

ALMOST SAVED, BUT LOST: The January 1873 Blizzard in Kandiyohi County, Minnesota

CHAPTER 1 The 1873 Snowstorm and Its Victims

INTRODUCTION

Described by some as a hurricane, a violent snowstorm hit the Dakota Territory¹, Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin for three days in early January, 1873. Roads and railroads shut down in central Minnesota for about a week due to snow drifts, newspapers didn't publish, and daily activities stopped while people took shelter in their homes--or in neighbors' homes. The storm took the lives of hundreds of people, including 70 deaths in Minnesota.² According to The Illustrated History of Kandiyohi County, published in 1905, 12 people died in Kandiyohi County.³ Some of these victims were Kandiyohi County residents; others were travelers who died in Kandiyohi County when overcome by the dangerous storm.

This book takes a closer look at both the anatomy of storm as described in local publications and the storm's victims: where they lived; how they died; and the families who mourned. There will also be information about those who survived, but with injury.

THE STORM AND ITS VICTIMS

People awoke on January 7, 1873 to an unusually warm winter day with temperatures in the 30s. Farmers and their families took advantage of the warmer temperatures; using horses or oxen and wagon or sleigh they brought grain to town to sell or mill into flour, cut firewood in nearby forests, tended to their cattle, or went to the neighbor's farm to thresh grain. Residents of Kandiyohi County did not know a severe storm was approaching. The storm was described as an electrical storm which covered much of the northwestern United States. Telegraph wires west of Chicago refused to work. People working or traveling outside were not dressed for extreme cold and blowing snow which approached

¹ The Dakota Territory included current states of North Dakota and South Dakota.

² Peterson, Clarence Stewart. Known Military and Civilian Dead During the Great Blizzard in Minnesota in January 1873. Baltimore, CS Peterson, 1958, p. 13. Book also includes Samuel Adams, but this author finds no record of him in Kandiyohi County.

³ Illustrated History of Kandiyohi County, p. 46-47.

rapidly. The storm lasted from the Tuesday afternoon of January 7 through late Thursday, January 9 and covered much of the state.⁴

The Irish Canadian newspaper reflected on the storm at the 10 year anniversary, describing the storm as it approached Worthington in southern Minnesota:

It struck Minnesota on the 7th of January, 1873, and raged for three days, the wind blowing a gale, the temperature being about eighteen degrees below zero, and on the prairies the air was filled with snow as fine as flour. Through every crevice, keyhole and nail hole the snow penetrated, puffing into houses like steam. The number of human lives lost in Minnesota was about seventy. The morning...was beautiful and bright. The air was mild and still, and farmers set out for town or went to neighboring farms with their teams...The barometer had been falling for 24 hours, and never was known to fall so low before.⁵

One Minnesota resident reflected on the storm in which he survived, "nearer dead than alive":

The forenoon was mild. As the day wore on, the increasing moisture made us think that the back bone of winter was broken. Dark clouds began to gather in the west . . . the wind was blowing a gale, producing a change in the atmosphere that chilled the marrow in one's bones. The air was filled with blinding snow, so that you couldn't see the horsewhip in your hand. The sun seemed to withdraw its light, and the earth seemed to tremble beneath the terrific, howling blast. I felt as though I were tied down and a thousand imps were shoveling snow into my ears and mouth.⁶

More about the snow:

A white wall was seen bearing down from the northwest. The front of the storm was distinct and almost as clearly outlined as a great sheet...On the prairie the air was filled with snow as fine as flour. Through every crevice, keyhole and nail hole the fine snow penetrated, puffing inside the house like steam.⁷

The story continues as described in the **Illustrated History of Kandiyohi County** (1905):

⁴ The Centennial History of Kandiyohi County, Minnesota, 1870-1970, Willmar, MN, Kandiyohi County Historical Society, 1970. Rose, Arthur P. An Illustrated History of Nobles County, Minnesota, Worthington, MN, Northern History Publishing Company, 1908, p. 71.

⁵ The Irish Canadian, Toronto, Canada, February 1, 188, p. 2.

⁶ Child, James E. Child's History of Waseca County, Minnesota: from its first settlement in 1854 to the close of the year 1904. Owatonna Chronicle, 1905, p. 407.

⁷ Rose, Arthur P. An Illustrated History of Nobles County, Minnesota. Worthington, MN, Northern History Publishing Company, 1908, p. 71-72.

