

A memoir of Thanksgiving to Gilmore City

Blizzard of '78

Most older Iowans remember the blizzard of '78 as the worst of Mother Nature's snow storms during their lifetime. Two Iowans died in it. Many had close calls, including my cousin Jim Sutton of Evansdale. Then the age of 36, an auto mechanic, he almost died in the cab of his large pickup after he spent the day pulling out cars that were stuck in the snow. Then, as the blizzard worsened, he became stuck and was underprepared to spend the night in a freezing pickup. His mother, my Aunt Edna, deemed that night to be the beginning of his declining health and heart problems.

Another close call occurred in Spencer. Mrs. Patricia Larsen, a 37 year old mother of four, spent twenty hours in the Clay County Fairgrounds during the blizzard because she couldn't see her way out after snowmobiling there. It was 'white-out conditions'. She huddled beside a locked building, no doubt wondering if she would survive. Somehow she did live, even with a wind chill of 60 degrees below zero and wind gusts reaching 67 mph. Her story made the front page, above the fold, of the Des Moines Register in the Monday, January 13, 1975 issue.

Tim Steffen of Spencer terms it as the 'worst three day blizzard of his life'. He and Russ Sopeland rescued people stuck in cars by what was then the north shopping center (now ILCC) by giving stranded people a ride on their snowmobiles to a motel or homes. They did this until visibility was so poor that they could hardly see and Tim's snowmobile froze up. So, Russ took Tim home on his snowmobile and Russ headed home himself.

Spencer's Linda Hoberg recalled her Clay County farmhouse with no insulation. She relayed: "The temp dropped to just above freezing inside the house that weekend because the old furnace could not keep up, and there were snowdrifts inside under the windows." She added, "When the storm finally ended, I couldn't even see my garage, it was completely buried in snow." She also related, "At the family farm, my dad and uncle went out in the pastures to round up the cattle and bring them into shelter; they did this on foot with ropes to guide them back to safety. My dad and uncle made it OK," she wrote, "and no livestock were lost."

Jack Johnson of Lake Park and Fostoria said his cattle "looked like buffaloes, their faces caked with ice and snow." Some cows died standing up, from suffocation, because snow filled their noses. The ones that were near bails of hay did better because eating and nosing the hay kept the snow from building up on their nostrils. Johnson said that Bernie Cohrs of Spirit Lake lost around 400 head of cattle. He got ten cents per pound for the cattle he lost.

Meanwhile, the nearby town of Cherokee, Iowa made National news with film footage showing cattle walking down Main Street. The snow was so high and densely packed that it completely

covered fences and upheld the weight of cattle as the animals walked over the fencing and wandered away. My Cherokee friend and her husband lived on the 3rd floor of an apartment building at the time and said that they “felt as if we could walk off our balcony right into the snow-filled yard.”

I was a young teacher with a full teaching load. I was also the debate coach, a job that required taking students 100-200 miles each weekend to overnight debate tournaments hosted at schools or colleges. We would leave our school early on Friday, and after two days of competition for the students and judging for me, we would begin the drive home Saturday evening after the awards ceremony.

The school vans were basic...no heater other than the one located below the radio near the front seat and no insulation on the van ‘ceiling’. Students would run their fingernails along the inside of the top of the van for the frost to fall making it snow inside the vehicle. They brought blankets, pillows, and would vie to get to the front seat where the heater was located. And that was true with any winter drive...but blizzard, sub-zero temperatures made the school van especially uncomfortably cold.

So, on this late afternoon/early evening on January 11 of 1975, I had a van load of eight students and we were heading back to Spencer after a two day debate tournament hosted in central Iowa. The snow had begun before we left the host school, but we were busy at the tournament and had no advance news of a snow storm. We had no cell phones, and no way to get weather alerts, but, as we left the tournament we did hear on a fuzzy-sounding van radio that it was “snowing hard”, a fact we could see as snow was already piling up. Snow was coming down fast, with big flakes flying cockeyed (askew). The van side windows and ceiling quickly frosted over. It was so cold outside that the front heater seemed to kick out only lukewarm air.

The school van could advance through the snow at first, but at times it wasn’t easy to see the road as everything was white and any car tracks that preceded us quickly filled with snow. Following a semi, I drove as far as one small town and thought about stopping, but the town’s one motel looked full, with a car parked in front of each motel door. So, I drove on, still following the semi, wondering if we would drive out of the worst of the storm, or if the east/west roads may be better. Instead, the snow deepened and the wind blew harder. Sadly, the semi we were following turned off a different direction than we needed to go. At times we couldn’t see the road for long durations. When I could see, I had to judge where the street was by driving parallel to the telephone poles on one side of the road and electrical wires on the other, trying to stay equidistant between them.

