

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

The Fuel Situation

From reading *The Long Winter*, we tend to think of the winter of 1880-81 as one of near-constant blizzards, mind-numbing hunger, and body-shaking cold due to lack of sufficient fuel.

The research process uncovered similarities—and fascinating differences—from that narrative. One of the similarities was the fuel situation faced by the residents, who were forced to become creative when trains were unable to deliver the needed coal and wood.

For the most part, the tracks were open throughout November and December, though that did little to alleviate concerns expressed in the newspapers about having enough fuel to last through the winter.

January's weather deepened those concerns. Immediately following the breaking of the Christmas storm blockade, the Brookings paper reassured its readers, "Nobody hereabouts is suffering for fuel. Don't borrow trouble. . . Stations along the line of our Northwestern Railroad are all congratulating themselves on having plenty of coal. . . . We seem in a fair way to enjoy our

"Bean, corn, hay, and in fact every thing except wood and coal was used by most people for fuel, during the late storm."

Brookings County Press
 Brookings, Dakota Territory
 November 18, 1880

evenings 'by the moonlight alone.' The kerosene supply is about exhausted in town and the oil car is on a Minnesota switch!"

As the winter deepened to February, the number of articles concerning fuel became overwhelming.

Watertown was so short of wood that railroad ties and at least one bridge had "already added fuel to the flame of many a settler's hearthstone."

In contrast, east of the blockades, Mankato was described as "one vast wood yard," where vacant lots across the city were commandeered and turned into "immense piles" of wood, suppliers trying their best to fill the needs to the west.

Cooperative efforts were widespread, and there were reports that families combined households and were "burning the vacated residences." Meanwhile, Tracy claimed "no actual suffering," noting they obtained soft coal by team (horse and wagon) from one nearby location. Other articles indicated that men with sleds went as far east as Mankato to obtain some of that piled-up wood to bring back to their towns.

When two carloads of wood arrived in Pipestone on February 1, it only took a few hours for the

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The Fuel Situation *continued from page 1*

entire stock to be dispersed, despite rationing no more than a quarter cord to each buyer. An additional six cars of railroad ties were distributed among the residents of Madison, Pipestone, and Edgerton.

The situation to the west was serious. Back east, however, there were those unwilling to look at the situation with honest eyes—or fair ones, at least—and instead blamed the lack of fuel on the settlers, railroad companies, and dealers. One article from the *St. Paul Globe* illustrated why there may have been some significant animosity towards those “back East” when it came to the situation “out West.”

“The saw was heard in the land Tuesday morning and in consequence thereof the railroad bridge over the Sioux is not so much of a structure as it used to be.

Dakota News, January 31, 1881”

The executive and legislative committees of the Chamber of Commerce met to discuss transportation and fuel supply issues for the prairie communities. From their cozy and warm perch in St. Paul, they declared that there was already “an abundance of cheap fuel in the State to supply all needs, present and future.” They also claimed that the existing infrastructure was able to transport the fuel to those who needed it.

They then came down hard on the victims of the blockade, declaring that the “scarcity of fuel, which commenced October 25 and continued to the close of November, was the result of inexcusable carelessness on the part of consumers, dealers and railroad companies, and that the railroad companies and dealers were guilty of the greater carelessness.”

The “carelessness” they spoke of was a failure to plan for an especially harsh winter. The executives then softened a bit, acknowledging the uncommon severity

of the season, for “only once before in twenty-seven years had there been such severe weather in November, and that as it is possible such weather may occur again in November, all fuel for the winter should be at the stations for which it is destined on or before November 1st each year.”

The article concluded with the committee’s opinion: the settlers would learn a lesson from this winter and not repeat their foolishness. It did not, however, suggest any resolutions for the current winter and the hardships it was inflicting.

As spring approached and flooding concerns replaced fear of blizzards, resourceful residents near Egan found a “good supply of firewood” by harvesting the wood that was floating down the flooded Big Sioux.

Oddly, the townspeople of Flandreau reported that hay, of all things, had become “an unattainable luxury ... at the present time.”

The incongruity of wood floating into the hands of the prairie settlers while hay became scarce is one of the fascinating scenarios that hid within the larger stories of the winter.

As the tracks were freed of snow and ice, and repaired from flood damage, trains began to deliver the needed items.

