

# THE DRIFT

The newsletter of  
*The Beautiful Snow: The Ingalls Family,  
the Railroads, and the Hard Winter of 1880-81*

Oh the snow!  
The beautiful snow,  
Filling the cuts  
So the trains can't go

*Murray County Pioneer*  
Currie, Minnesota  
January 20, 1881

## Editor Clarence E. Graham *Janesville Argus, Janesville, MN*

Each newspaper had its own voice and personality, reflecting the editor who ran it. Some exuded significantly more style than others. One of the voices that rose above others from the faded ink (ok, microfilm...) was that of Clarence Graham, the editor of the *Janesville Argus*. Grounded and solid, he had a creative and expansive vocabulary, was not afraid to take on his critics, and was responsible for some of the more humorous quips of the winter.



In 1873, the town leadership of Janesville purchased equipment for another man, under the agreement that a weekly newspaper be produced. That original editor managed to generate a collection of handbills for a political candidate, but few if any issues of a newspaper. After only a month or two, the leaders repossessed the press equipment.

That fall, the leadership approached C. E. Graham, asking him to take over the enterprise, despite his lack of newspaper experience. After completing his harvest, the first edition of the *Argus* was dated November 2, 1873, and "bristled with odd, quaint sayings, and with witticisms fresh and stale presented in an original manner."<sup>1</sup> One can only imagine what it took to set about on such an endeavor with such short notice!

*continued on next page*

“ *The Superintendent of the Chicago & North Western should send up a special agent and a special pot of oil to grease the wind mill at the water tank. Howls and grumbles like a flock of wild geese mourning for their first born. Excruciating and horrible.* ”

Janesville Argus, December 14, 1880

*Mr. Graham was a member of the Minnesota Editors and Publishers Association, though the extent of his participation is not known. The image shown here is from the 1892-93 membership photo montage. Photo courtesy of the Waseca County Historical Society.*

He ably served as both postmaster and editor of the *Argus* until selling the paper in August 1881, handing over both duties to the new proprietor. He then moved to nearby Waseca to operate the *Waseca Radical*.

A Grange member and sometimes-farmer, he suffered from various health issues, and his death on January 11, 1904 is listed as dropsy (congestive heart failure). He was well liked, and his obituary reads, in part, "though not unprepared for the announcement, our citizens were pained to hear of the death."<sup>2</sup>

“*The papers come down from the west printed on brown paper in some instances. Those fellows out there won't be beaten, and we expect yet to see them shoving out cabbage leaves and elm slabs at \$1.50 a year.*”<sup>1</sup>

*Janesville Argus, February 8, 1881*

A stately tombstone marks his grave in Waseca's Woodville Cemetery.

Clarence may have come by his confident wit naturally, as the obituary of his father John, just five years before, included that the elder Graham was "an outspoken, upright man, and thoroughly honest, even in his prejudices, which were many and strong."<sup>3</sup>

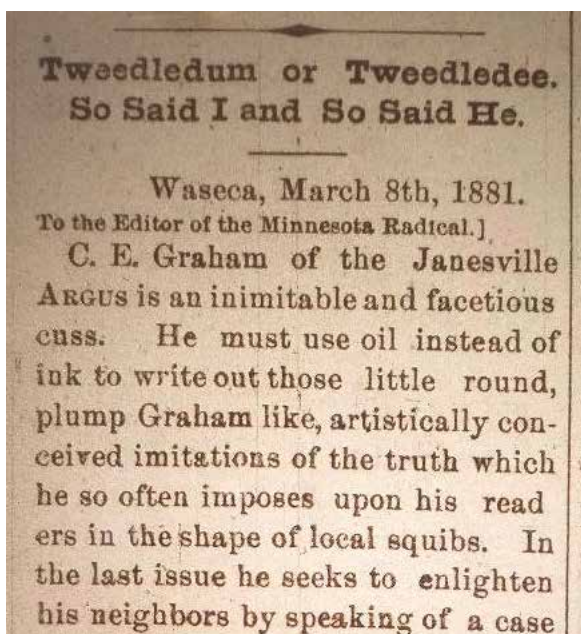
*As you read **The Beautiful Snow**, it is my hope that you'll take note of Mr. Graham's charm and wit.*

<sup>1</sup> James E. Child, *Child's History of Waseca County*, p. 580.