We made it as far as the small town of Gilmore City, a town of fewer than seven hundred people, when it became consistently impossible to see the road and the snow level grew so

deep that it was difficult for the school van to plow through it. We stopped at a small, single pump gas station and the gas station attendant directed us to a nearby church.

The minister's wife met us at the church door. The debaters carried in their blankets and pillows from the van. We were happy to be indoors, warm and safe. The church had restrooms and a kitchen. Our girls took over one Sunday School classroom in which to sleep and the boys, another. I slept on the heated hallway floor near the two rooms, using my coat as a blanket and its sleeves as my pillow. The debaters had purchased some snack food at the gas station, although in those days, gas stations sold mainly candy bars and soda, not much else for food. So, the students did not have much for dinner, but they were more tired than hungry.

The minister's wife was able to get a call into our principal and he announced on KICD that the debate team was safe in Gilmore City. The snow kept coming down, the wind kept howling, and temperatures dropped dangerously cold. What we thought would be an overnight event became a three day ordeal.

The next morning, the minister's wife came through the blizzard and brought some food to us. I made eggs for students, and they each made their own peanut butter toast for breakfast each day. Later in the afternoon, the minister's wife blew in with a half-baked turkey with directions as to how to finish baking it. So, one night our boys 'cooked' and the girls set the table and did the dishes after. The next night was a ham dinner that the girls finished preparing and the boys cleaned up. The third day was 'peanut butter sandwiches' day.

Our lunch and dinner were combined meals, eating at about 3 PM. I recall we had popcorn one evening. A neighbor who lived near the church braved the storm to bring us a gallon of milk and brownies. We were thankful for the generosity of the church congregation and townspeople.

As time went on, the church became a refugee camp for others. A 'GI Joe' soldier became our church share mate, then an older couple, then a National Guard guy and a few more people, too. I remember one couple was from out-of-state and picked a bad time to visit Iowa enroute to a warmer climate.

Every so often, I weathered out to the school van to start it and let it run for a while, thinking that it would start better when we were able to leave. The school van reluctantly started each time.

When the snow finally ceased, on the third day, we waited until noon to leave in order to give the snow plows a chance to clear the roads. On one stretch, I drove in an above ground tunnel,

a curvy single lane path with snow piled two to three times higher than the top of the school van on each side. I feared meeting another car...how would we ever back up? Or what if the snow plow was working; what if we met it? It was a long, slow drive through the tunnel. Occasionally, we saw parts of cars buried inside the tunnel walls. Eventually, we drove out of the snow tunnel, but roads were still unpleasant and sometimes only single lanes so we took turns with oncoming cars. We saw lots of stalled cars, some in ditches. Bucking the drifts that came back onto the road after the grader went through wasn't a good idea as the snow was packed hard and sometimes deeper than it seemed. Going around such drifts when possible, and taking our time on frosted and slippery roads, we finally made it to Spencer.

I was relieved when we arrived safely in town. Students who left a car in the school parking lot could not access their car; nothing was plowed out in the school lot. In some cases, the students' cars were completely covered in snow; they couldn't even find their car. So, then I worked on delivering each student to his or her home by use of the school van. One debater lived out in the country, on an inclined gravel road, so that, alone, was a scary drive as most the country gravel roads were barely plowed, a single path at best, and they had fingerlings across the road, but the boy's father, a farmer, plowed the stretch nearest their house so that I could deliver their son home and turn around in their yard.

I always thought a van load of bright students was the most precious of all cargos and that it was a large duty to be in charge of them, but never did I feel the weight of responsibility more than I did during the blizzard of '75.

As I recall, the students did well at the debate tournament, but trophies were secondary to safely arriving home. After school resumed, our debaters sent a thank you note to the church people. Our principal wrote one also. He put a hundred dollar bill in with his thank you note. I suspect it came out of his own pocket as our school didn't have any 'slush' fund that I know of, let alone a winter blizzard account. There's no debating that the freezing, dangerous, and lengthy Iowa blizzard of '75 was unforgettable, as was the warmth, generosity, and shelter provided for us.

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Thank you, Gilmore City

Written by Jan Myers, Retired teacher/debate coach, Spencer High School