

The Blizzard of '49

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

Thursday, 30 January 2014 16:28 - Last Updated Thursday, 30 January 2014 16:58



Stone Hearth Estates residents tell stories about the big storm.

Glen Golter had no idea what was coming when he decided to hunt for ducks and geese on Jan. 2, 1949.

There was no Internet, or Weather Channel to consult, just radio and newspapers.

At the time, Golter was living in Arapahoe and was with his brother-in-law, pregnant wife, kids and other relatives in the car when they drove into heavy snow east of Elwood.

“We couldn’t go any farther so I got out to put on chains,” he remembered. “I tried to jack up the car but my mother-in-law kept wiggling around in the back seat so the car would fall off the jack.”

When a car approached from Elwood in blinding snow, he flagged it down and begged for a ride back to town.

The motorist loaded up eight passengers and got turned around. With that much weight in the car, the vehicle had enough traction to limp into town.

The Blizzard of '49

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

Thursday, 30 January 2014 16:28 - Last Updated Thursday, 30 January 2014 16:58

“The snow was so deep, the front bumper was pushing it,” Golter said.

Once there, the family stayed for three days at the home of a relative as the storm raged outside, piling drifts as high as telephone poles, stopping trains in their tracks and killing livestock across the central Plains.

Golter’s feet were frostbitten and he tried to thaw them out in a bathtub.

“The cold water was coming out of the tap and it felt warm,” he said with a laugh.

To this day, Golter wears heavy socks at night to keep his feet warm.

“It always reminds me of the 1949 blizzard,” he said.

THE SNOW WAS so deep, the
front bumper was pushing it.
GLEN GOLTER

Marjorie Cool was living on a ranch 20 miles south of Arnold when the ferocious storm hit.

She remembers her husband taking out a team of horses and a tractor to feed cattle as the wind howled and snow whipped about.

“He made it back but I sure worried about him because he didn’t show up when he was supposed to,” Marjorie said.

After the blizzard passed through, some of the Cool cattle were found, covered with snow, and

The Blizzard of '49

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

Thursday, 30 January 2014 16:28 - Last Updated Thursday, 30 January 2014 16:58

alive behind a haystack.

The Cools fared much better than many farmers and ranchers.

Cattle losses throughout the state topped \$10 million and transportation was paralyzed during the Jan. 2-5 storm.

News reports said thousands were trapped in their homes without food, electricity, fuel or medicine and many people survived by burning furniture and fence posts.

Snow drifts in many places were as high as the tops of electrical poles.

Cool remembers airplanes dropping groceries for stranded Nebraskans.

“One dropped flour and cereal and other things on the top of a hill near our house,” she said.

One blizzard after another slammed into the Midwest during 1948 and 1949.

Cool noted that many people hadn't dug their way out from a Nov. 18 blizzard and subsequent storms throughout December.

DELIVERY OF A BLIZZARD BABY
Not only did Marjorie Cool deliver a baby far away from the nearest hospital but it was in the middle of a raging blizzard.
“I was frightened out of my wits,” the 37-year-old recalled.
The sister of the Cool's hired man says at a different ranch had traveled to their ranch to be closer to the Callaway hospital which was 15 miles away.
“When they got there, the snowstorm hit and she started having contractions in the middle of the night,” Marjorie said.
The couple left for town in a tractor but weather conditions forced them to return to a trailer house on the Cool ranch. Marjorie said she phoned the Callaway
doctor who told her what to do before he tried to get to the ranch in a snowplow.
“She'd been in labor several hours when I lifted the blanket and all I could see was a black-and-blue bottom,” Marjorie said.
The baby was breathless.
She reached inside and turned the baby, held on to its feet and slowly brought it out.
Shortly after cutting the umbilical cord, the doctor arrived.
Marjorie's son, Jerry Cool, joked about an unwritten rule concerning pregnancies on farms and ranches when snowstorms are predicted.
“Head to town,” Jerry said.

And more blizzards hit the area in February and March.

The Blizzard of '49

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

Thursday, 30 January 2014 16:28 - Last Updated Thursday, 30 January 2014 16:58

Other residents of Stone Hearth Estates also had stories to tell.

Betty Volkman was a young teacher in Lexington and walked to her mother's home as snow fell on Jan. 2, 1949.

"It was around my boots when I left," Volkman said.

When she started for home a couple of hours later, she had to push through waist-high snowdrifts.

On the first day of the blizzard, Mary Peyton left Ft. Worth, TX, on a train to meet her husband in Laramie, WY.

When she finally got to Denver, her train was the first one out of the station bound for Laramie as the snowstorm had halted trains across much of the country.

As they passed through little towns, Peyton remembers people standing on the side of the tracks waiting for medicine and food.

Leona Widholm was 18 years old in 1949 and can only remember how warm the house stayed during the January blizzard because it was enveloped in snow.

"I also remember walking up snow drifts and sliding down."

Widholm recalled many other storms in her life.

The Blizzard of '49

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

Thursday, 30 January 2014 16:28 - Last Updated Thursday, 30 January 2014 16:58

During one in particular, she remembers riding home in a truck with her husband, Leonard, and their kids to their farm north of Gothenburg.

Because roads were plugged with snow, they zigzagged during their journey and were going up a hill when the truck died.

“The kids hollered ‘we don’t want to go back and stay with the neighbors,’ ” Widholm said.

Leonard got the neighbor’s tractor to pull them home.

Odessa Treat, who grew up on a farm near Wilsonville, remembers the difficulty of walking from the house to the barn because of high drifts.

“We also had a terrible time with water because it froze,” Treat said.

Golter remembers a terrible scene in the Republican River Valley after the blizzard of '49.

A flood had earlier washed out a road so another was carved into the side of a hill.

“They found people stranded in their cars that were dead because they couldn’t get turned around,” Golter said.

Another Stone Hearth resident, who wished not to be identified, said she was at college in Kearney when the blizzard struck.

The Blizzard of '49

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

Thursday, 30 January 2014 16:28 - Last Updated Thursday, 30 January 2014 16:58

“We walked through the underground emergency tunnels to get to classes,” she said. “I couldn’t get home for six weeks.”

Retired rancher Estella Tillotson remembers how her first husband, John Schurr, got disoriented in the blinding snow west of Farnam when he went out to check cattle.

“It was snowing so hard he had to grab hold of the hog fence to try to get back to the barn,” Tillotson said.

Once he returned, she said she told him it wasn’t fit for man or beast to be outside the way the wind was whipping snow into a frenzy.

“He agreed.”

ebarrett@gothenburgtimes.com

308-537-3636