

Remembering the blizzard of '49

The day began with gorgeous weather. On Jan. 1, 1949, KOA radio in Denver predicted "another nice day with a possibility of snow flurries."

After chores, my family piled into the car and went to Uncle Henry's ranch, located near Sundance. Aunt Laura spread a feast. Cousin Dick and I walked off some of its effect by checking a cow herd on winter feed grounds a little more than half a mile from ranch buildings.

We started for home about 3 p.m. On the way home, we grew concerned as clouds the color of black ink formed in the northwest, casting genuine doubt on KOA's weather prediction.

My dad let me off at Granddad's place, about six miles from home, where I had responsibility of caring for our yearling cattle, bulls, milk cow, saddle horse, and team of draft horses. I hurried to milk the cow and feed the bulls and horses.

The yearlings licked up the last stems of hay I fed that morning.

Cowmen learn to watch their livestock. When I carried the evening's milk to the house, I noticed the yearlings beginning to crowd into sheltered areas on the south side of barns and wind-breaks.

I couldn't have imagined the magnitude of what was to come.

The storm didn't begin with a few lazy

snowflakes drifting to the ground. It attacked like a runaway locomotive that rattled doors and windows, and made us think the roof would fly off. It roared in from timberland to the north, and blasted across prairies to the south.

Thick snow blew horizontally on wind gusts up to 75

miles per hour. Temperature dropped into a subzero level which old-timers declared was "too cold to snow." We learned firsthand the fallacy of that theory because we experienced an absolute storm trifecta — snow, cold, and wind.

I fashioned a hay sled from skis and an old door and, for the next three days, dragged bales of hay into willow thickets along Soldier Creek that offered small relief from whiteout. With an old broom, I swept snow and ice from backs of cattle, and knocked bloody icicles, which threatened to smother, from their noses.

I tried to keep paths shoveled to the well, outhouse, bunkhouse, and milk barn — a fruitless effort given the blizzard's fury.

Finally, after three days, the wind



Center Stage

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stopped and the sun slipped out of sight on a scene of disaster. The moon came up, and as it cleared the horizon, snowdrifts turned blue in the moonlight.

A single lamplit window shone in our house set back from the road, and we heaved a sigh of relief. I survived without losing one

animal but knew some ranchers had significant losses, some losing entire herds.

At the end of each day, I sat with Granddad and listened to radio reports proclaim, "The worst blizzard since 1888." Across a four-state area, hundreds of travelers were stranded, some freezing to death in cars stuck in snow.

Livestock and wildlife numbering into tens of thousands froze or smothered. Hundreds of miles of roads and railroads were blocked bringing ground travel to a virtual standstill.

Drifts as high as 30 feet buried buildings. Some of those drifts didn't melt until June.

Tragedies sometimes have instances of humor. Snow buffeted and pounded by wind solidified into drifts cattle and hors-

es could walk on.

One of Uncle Henry's cows walked up a snowdrift that gradually sloped to the level of a small door in the barn hayloft. It blew open in the storm. She squeezed through the door and found a bonanza of grass/alfalfa hay.

As she continued to feast, her belly grew, and when Henry and my cousins found her several hours later and tried to shoo her out, she no longer fit the opening. After several unsuccessful attempts, they decided to grease her sides and back liberally with lard.

With the combination of at least an hour's time, half a crock of lard, a halter with Cousin Dick pulling from in front, and Henry and Cousin Joe pushing from behind, she finally popped out onto the snowbank.

They closed the door and fastened it. A short time later, they discovered the same cow with her nose a few inches from the door staring at it. Go figure.

An accomplished writer and cowboy poet, Duane Portwood has been volunteering his time and talent at the Sheridan Senior Center for more than two years.

Center Stage is written by friends of the Senior Center for the Sheridan community. It is a collection of insights and stories related to living well at every age.