

blew fitfully out of the south—the next moment frozen hell had broken loose.”

The storm came to be known as the Schoolhouse Blizzard, the Schoolchildren’s Blizzard, or simply the Children’s Blizzard for the large number of students who were stranded in the storm—many of them after venturing home from their one-room schoolhouses.

The U.S. Army Signal Service’s Daily Weather Map issued the morning of January 12 referred to the storm as being “of considerable energy,” with much of that energy coming from warm, moist air from the Gulf of Mexico. In fact, it was the mild temperatures that preceded the onslaught of the blizzard that led many into a false sense of security. In Gibson, Kansas, the temperature at 2:00 p.m. on January 12 reached a balmy 44°F. It would plummet to -11°F by 9:00 p.m. the following evening and to -24°F by the morning of the January 15.

At Bismarck, the capital of the Dakota Territory, the Signal Service observer recorded in his daily journal that the low temperature reached -37°F and that the wind had shifted to the northwest by 6:00 a.m., “increasing in force, drifting the snow which had already fallen and that which was falling to depths of five to twenty feet. This, with rapidly falling temperatures, constituted a well-defined ‘blizzard.’” (It’s worth noting that modern definitions of the term “blizzard” do not include low temperature among the criteria.)

About 200 miles to the southeast in Huron, also in the Dakota Territory, the Signal Service observer recorded the following:

*At 12:42 p.m. the air was perfectly calm for about one minute; the next minute the sky was completely overcast by heavy black clouds which, for a few minutes previous, had hung along the western and northwestern horizon, and the wind veered to the west and blew*

*with such violence as to render the position of the observer on the roof unsafe. The air was immediately filled with snow as fine as sifted flour.*

In the tiny hamlet of St. Vincent, in the extreme northwest corner of Minnesota, the observer noted that the blizzard struck at 1:00 p.m., and that by 2:40 p.m., “The wind blew a terrific gale, attaining a velocity of from thirty-six to forty-eight miles from 3 p.m. to 2 a.m. of the 13th.” The temperature plummeted to a staggering -53.5°F, less than seven degrees from the current all-time state record low.

On the morning of January 14, the following headline appeared in the *St. Paul Daily Globe*: “STUNG TO DEATH: Several Persons Put to Sleep Forever by the Blizzard’s Viper Tongue.” The blizzard claimed some 235 lives across the frozen prairie; an estimated 20 percent of the dead were children. Amidst the many tales of tragedy and horror that came from the blizzard of January 12, 1888, stories of survival against the odds and the elements stand out, including the following account published in the *St. Paul Daily Globe*:

*Particulars come in this evening of a terrible experience, the result of yesterday’s storm. A son of Henry Oeder, a farmer living about ten miles northwest of here, started out in the morning with a team and sleigh to take four of his younger brothers and sisters to school. He reached the school house with his load and had started home when the storm struck him. He started back to the school house to get the children. The two older expressed a desire to remain, but the others started home with the young man. They had not gone far when they lost their way and finally unhitched the team and covered themselves up with robes and lay down in the sleigh. There*

*they remained twenty-six hours until they were discovered this morning, all three being almost dead. The other members of the family stayed in the school house all night, and returning home this morning gave the alarm. The sufferers were brought to the nearest farm house. They are in bad shape, but it is thought all will survive. One of the horses was dead when found. It is thought other reports of a similar nature will come in after the storm. The blizzard which raged was the worst ever experienced by the oldest settler. To-night the thermometer is away down and the wind still blows.*

A cautionary footnote to the Children’s Blizzard came several years later, in the form of a letter from Mr. Oliver Gibbs, Jr., of Ramsey, South Dakota, that was published in *Northwest Weather Crops* and reprinted in the December 1895 issue of *Monthly Weather Review* under the headline of “Blizzards and Schools.” In his letter, Gibbs claims that a “blizzard always comes on a day that opens mild and cloudy, like a ‘down-east’ January thaw. On such days, any time in the winter, it is the safest thing to watch out and stay close at home.” He goes on to say that country schoolteachers “should have an understanding with the directors and the pupils that on such days there will be no school.” Because this was the case during the 1888 blizzard, Gibbs claims that many lives were likely saved in his town, “though the morning was mild and inviting everybody out by the softness of the air.” W

---

*Contributing Editor SEAN POTTER is a New York-based Certified Consulting Meteorologist (CCM), Certified Broadcast Meteorologist (CBM), and science writer with an interest in weather history.*