The first train into Egan in early May delivered long-awaited wood, inspiring the editor there to share, “K. W. Sheldon received a car load of wood on the first train, and is now prepared to furnish fuel to all who wish it.”

Boosterism and the Hard Winter

Little seemed to irritate western editors more than the concerns of Easterners about the livability of the West. In the January 24 issue of Watertown's *Dakota News*, the editor included an article strewn with thinly veiled exasperation and a handful (or more) of little, amusing mistruths.

After reminding readers that Watertown was a mere day and a half by train from Chicago and just three from New York—when the trains were able to run, of course—things turned more toward a proud, stubborn, set-jawed exclamation that begged challenge, especially knowing that by its publication date, the railroad blockades were locked into place.

Despite Watertown being a younger community, the editor proclaimed, "We have every luxury and convenience that can be found in thirty year old towns east, of four times our population." Of that population, he continued, "We have no tramps, no loafers, no dead beats, no gambling dens, no houses of prostitution, no idlers, no lawlessness, no crime. Our people are intelligent, social and generous. Buds of promises adorn the present, the blossoms of hope garland all the future."

He then turned his attention to the "exaggerated weather yarns" that "surpass in ridiculous improbabilities" the fantastical tales of Sinbad the Sailor. Incredulously, he told his readers that one eastern paper had reported, "Watertown was blown all to pieces by a blizzard. This is but a sample of a thousand wild stories floating all over the east, that have not, in fact, a shadow of foundation. Not a house, or even a shanty, has been blown down or injured in any particular. Nor has any one been frozen to death."

Continuing, he entertained that while "we had one day when the thermometer marked 37 degrees below zero," in Dakota's atmosphere, that is equivalent to the more balmy "20 in Wisconsin, Michigan, or New York." He then defiantly took on the stories of overwhelming snows and blockades:

As yet we have not had snow enough to make good sleighing. What little we had was dry when it fell, and drifted into the railroad cuts, and as the business is light at this season of the year, this end of the road for some 100 miles was closed for ten days. Such a blockade on an eastern road would have been considered nothing.

After putting to rest concerns about the current situation, he took on the historical record, going back to 1864 to cite a few dates and locations where people had frozen to death in Wisconsin, Minnesota, or Iowa, noting that people didn't accuse those states of being unlivable, so why do they pick on Dakota?

The real problem, he insisted, was "a certain class of eastern people" who were afraid to move west, who were "nerveless, cowardly stock" who painted the situation out west in as detrimental a view as possible to frame their fears as reasonable and respectable.

One would think he had expended his wrath, but no. The article, along with the editor's irritation, were barely half spent.

Some of the more interesting articles of the winter involved editors engaged in boosterism. It is fun to imagine, probably accurately, their writing these missives while storms raged outside their windows.

boosterism
[boo-stuh-riz-uh m]
noun
the action or policy of enthusiastically promoting something, as a city, product, or way of life:

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

People have found the publishing process interesting, and have peppered me with questions. So, I thought I'd use this space to walk through the steps!

Assessment Phase

My editor read the (very) draft manuscript to give a thumbs up or thumbs down on the concept. She not only loved it, but enthusiastically said that there was "something very special" there. With that approval, the project continued.

Early Readers

The (still very) draft manuscript was sent to six people who had interest in the topic. At this phase, I was looking for feedback about which sub-topics were interesting enough to include, what could be cut, what could be expanded, etc. Based upon that feedback, I honed the manuscript and prepared it for the content edit.