About two o'clock a great many [farmers] were wending their way homeward with their sleds and teams of horses or oxen. At that hour there were no indications of a coming storm. The thermometer was about at the freezing point; the wind, which had been blowing gently from the southwest, suddenly went down and a perfect calm settled over the vast expanse of the snow-clad prairies. Light, fleecy clouds floated lazily in the heavens and occasionally a flurry of feathery snowflakes came sifting down through the tranquil atmosphere. Such was the stillness for a few moments that human voices, the barking of dogs or the lowing of cattle could be heard for miles.

Suddenly a muttering and rumbling as of distant thunder was heard in the direction of the far-away northwest. At first these sounds were more suggestive than real, but in a moment they began to increase and swell in volume until the fierce roar of the coming hurricane struck the ear of the anxious and affrighted listener. Simultaneously there appeared upon the northwestern horizon a white cloud, like a snowbank, which mounted upward, increased in volume and approached with astonishing rapidity. Within a few moments after these premonitory signs the storm broke in all its fury. The temperature fell steadily and it became intensely cold. Great clouds of snow, resembling powdered and hard frozen ice, were driven by the gale with such force that a person, no matter in which direction he turned, would be blinded. Within a few minutes the bright light of mid-afternoon was changed almost into darkness by the frozen moisture that came down from the clouds or was swept up from the ground and swirled about in the wild fury of the tempest. A person sitting in a sled would be unable to see his oxen or horses, though only a few feet away.

So sudden was the coming of the full force of the storm that farmers or members of their families who were working near their barns barely had time in many instances to reach the doors of their dwellings before the darkness and the bewildering terrors of the blizzard enveloped them.

The condition of those who were on the prairie roads far away from any habitation can more easily be imagined than described. All who have had the thrilling experience of being out in a blizzard remember that the blinding snow and the swirl of the wind soon cause them to lose all knowledge of directions.

The wind seems to strike them in tremendous eddies and bewildering gusts, as if it were coming from every point of the compass. No matter how thoroughly one is bundled up the fine particles of snow pierce through the clothing to the skin, where it melts, until the cold increases, when it again freezes to ice. Not only are the eyes blinded by the fierce

and ceaseless pelting of the frozen moisture which fills the air, but it becomes difficult to breathe. To attempt to guide a team under such conditions is out of the question. There is usually no safer course than to allow the horses or oxen to go where they will. Their knowledge of the road or inexplicable animal instinct will usually result in bringing up to the stable where they are accustomed to receive food and shelter, or to some other place of safety.

The terrific storm which had so suddenly come up on the afternoon of the 7th continued with unabated fury during the night, all day the 8th, and during the night following. Toward morning on the 9th it began to moderate slightly and throughout that day the weather conditions might be described as an ordinary blizzard. On the 9th the farmers for the first time in two days ventured outside their houses as far as the stables to provide such feed as they could for the suffering stock.

