

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 Food Situation

In the last issue, we took a brief look at the fuel situation during the Hard Winter of 1880-81. There was also a teaser that this issue would take a look at the companion topic, food.

The center-page quote is from the last half of January, from a town about fifty-two miles southeast of De Smet. In Wilder's *The Long Winter*, the list of meals consumed early-to-mid February included the last of the potatoes, bread from the ground wheat, and tea. It also featured a surprise treat: Ma unveiled a frozen codfish she had secreted away. Had a neighbor gone ice fishing somewhere nearby and gifted the family with this treasured bit of protein?

There is evidence within the newspaper record of organized attempts—some successful, some not—to obtain food and fuel from nearby towns across the region, which will be found in the book as the winter months unfold.

For the rest of this month's main focus, however, I want to share a treasure that is semi-related to those efforts. At the end of April, just prior to the breaking of the train blockade, a small group of men embarked upon an adventure to boat

from Marshall to Sleepy Eye—across the flooded prairies—on a mission to obtain goods. It is more likely that the men were restless, as Marshall was not entirely lacking in supplies.

In the May 6, 1881 issue of the *Marshall Messenger* was this entertaining summary of the trip, harkening to the style of Homer's *Odyssey*. The humor and wit come from its author, Mr. C. F. Case,

a co-editor of the *Marshall Messenger*:

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

—*Egan Express*, January 20, 1881

BOATING ON THE PRAIRIE.

The "rime of an ancient mariner" sung to modern music. From Marshall to Sleepy Eye by water overland

A week ago last Saturday while the flood was at its height and the prospect of railroad travel only a thing in the distance, a spirit of migration sprang up in the minds of men hereabouts, and as aerial and land travel were at that particular time impracticable, water navigation was sought and easily found as a means of transportation from the moist and bonnie braes of the Redwood to more eastern climes. Ordinarily the Redwood and adjoining prairie is not noted for navigable qualities, but, owing to circumstances over which the oldest inhabitants had no control, the places hereabouts where one could not go with a boat this Spring were scarcer than those where he could.

Three skiffs and six persons left Marshall on the day above named to go where the flood would bear them. Mr. Waldron and Mr. Stafford chose the Redwood river, and, as our readers already know, Mr. Stafford found death while seeking pleasure, the particulars of which are given elsewhere.

E. L. Healy and the editor of the Messenger decided in the afternoon to take the longer route by the Cottonwood river to Sleepy Eye or some point farther if necessary. Before starting they were joined by Messrs Kilshaw and Blanchard, two Englishmen, who wished to get to St. Paul.

The Cottonwood does not flow near Marshall, its nearest point being ten miles or more away. Ten miles of intervening prairie would generally be considered an obstruction to navigation, but at this time all such slight obstacles disappeared. In fact the prairie two weeks ago was our best boating ground, and to reach the Cottonwood by boat it was only necessary to head your boat that way and go.

The two boats made their launch successfully from the steps of the W. & St. P. land office, and immediately stuck in the willows between there and the steam mill. Bad management and too swift water was the cause, of course, and this was our first lesson. Across the railroad we came to anchor and sent E. L. to hunt for tin dishes to bail with, it having been discovered that our vessels had sprung a leak and the pumps wouldn't work.

Across the fair ground and Mr. Addison's farm we found navigation poor, three or four inches of water and mud in some places being our only resource, but from a little assistance from Fred Healy, who went the first two miles with us, the boats were gotten over into the cut off from the Redwood with comparative ease. Here an immense stream flowed from the Redwood river to Lake Marshall, and we started on our long boat ride at four o'clock p. m.

The stream here was nearly half a mile wide, and swept over meadows and corn fields, covering fences wherever met nearly to the top of the posts. The railroad was crossed this side of lake Marshall, and a straight sea was spread to the Cottonwood. Railroad

ties were floating down the current and being gathered by the natives, they said to turn over to the company when they got dry. Streaked snakes which had been drowned out were afloat all over the flat and followed the boat in hopes of being taken out of the wet.

Two flags had been procured, ours the stars and stripes, that of the Englishmen an improvised British flag, and the two crafts never failed to draw out the whole family whenever a house was passed. As the water had spread out here nearly half a mile wide there was not a strong current, and some solid work in rowing could be put in. Mr. Healy proved to be the best oarsman of the company, and probably monopolized too much of it to leave us a record over which to brag.

Several wheat stacks were passed which stood in water, some four or five feet deep. High ground had been picked out to stack on too. The afternoon was very pleasant, and our spirits, when we didn't have to row, burst out into song. Those who know us best know that we are not saddest when we sing. When you hear us sing everything is lovely, but E. L. stopped rowing to remark that he never dodged work and would do all the labor of the trip if we would only spare his nerves which were just a little delicate and couldn't stand that infernal catterwaul that we were expressing our emotions in. E. L. never sings. He has no music in his soul, and recognizing this we stopped.