Content Edit

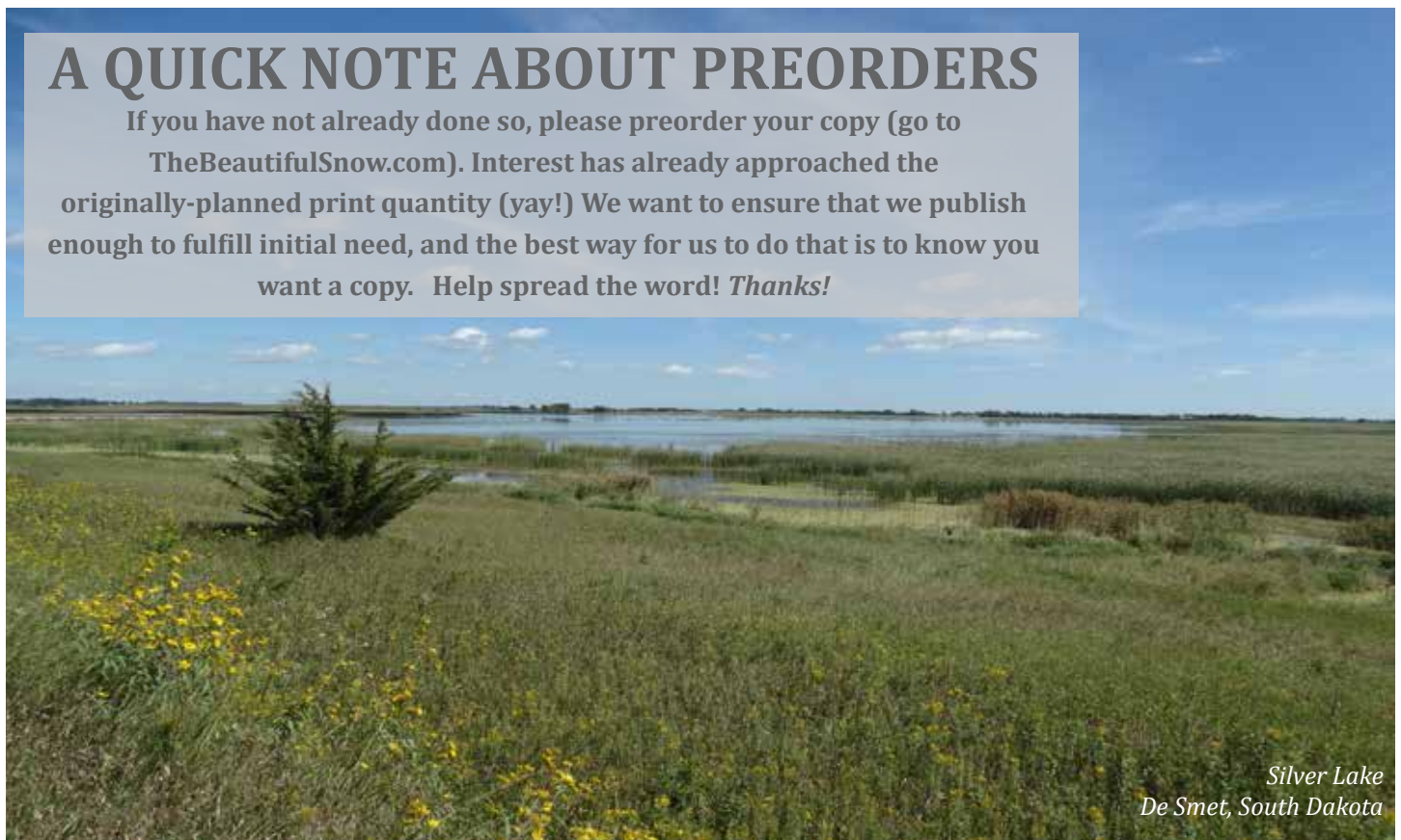
With some guidance from the editor, I re-worked aspects of the content, order, flow, and focus of the book. It was during this phase that the original Part I, which detailed the construction of the Winona & St. Peter and Dakota Central railroads, was pulled out to be expanded into a second book. The focus was then narrowed to the winter of 1880-81 itself, with a brief introduction about the railroads to establish context for *why* the new towns were out there on the prairies.

Copy Edit

The current phase! In this step, the copy editor goes word-by-word, sentence-by-sentence, paragraph-by-paragraph to make sure that everything is perfect. Is it the right word? Is this phrase in the right spot? Should this sentence be moved to above this paragraph? It is a highly interactive and immersive process, but is paying off beautifully. The copy editor

A QUICK NOTE ABOUT PREORDERS

If you have not already done so, please preorder your copy (go to 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!*



*Silver Lake
De Smet, South Dakota*

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR *continued*

and I are finishing the March chapter now, which means the end is in sight! This has been a very rewarding and fun step, and I will miss it when we're done. We are hoping to have the copy edit complete by early November.

Proofreading

As expected, this is where someone makes sure that all words are spelled correctly, that word usage is consistent, that all citations are properly formatted, etc. Ordinarily, this step waits until the copy edit is complete, but in an effort to compress the time frame a bit, the proofreader already has the first six chapters. We hope to have the proofreading complete within a few weeks of the copy edit being done.