<sup>2</sup> *Waseca Herald*, Waseca, Minnesota, January 15, 1904

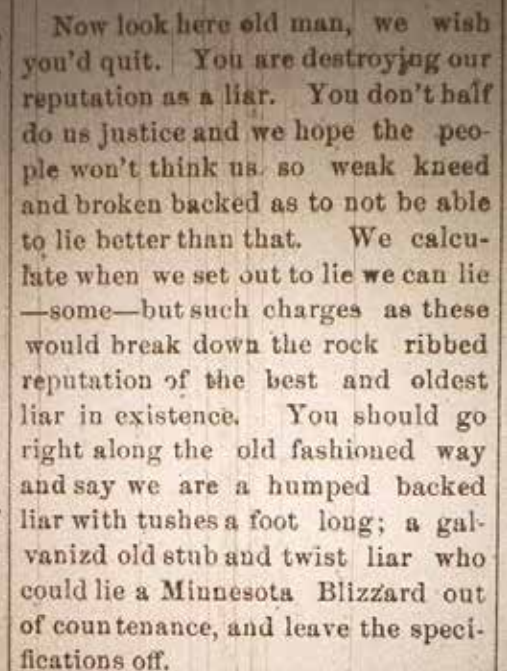
<sup>3</sup> James E. Child, *Child's History of Waseca County*, p. 511

The sample articles here from the March 15, 1881 *Janesville Argus*, illustrate some of the back-and-forth between correspondents and editors. **The image on the left is the introductory portion of a letter about Mr. Graham. The image on the right is the beginnings of Mr. Graham's response.** These jabs were often between friends, exercising opportunities to be humorous and entertain the readers.



Twædledum or Tweedledee.  
So Said I and So Said He.

Waseca, March 8th, 1881.  
To the Editor of the Minnesota Radical.]  
C. E. Graham of the *Janesville ARGUS* is an inimitable and facetious cuss. He must use oil instead of ink to write out those little round, plump Graham like, artistically conceived imitations of the truth which he so often imposes upon his readers in the shape of local squibs. In the last issue he seeks to enlighten his neighbors by speaking of a case



Now look here old man, we wish you'd quit. You are destroyjag our reputation as a liar. You don't half do us justice and we hope the people won't think us so weak kneed and broken backed as to not be able to lie better than that. We calculate when we set out to lie we can lie—some—but such charges as these would break down the rock ribbed reputation of the best and oldest liar in existence. You should go right along the old fashioned way and say we are a humped backed liar with tushes a foot long; a galvanized old stub and twist liar who could lie a Minnesota Blizzard out of countenance, and leave the specifications off.

Such charges as these with the specifications and proofs left off, might count and amount to something, but not such "stuff" as you produce.

Let us sift.



## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

As word of the upcoming book has spread, I have been thrilled with the excitement it is generating! Thank you for the wonderful response. I, too, am excited to get the book published and into your hands. Each month I'll provide a status update here.

The process of publishing a book can be a long one, but things are moving along. The first two years were essentially research-and-writing, and now we are deep into the final "immersion editing" process.

I've partnered with a talented team of editors (Angela and Kris), and we just began our work on the February chapter. The newest team member, Jennie, will begin proofreading the early chapters this week, so that by the time the edit is complete, she will be nearly caught up to us, and the manuscript can then go off to the book designer. We get closer to publication every day!

