

Storm of 2009 over christmas

Just a note to say "Merry Christmas" and to let you know the electricity - and, therefore, the water pump, fridge and freezer - is back on after several days of quiet in the dark!!

Power went off here at Hidden Timber Wednesday afternoon about 3 p.m. and came back on Thursday evening about 11 p.m. after we returned home from Christmas Eve supper, conversation and laughter with nearby neighbors who had just installed a gas generator. Church services had been cancelled. Friday morning (Christmas Day), I washed dishes, took a shower, and did some cooking until about 2:30 p.m. when the power shut off again. We spent the evening in romantic candlelight and an oil lamp doing a 1,000-piece puzzle. Hubby got the edge pieces together but it got too dark to finish. I crocheted on a pillow top but finally called it a day too, blowing out candles and lamp. I had set and wound a hand-crank alarm clock earlier, found last summer at a Crookston rummage sale for 50 cents, and placed it near the bed with a flashlight.

We arose Saturday morning to cloudy skies with the sun trying to peek through and two-and-three-foot drifts around our small farmstead. Mobile phones and landlines didn't work yet, so we relied on cellular to reach daughter, her hubby and grandkids in Valentine to assure them we were okay, had drawn drinking and washing water, were eating lightly and had propane heat. Gotta get the tank refilled soon, however.

While our grandkids think this was a terrific blizzard, we both remember the late 1940s and 1950s when blizzards lasted three or four full days, and snow drifts actually reached the eaves of the farmhouse. The James River at Olivet and the Missouri River at Yankton flooded the following spring of those years. The Daily Press and Dakotan, Yankton's newspaper, eventually printed photos of super-high snow drifts alongside U. S. Highways 18 and 81 in eastern South Dakota as SD Highway Dept. employees ran dozers, graders and other machinery to open highways for traffic.

After one storm left snow packed against the north wall of the house up to the roof, Dad started the tractor and tunneled a path alongside the house so we could again see outdoors. He spread that snow into the center of the yard where nights winds had kept drifts from forming. My brother and I tunneled into the remaining snow drifts and giggered snugly inside our two-foot-high igloo where the wind couldn't reach us. We didn't have television yet so didn't know how much snow had fallen elsewhere, who might have gotten stranded or if church would be held on Sunday. School was always called off automatically, without notification, if farmers couldn't get their children to the highway on tractors with tire chains. If school buses couldn't get through, there also generally was no school. I remember the winter of my junior year when Dad couldn't get the car or tractor started, so I missed the bus. He called to the high school, and my chemistry teacher was dispatched to come get me. I was terribly embarrassed at having to be the ONLY high school kid who needed a rescue - and from a teacher yet!

We kids helped Dad do morning and evening chores during blizzards by following a rope he had tied onto the front gate by the house which then led to the barn's door handle. We usually couldn't see more than two or three feet so kept one hand on the rope as we trudged through deep snow to the barn to help feed the herd of Herefords and start milking the Jerseys, Guernseys and one brown Swiss. Chickens had to be fed ground oats and corn and water carried to them by hand. Pigs got shovels full of dried field corn still on the cob and water. Eggs were gathered at 5 p.m. daily, though some hens quit laying during long electric outages. Later, after the silo was erected, we kids climbed up into the structure, yelled to hear our own echoes and then forked corn silage down to where Dad would then shovel it into the feed bunk, where cows chewed contentedly.

We also filled coal shuttles and five-gallon metal pails with dried corn cobs to burn in Mom's woodburning stove. We kids often helped Dad split dead tree trunks and branches into burnable lengths and then, after he'd hauled them to an open basement window and they'd dropped onto the basement floor inside, we would fill the coal basket again and again, bringing both cobs and wood upstairs to feed the stove. Mom baked many

loaves of bread and pies inside that oven; prepared pots of soup and stew; cleaned the top of the cooking area with black emery cloth and fried pancakes on top of the stove without using a frying pan.

Walking to the rural, one-room-and-a-porch school was mandatory but it was only 1.25 miles one way unless neighbors who had cars picked us up and gave us a ride. Dad finally bought a small gray Chevy. He and mom both beamed the day they brought it home, and we kids thought we'd died and gone to heaven. A real car! No more walking to school in blizzards! Not so fast, girlie! Sometimes, the car wouldn't start, so we walked again unless a neighbor came along and gave us a ride.

Girls were required to wear dresses or skirts to school but, in the winter, we could also wear jeans under our skirts. Boots and long brown stockings were mandatory during blizzards - usually four-buckle overshoes that had the cow manure washed off first. Outhouses were just that - outdoors, often with snow having blown in through the screened vents and needing to be brushed off the two-hole planks before we sat.

Mom always had canned chicken, tomatoes, green beans and other vegetables, pickles, jams and jellies, etc. each summer, with me helping, so we usually got to enjoy hot suppers during dark winter evenings. Of course, there were fresh eggs, cream and milk and freshly-baked bread available most winter days. Dad would often come in from last-minute chores, his feet and hands cold as ice despite boots and gloves, his face red with cold and his handkerchief wiping his nose and face. He would remove his overshoes, parka, cap and gloves and then set a wooden table chair in front of the wood burner, open the oven door and rest his feet on the warm grate inside. Sometimes, if the oven was too hot, he placed a brick inside the oven and then rested his feet on it. More than one baby calf born during a February blizzard was also saved by the warmth of the kitchen wood burner. Newborn piglets sometimes too, especially if the sows tried to lay on them.

There are more good memories of blizzards in the "olden days", but perhaps this is enough this time on Prairie Newsletter. Thank you for reading this.

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