Our [crew?] was a sociable one and stopped to exchange lies with every settler. We left the impression with some that we were the sole survivors of a populous region, and were simply going down stream to be present at the funerals of those gone before. The present flood as we believed, was only the beginning of the perihelian troubles.

As the sun went down we reached the farm of Mr. Hanks, near the Cottonwood, and put up for the night. More or less wet and just tired enough to appreciate a warm supper and a bed, we fully enjoyed the hospitality that was so generously given, and left next morning fresh as mud hens for new adventures. Just how fresh mud hens feel o'mornings and whether they are subject to rheumatism or not we don't

exactly know, but, as you don't know either, this comparison is a good one.

The Cottonwood was reached at Mr. Carney's and a current now helped us along. The river proper was running within its banks and had already sent off its ice, traces of which were visible in barked trees and other destruction. The addition of half a mile of Redwood water made the stream below the junction a river worthy of notice, and we noticed it accordingly. From the junction to Lamberton bridge was almost a straight course, the high water cutting across all bends and straightening all crookedness.

We found one house in the Cottonwood bottoms on an island from which the inhabitants had no means of getting off, and water was almost over the island. They were out of matches and their fire was out. We traded matches for milk and passed down stream. Half drowned muskrats appeared here and there, but we had no time to skin rats, as the passage through the brush and rapids engrossed all our attention.

At noon we reached the farm of C. B. Taylor near Lamberton and stopped to lunch and rest. Mr. Taylor has a fine farm here, and a stock barn that would be the pride of any farmer. The party received a liberal donation of milk and spread on the ground the first meal from the commissary stores brought along. The supply was found to be ample and varied, though Mr. Healy's box of provision was discovered to be in Marshall. He drew very fascinating pictures of what the box contained, but as he only had a paper bag of soaked crackers to show as his share of the repast, his audience didn't get very enthusiastic over his contributions. The rest of the trip to Burns [Springfield] that afternoon was not as pleasant, as the wind blew a tornado, and we had to ride rough billows as well as rapids. No accident occurred, however, and Burns was reached at seven P. M.

The town was under water, and one house had washed away, but enough of it was out to get a bed in

and next morning we saw us en route for Sleepy Eye. If any after us should take this boat trip for pleasure or profit, we would advise them to stop at Burns unless sure that they are cool headed and can handle a boat, for from Burns to Sleepy Eye the river becomes a torrent and is dangerous enough to make it interesting. Three dams and other rapids have to be passed, and the stream is crooked as a ram's horn, so that the main current in many places goes tearing through the woods which fringe the river here, making the passage exciting and a little perilous.

A short distance below Burns the roar of falling water greeted our ears and somewhat disturbed the English craft, one of whose passengers at least had before this admitted just a little timidity in situations where timidity is not desirable. A fall of a foot or two was

discovered and was run by the advance boat with just exhilaration [sic] enough to make the dash a pleasant one. The British flag was struck here however, and Mr. Blanchard refused to risk the passage. Mr. Healy and the writer volunteered to take the second boat over the falls, and in the hurry to get aboard Healy

made a misstep, the snowbank broke away, and to save swamping the boat he stepped into the river up to his arms. This was the first serious wetting on the trip, and caused a delay while brother H. retired to a corn crib to wring out his clothes. Down these falls we soon found the spot where there should have been a mill dam, but only a torrent marked the spot, over which we easily rode. A Catholic church and two saloons together with a mill constitute the village at this place. We didn't stop as we had our own supplies. From here we were constantly in rapids through which it often took quick [?] good management to avoid getting swamped.

The boat behind us, the rudder end of which was engineered by Mr. Blanchard, was badly managed from some cause and escaped very narrowly several collisions with trees &c. A spot was finally reached where the river jumps its banks and tears through

“ Our [crew?] was a sociable one and stopped to exchange lies with every settler. We left the impression with some that we were the sole survivors of a populous region. ”

Marshall Messenger, May 6, 1881

the woods so swift as to make handling a boat in it almost impossible. A boat if headed right would run it safely, but Mr. Blanchard lost his head, and after some excitement ran the boat into a tree top. At this our two Brittons abandoned their ship after tipping it over, and took to the tree, more or less wet. Cries of help, fire, murder, and a prayer or two scared away all the wood ducks within half a mile and brought the advance boat to a sudden halt. A capsized boat, two coats, a cap, a bag of bread and meat, two valises and all the oars, paddles and seat boards were discovered floating for the brush and tall timber, while two bare-headed sons of old England hung by a limb in the roaring Cottonwood bellowing for help. It took an hour or two of hard and wet work to rescue the shipwrecked and find their lost property, but it was at last done, all but a cap and the dinner bag, when the party held a camp meeting and dined on soaked crackers and rock and rye, a bottle of the latter having by some unaccountable providence been in the advance boat at the time.

Mr. Blanchard wanted to walk from here, but that scheme was vetoed, and we once more took to water. In half an hour there was a second roar for help, and the British navy had to be pulled off a snag by hand. The two crews were then mixed and the rest of the trip to Sleepy Eye was safely and quickly made. The boats landed at Mr. Larabee's three miles below town, where we sold one boat and hired the other hauled to town.