*Cindy Wilson*

## The faces behind Team Snow



*"Team Snow" at a recent project meeting.  
From left-to-right, Kris, copy editor; me;  
Jennie, proofreader; and Angie, lead editor.*



### **A QUICK NOTE ABOUT PREORDERS**

**If you have not already done so,  
please preorder your copy  
(go to [TheBeautifulSnow.com](http://TheBeautifulSnow.com)).**

**Interest has already approached the  
originally-planned print quantity (yay!)  
We want to ensure that we publish enough to  
fulfill initial need, and the best way for us  
to do that is to know you want a copy.  
Help spread the word! *Thanks!***

## What Happened When a Train Derailed?

An early reader of the book manuscript wondered how, in 1880-81, train wrecks were cleared. Good question! Early in the research phase, I became connected with Minnesota railroad historian John C. Luecke. He graciously provided some answers.

If a car's wheels came off the rails but the car itself remained upright, it could be as simple as employing a rerailer (a device similar to a small ramp - see photo on next page) to nudge the wheels back into place, tugging the car with a locomotive. Also called frogs, rerailers remain in use today.

If a car toppled, it likely separated from its wheels, as they were held together by gravity and friction rather than nuts and bolts. In this case, the wheel assembly (called a truck) would likely be reusable as is or after repair. The car, however, was often damaged or destroyed during the accident.

If the wreck involved multiple cars or a locomotive, a wrecking train would be called. A wrecking train consisted of a crane; multiple flatbed cars loaded with ties, rails, and specialized tools; and often a boarding car for the laborers. The crane would lift heavier

elements, such as locomotives, either back onto the tracks or onto the flatbed cars for hauling away.

Quoting Luecke, "If the engine managed to leave the immediate right of way and go 'off into the rhubarb' (phrase credited to Ray Norton), the task of getting back on its feet grew more difficult with every foot it traveled." During the winter of 1880-81, one locomotive ventured forty feet onto the prairie before stopping.

For the most severe wrecks, a shoofly, or temporary track, would be built around the wreck. Once the wreck was cleared and any necessary repairs made to the tracks, the shoofly was dismantled, and its pieces returned to the wrecking train for future use.

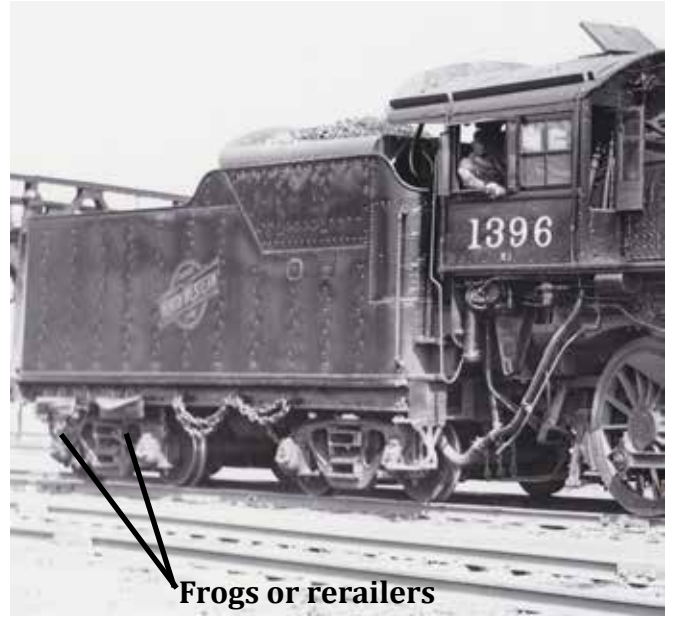
The expense and inconvenience of a wreck wasn't the only concern. The railroad companies felt that failing to clear debris from a crash site could hurt their public image. Any stray metal was collected and returned to a maintenance shop for either repair or scrap, and, according to Luecke, "it was not uncommon for [the wood] to be piled up and burned. Wreckage strewn along the right-of-way did not tend to add to the comfort and peace of mind of the traveler."