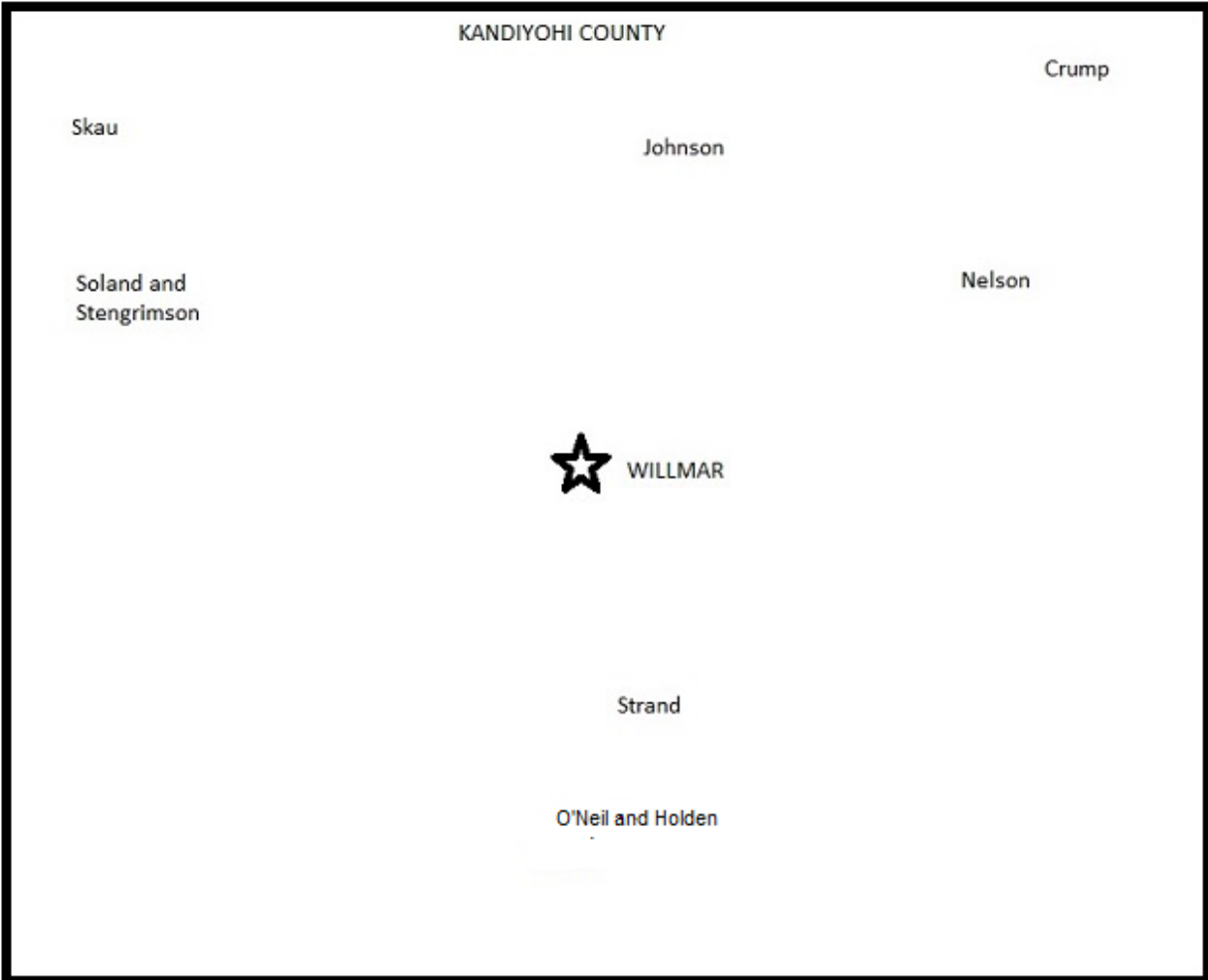
Immense banks of snow had been heaped up around the buildings and along the roadsides, wherever an obstruction impeded the free sweep of the wind. When the storm was over and communication was established between the villages and the various settlements it was learned that a great many had perished. In Whitefield township **Claus and Jorgen Strand**, brothers, were found frozen to death near Peter Monson's place. They were on their way home from the woods east of Lake Waconda. In Roseland township a party of five men, consisting of **John O'Neil, Charles O'Neil, Stephen O'Neil, Thomas Holden** and Michael Holden, while en route from Willmar to Olivia, were overtaken by the blizzard and all met death except Michael Holden, who still lives at Olivia, with one crippled hand to remind him of the terrors of his experience. Charles O'Neil lived nearly two weeks, but died after amputation of legs and arm at St. Paul. **Lars Nelson** of Whitefield while returning from the woods at Green Lake was caught in the storm and died later at Willmar from the effects of having both legs amputated. In section 7, Norway Lake township, the body of **Ole K. Skau** was found. He was returning with grist from the mill at Chippewa Falls to his home near Lake Johanna when the storm overtook him. **Margaret Soland**, 24 years, and **Helge Stengrimson**, 13 years, froze to death while returning to their home in Norway Lake from Kerkhoven. **Ole Gronseth** of Kerkhoven perished in section 4, Norway Lake township, while on his way home from the woods. In Roseville, **William M. Crump** was lost in the storm and his body was found within ten rods of R. C. Benton's house.⁸

⁸ Illustrated History of Kandiyohi County, p. 46-47.

This chart lists the name, the location where found, and residence of each victim in the blizzard as described in the **Illustrated History of Kandiyohi County** (1905),⁹ followed by a diagram of Kandiyohi County illustrating the geographic locations where the victims were overtaken by the January 1873 storm. (The diagram is not drawn to scale.)