At Sleepy Eye it was found that trains were running, and three of the party went east next morning. The village of Sleepy Eye was found in an immense blockade, a bed being hardly attainable. It was said that boarders were waked up at four o'clock to put others to bed that had sat up through the night. Some less than a thousand emigrants slept, ate and smoked in the depot night and day, and the odors of that locality would sink a limburger cheese in oblivion in two hours. The writer hereof had breathed western blizzards too long to appreciate this condition of life, and left for home via Redwood Falls as soon as possible.

This boat trip down the Cottonwood from Marshall is the first we ever heard of, and lent the charm of novelty to its other fresh and breezy pleasures. It will probably not be the last.

Help Spread the Word

If you're excited about the book, please tell others! Here are some things you can do:

- Join [TheBeautifulSnow](#) on Facebook
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- Share information on Social Media
- Tell your friends in person
- I have bookmarks that you can share with friends, area libraries, etc. Just contact me via email and I can mail some to you. You can contact me at cindy@thebeautifulsnow.com

A Quick Note About Preorders

If you have not already done so, please preorder your copy (you can order at [TheBeautifulSnow.com](#)).

Interest is already near 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.

THANK YOU!

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Several major milestones have occurred since the last issue of the newsletter.

The copy edit and proofread are complete!

The manuscript is now in the hands of the (award-winning) book designer, meaning that we're down to just a few months until the book will be in your hands.

Research Continues

In late October, I returned to Chicago to spend additional time in the archives of the Chicago & North Western Historical Society. There was one final bit of information I needed to verify for a photo caption in *The Beautiful Snow*. Once that information was found, I had a different mission...the right-of-way and plat maps!

Once *The Beautiful Snow* is into the production chute, I can continue the analysis and writing for the follow-up book, which is actually a prequel and focuses on the construction of the Dakota

Central Railroad (the line featured in *By the Shores of Silver Lake*).

There is already a solid one hundred or so pages of text that was originally a part of *The Beautiful Snow*. That section was set aside, based upon the recommendation of my lead editor, so that it could be expanded and “allowed to breathe and tell its own story” in a separate book.

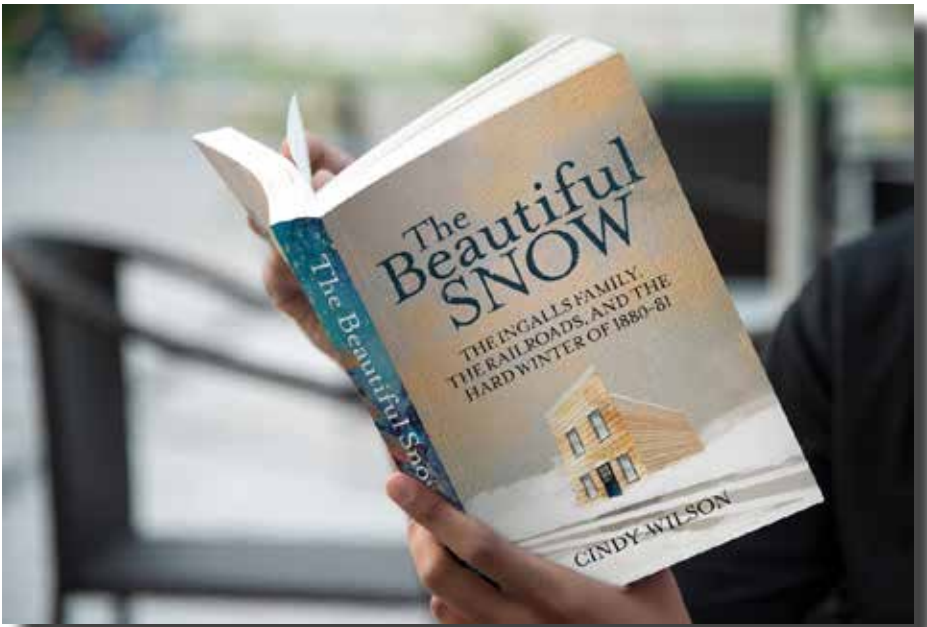
So, as yet another winter descends upon us here in southern Minnesota, I'll not only be anxiously awaiting the publication of *The Beautiful Snow*, but getting the second book farther along.



I cannot understate how exciting it is to look through these old records and piece together clues. Some of the materials are in very delicate condition.



The author with Chicago & North Western Historical Society archivists Frank Carlson (left) and Craig Pfannkuche (right), October, 2019. We are standing in front of the C&NWH's wonderful collection of right-of-way coated linen roll maps, including those for the entire length of the Dakota Central from Tracy, Minnesota to Pierre, Dakota Territory.



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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

“ *Our citizens, although shut off from communication with the outside world, are enjoying themselves with parlor dramas, theaters and literary entertainments, and are in the best of spirits.* ”

—Telegraph correspondence from a resident of Huron, Dakota Territory, published in the *Janesville Argus*, March 8, 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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