceding illustrates some examples of the effects of harsh winters in Martin County. In contrast with today’s wired world that includes The Weather Channel, twenty-four hour TV and radio weather forecasts, and cell phone weather apps, it would seem that we should have little or no reason to be caught unprepared. Nevertheless, although weather predictions can prove helpful, they are certainly not infallible.

For more information on historic Martin County weather events, or to become a member of the MCHS, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.



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HERE'S PROOF!

The following official figures on the history-making cold spell of 36 days below zero in January and February, 1936, are from Weatherman James Lamperd, Fairmont, Minn. It was the longest arctic wave in the weather station's history.

Jan. 18	.....	-12
Jan. 19	.....	-18
Jan. 20	.....	-22
Jan. 21	.....	-11
Jan. 22	.....	-30
Jan. 23	.....	-27
Jan. 24	.....	-17
Jan. 25	.....	-20
Jan. 26	.....	-21
Jan. 27	.....	-16
Jan. 28	.....	-14
Jan. 29	.....	-18
Jan. 30	.....	- 9
Jan. 31	.....	-21
Feb. 1	.....	-16
Feb. 2	.....	-14
Feb. 3	.....	- 2
Feb. 4	.....	-20
Feb. 5	.....	-26
Feb. 6	.....	-18
Feb. 7	.....	-26
Feb. 8	.....	-14
Feb. 9	.....	-18
Feb. 10	.....	-17
Feb. 11	.....	-18
Feb. 12	.....	-15
Feb. 13	.....	- 6
Feb. 14	-23
Feb. 15	-21
Feb. 16	-29
Feb. 17	-14
Feb. 18	-19
Feb. 19	-20
Feb. 20	- 4
Feb. 21	-20
Feb. 22	- 5



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