*Called "cornfield meetups," wrecks were all too common, despite signaling procedures meant to prevent them. A wrecking train, stationed at intervals along each railroad line, would have been called out to clean up this incident from Menomonie Wisconsin. All wreck photos courtesy of the Chicago & North Western Historical Society.*



## What Happened When a Train Derailed?



**Upper left:** A wrecking crane hoists a locomotive from a wreck in this undated photo.

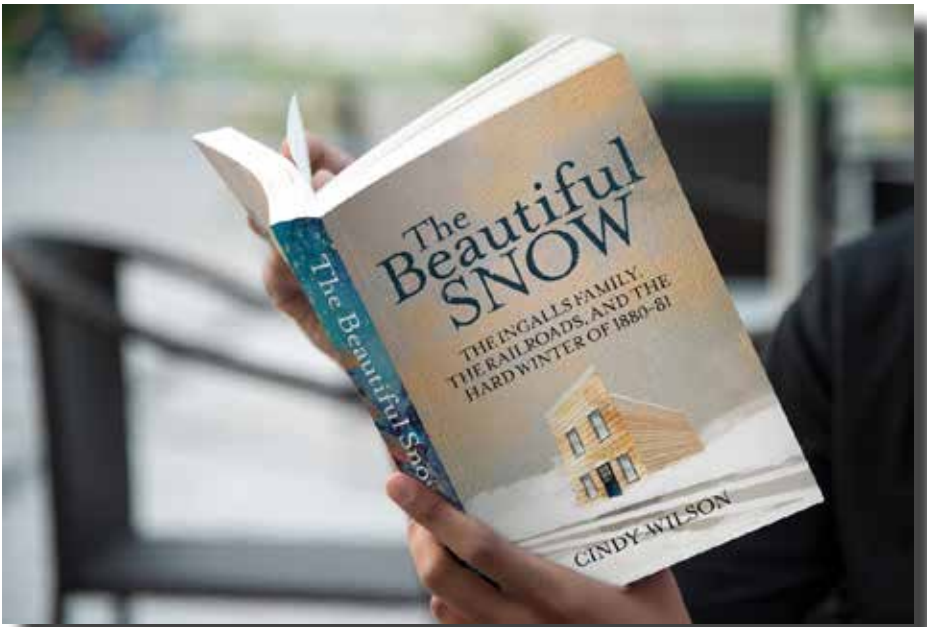
**Upper right:** This photo shows the rerailers, or frogs, hanging from the tender car behind the locomotive. Each frog has a "lip," oriented to the outside, to help guide the wheels back up onto the rails and keep them from slipping off the frog.



**Left:** This undated photo captures a wrecking crane lifting a locomotive near New Ulm, Minnesota. It also shows a wheel truck assembly that disconnected from its car (right side of photo).



**Lower left:** An excellent example of how fragile rail cars were. As Mr. Luecke described, if a car fell from the tracks enough to become separated from its wheel truck assembly, it would likely be destroyed. The wood was usually burned in place both for simplicity and to not frighten the traveling public.



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*The Long Winter* is one of the most memorable novels in Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House series. It beautifully details the dramatic events of a harrowing winter with months of never-ending blizzards leading to railroad blockades that all but cut off fledgling communities.

But what really happened during the Hard Winter of 1880–81?

Lively and rewarding, *The Beautiful Snow* is a new look at the Hard Winter. Pulling from nearly three thousand regional newspaper articles, *The Beautiful Snow* weaves the historical record around and through Wilder's fictionalized account of *The Long Winter*. From the tireless efforts to dig out the railroad blockades, to lavish oyster parties, to carefully spun boosterism, the Hard Winter comes to life with extraordinary tales of survival, resilience, and defiance that adds rich context to Wilder's beloved novel.

## SNEAK PEEK AT NEXT MONTH

“ *It is said the people of the newly settled western districts on the tree-less prairies are suffering terribly for fuel. . . . People have not only pulled down and burned their fences, but have also burned their machinery to keep from freezing. Costly warmth that must be.*

—*Janesville Argus*, November 30, 1880



## ABOUT THE NEWSLETTER

Subscribe at [TheBeautifulSnow.com](http://TheBeautifulSnow.com)

While writing *The Beautiful Snow*, nearly 3,000 articles were harvested from the newspaper archives of South Dakota and Minnesota, covering March 1879 to May 1881.

In the months to come, via the emailed newsletters, we'll explore deeper corners of that history, and uncover additional fascinating stories that didn't fit into the book.



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