

Recalling the Schoolchildren's Blizzard of 1888, ca. 1930s

Introduction

From November 1887 through January 1888, ice storms, frigid temperatures, and a December snowfall measuring up to 40 inches battered the Midwest. The morning of January 12 dawned with unseasonably mild temperatures and lulled many settlers into venturing out without their coats. By mid-afternoon, a storm had exploded, accompanied by rapidly falling temperatures, 60-mile-an-hour winds, and heavy snow with drifts of fifteen feet. One weather station recorded the temperature at 44°F at 2 p.m., -11°F at 9 p.m. and an overnight low of -42°F.

A farmer in Valley Springs, South Dakota, described the blizzard's arrival: "About 3:30, we heard a hideous roar. . . . At first we thought that it was the Omaha train which had been blocked and was trying to open the track. . . . the storm came as if it had slid out of sack. A hurricane-like wind blew, so that the snow drifted high in the air, and it became terribly cold. Within a few minutes, it was as dark as a cellar, and one could not see one's hand in front of one's face."¹

Many parents had sent children to school that day. Known as the Schoolchildren's Blizzard, the storm caused the deaths of hundreds of people, including 213 children who never made it home from their one-room schoolhouses.

In the 1930s, the WPA Federal Writers' Project interviewed survivors of the storm. Here, O. W. Meier, who was fifteen at the time of the blizzard, recalls the journey home from his school in Nebraska with his two younger brothers:

My brothers and I could not walk thru the deep snow in the road, so we took down the rows of corn stalks to keep from losing ourselves 'till we reached our pasture fence. Walter was too short to wade the deep snow in the field, so Henry and I dragged him over the top. For nearly a mile we followed the fence 'till we reached the corral and pens. In the howling storm, we could hear the pigs squeal as they were freezing in the mud and snow. . . . The roaring wind and stifling snow blinded us so that we had to feel thru the yard to the door of our house.

The lamp was lighted. Mother was walking the floor, wringing her hands and calling for her boys. Pa was shaking the ice and snow from his coat and boots. He had gone out to meet us but was forced back by the storm. We stayed in the house all that night. It was so cold that many people froze.²

¹ Account of Austin Rollag, quoted in Alyssa Ford, "125 Years Ago, Deadly 'Children's Blizzard' Blasted Minnesota," *MinnPost*, January 11, 2013. Accessed May 19, 2014. <http://www.minnpost.com/minnesota-history/2013/01/125-years-ago-deadly-children-s-blizzard-blasted-minnesota>.

² "O. W. Meier Relates Experience He Had in the Blizzard of 1888," Folklore Project, Life Histories, 1936-39, US Work Projects Administration, Federal Writers' Project, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. Accessed May 30, 2014. <http://www.loc.gov/item/wpalh001092/>.

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Although the epicenter of the storm was in present-day South Dakota, the frigid temperatures were a nationwide phenomenon. Sub-zero temperatures reached all the way to Texas and Georgia, people could ice skate in San Francisco, and water mains froze in Los Angeles.

Excerpt

O.W. Meier Relates Experience He Had in the Blizzard of 1888.³

“The two Strelow boys, Robert and George, with John Conrad, my two brothers, and I, put out into the storm for our homes. We had not gone a rod when we found ourselves in a heap, in a heavy drift of snow. We took hold of each others' hands, pulled ourselves out, got onto the road, and the cold north wind blew us down the road a half mile south, where the Strelow boys and John Conrad had to go west a mile or more. When they reached a bridge in a ravine, the little fellows sheltered a while under the bridge, a wooden culvert, but Robert, the oldest, insisted that they push on thru the blinding storm for their homes. In the darkness they stumbled in, and by degrees their parents thawed them out, bathed their frozen hands, noses, ears and cheeks, while the boys cried in pain.

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³ “O. W. Meier Relates Experience He Had in the Blizzard of 1888,” Folklore Project, Life Histories, 1936–39, US Work Projects Administration, Federal Writers' Project, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. Accessed May 30, 2014. <http://www.loc.gov/item/wpalh001092/>. Typos in the WPA Federal Writers' Project transcript have been silently corrected.

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Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction and study the transcript of the interview. Then apply your knowledge of American history to answer the following questions:

1. Describe the extraordinary climatic conditions of the winter of 1887–1888 and, in particular, of January 12, 1888.
2. What was the tragic outcome of the storm?
3. How does the description of events provided by O. W. Meier illustrate courageous behavior?
4. The extraordinary weather of 1888 affected many areas of the nation. Consult your public library, historical society, or local newspaper archives to determine if it affected your community and how it was reported. You may have to search records several days after the events to find comprehensive reports.

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Transcript

O.W. Meier Relates Experience He Had in the Blizzard of 1888.⁴

“The awful blizzard of Jan 12, 1888,” said O. W. Meier, “cannot be forgotten by anyone who experienced it as I did.” He and his brothers were attending school in District 71, 15 miles southwest of Lincoln, and this is his story of that blizzard which swept over the country 50 years ago.

“The weather had been mild, after a heavy fall of snow. Deep snow lay over all the ground in fields and on the roads. Long hanging icicles dripped melting snow water from the eaves of the house and barn. The sky was dark and heavy. Beautiful big white flakes were falling fast that morning of the fateful day. Father and mother said, ‘The girls must stay at home, but the boys may go to school.’