NAME	LOCATION	RESIDENCE
Crump, William	Roseville	Roseville
Gronseth, Ole Larsen (<i>1872 victim</i>)	Swift County	Swift County
Holden, Charles	Roseland	Renville County
Johnson, Helena (<i>not in the above account</i>)	Colfax	Colfax
Nelson, Lars	Whitefield	Whitefield
O'Neil, Charles	Roseland	Renville County
O'Neil, John	Roseland	Renville County
O'Neil, Stephen	Roseland	Renville County
Skau, Ole K.	Norway Lake	Pope County
Soland, Margaret	Arctander	Norway Lake
Stengrimson, Helge	Arctander	Norway Lake
Strand, Claus	Whitefield	Whitefield
Strand, Jorgen	Whitefield	Whitefield

⁹ The 1905 history book incorrectly includes Ole Larsen Gronseth as a victim of the 1873 blizzard. Gronseth died near his Swift County home in a February 1872 blizzard. His name and death should not be confused with Ole Tollevsen Gronseth from Otter Tail County, Minnesota, who died on January 9, 1873 in his home county 130 miles north of Kandiyohi County. The list of blizzard victims should have included Mrs. Helena Johnson, who lingered and died in March 1873 from injuries in the storm.



AFTER THE STORM

The people of Kandiyohi County, Minnesota, and the rest of the Midwest dug out from under the storm for several days. Families separated for days of uncertainty either reunited with loved ones or learned that a loved one had died. Homeowners dug out from snow which sometimes reached the second floor. Farmers created paths to their barns and fed livestock which had not eaten for 3 days. Blocked roads were opened after several days and mail delivery was resumed after a 2 week delay. Railroads plowed through drifts and began serving the communities on their routes. Stores opened again. Newspapers printed stories about the storm and those who suffered. The injured received care; some faced amputations of toes, hands and/or legs and faced physical difficulties for the rest of their lives. Some dead farm animals, including chickens, turkeys, pigs and cattle were not discovered until the spring thaw. Families buried their loved ones, faced financial hardship, and had to find the emotional and physical strength to move forward

in life, knowing that some of their dreams had died with their loved ones. To ease their immediate financial distress, some families sought financial help from their Governor.

MINNESOTA RELIEF FUND

The State of Minnesota provided financial help to those who faced financial burdens--survivors of those who died, the disabled whose lives would never be the same, and farmers who lost cattle and horses. Seventy people died in the State of Minnesota, an undetermined number suffered injury, and thousands of livestock and horses froze to death. At the urging of Governor Horace Austin, the State Legislature provided short-term relief by appropriating \$5,000 for the governor to distribute. On average, each widow received \$40.00; each injured resident received \$25.00 and other funds to cover some medical care; and farmers who lost cattle, oxen team, or horses received \$10.00. Families in 34 Minnesota counties received an average of \$36.00 per family from the State (approximately \$690.00 in 2016 dollars). Governor Austin turned to county leaders, asking for truthful and written information about losses experienced in their communities. Willmar businessman Albert E. (A.E.) Rice served as Kandiyohi County's agent and Notary Public. Rice screened the applicants, submitted accurate relief applications to the State, communicated with the Governor's office detailing local residents' needs, and distributed State funds to the approved applicants.¹⁰

A. E. Rice (1845-1921) had an active business and political life in Willmar, and later the State of Minnesota. His mercantile business, "Paulson & Rice, Dealers in General Merchandise & County Produce," was the first business to be located south of the newly built railroad tracks in this growing community and county seat. Rice owned a local newspaper (Willmar Republican), he served in local government in the 1870s, and founded the Bank of Willmar. Rice served as a member of the Minnesota House of Representatives and as the state's Lieutenant Governor (1887-1891). Rice Memorial Hospital in Willmar was named for A. E. Rice and his family.¹¹

¹⁰ Fite, Gilbert Courtland, The Farmers' Frontier, 1865-1900, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1987. pp. 58-59; Governor Horace Austin Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, File 293 "Grasshopper Relief, January Snowstorm, 1873" and File 311 "Papers Relative to Relief Furnished to Sufferers From Storm of 1873"; Atkins, Annette, Harvest of Grief: Grasshopper Plagues and Public Assistance in Minnesota, 1873-78, Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1984.

¹¹ Illustrated History of Kandiyohi County, 1905, p. 430-431.