Book Design

An award-winning designer in Duluth will be doing this work. He will convert the raw document into a book. He will decide how each and every page will look, thinking about things such as what font to use, where to put page numbers, what will be on the top of each page (chapter name? book title?), etc.

There are many photos and "sidetrack topics" in the book, so he will also make sure that the placement and layout of these items line up appropriately and in the correct space. The book designer gets up to twelve weeks to do his work. I'm hoping it won't take that long, but the book is approximately 500 pages, and this is just one of multiple projects on his plate.

Indexing

While the other steps in the process are fun and interesting, my mind boggles at the idea of indexing. Fortunately, the publisher has an experienced Indexer who will deal with this. WHEW! It was described to me as a mix of talent, software, and alchemy. Ha! Truly - in a book such as this, I wonder what they will index. If a word appears once, it will have a tendency

to appear many times. Snow? Blizzard? Train? De Smet? Brookings? I'm curious to see what the index will look like, because...eek! This is the last step before publication, because the page numbers must be nailed down before indexing.

Publication

Finally, the step where all of the work pays off and we'll all get to hold a book in our hands! Could take ten weeks. I'm hoping for less!

Additional Steps

Artwork

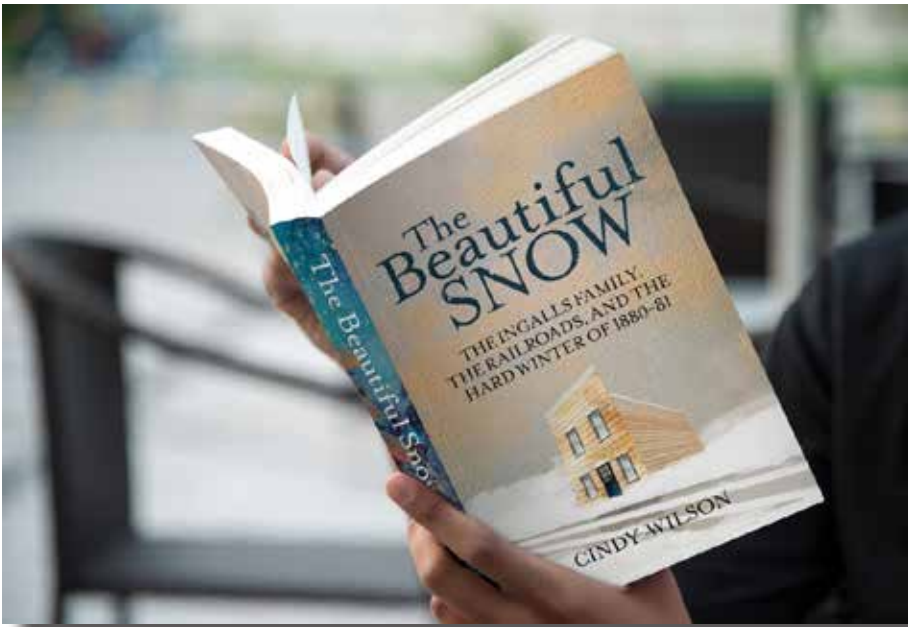
Throughout the process, various pieces of artwork have been created. The book's cover is still being finalized, but the earliest drafts were begun during Spring 2019. Additionally, a second artist has been working on the chapter-head spot illustrations. Using vignettes from each chapter, she's created wonderful drawings that evoke the feel of the Little House books while pulling from the historical record.

Endorsement Readers

To prepare for the back cover of the book, I've approached—and received enthusiastic support from—some of the most respected Wilder scholars, along with a railroad historian and an archivist. Once the copy edit is complete, the manuscript will be sent to them. Then, hopefully they will send back a few sentences of endorsement, to be published on the back cover of the book.

Marketing

Shaking the trees to spread the word! This is quickly becoming my focus, as the copy edit winds down. You can be a part of this by sharing information about the book. Contact me and I can help! I've also been honored and surprised to see some well-known authors include information about the book in their own materials. THANK YOU!



Targeted release:
Spring 2020

Published by
Beaver's Pond Press



at TheBeautifulSnow.com
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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

“
*Lots of fish
are being speared
in the [Big] Sioux
now-a-days*”

—*Egan Express*, January 20, 1881

ABOUT THE NEWSLETTER

Subscribe at 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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