“At half past eight Walter, then 8, Henry 12, and I, 15 years of age, started out thru the deep white snow. Pretty starry flakes made us look like snow men before we reached the school, a mile and a half from home. When we got there we found other boys, and some girls, playing ‘fox and geese.’ Henry and I joined in the game.

“The bell rang, calling us in to study and recite. The heavy snow kept falling all that day. By the middle of the afternoon, at the last recess, the snow was about two feet deep, and on the top it was almost as light as feathers. At a quarter to three, the school bell rang for the last time that day. We rushed for the brooms to sweep the wet snow from our boots. Just when we got settled down to our books as swiftly as lightning, the storm struck the north side of the house. The whole building shivered and quaked. With deafening whack the shutters were slammed shut by the terrific wind. In an instant the room became black as night, then for a moment there came a ray of light, I stood and said, ‘May my brothers and I go home?’ The teacher said, ‘Those boys who live south may put on their coats and go, but the rest of you must stay here in this house.’

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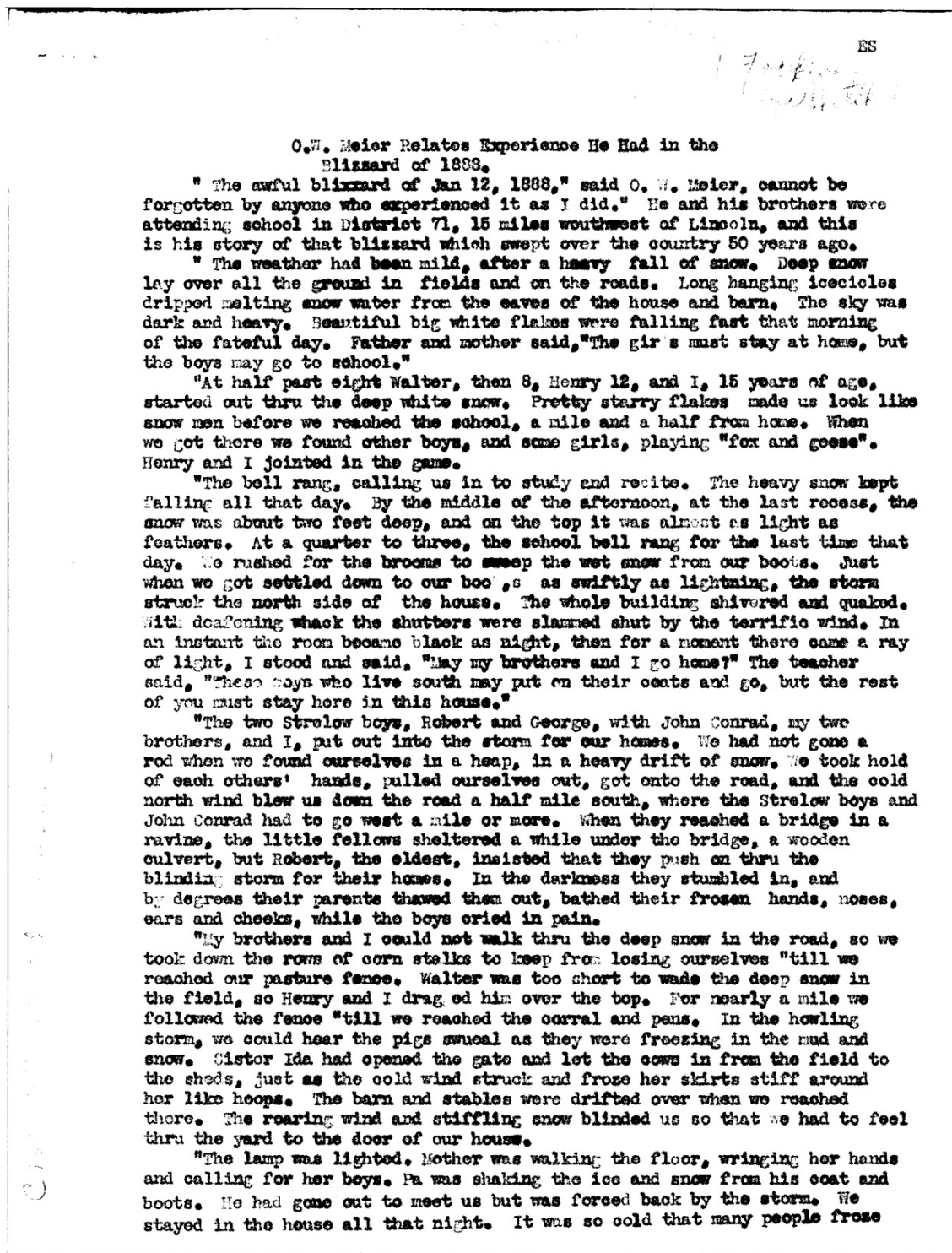
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Image



Mr. O. W. Meier (Interviewee). Nebraska. [Blizzard of 1888]. Folklore Project, Life Histories, 1936-39.
(Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, WPA Federal Writers' Project Collection)