

## The Long Winter runs from the fall of 1880 to the spring of 1881

A winter season of such frequent blizzards that it went down in history as "**The Snow Winter**".

Accurate details in Wilder's novel include the names of the townspeople (with only minor exceptions).



The Chicago and North Western Railway closing down business until the Spring thaw, the near-starvation of the townspeople, the severe cold, the terrible danger of getting caught in a blizzard, and the courage of Almanzo Wilder and Cap Garland, who ventured out on the open prairie in search of a cache of wheat that no one was even sure existed.

Prof. Herbert Schell reminds us of this fact in his [History of South Dakota](#) (3d ed., 1961, 1968, 1975, University of Nebraska Press) at pp. 180-1:

The winter of 1880-1881 often has been called "the hard winter."

A blizzard occurred as early as October, and although most of this early snow disappeared, heavy precipitation throughout the winter resulted in an [accumulation of more than eleven feet of snow in many communities.](#)

Hardships were due not so much to low temperatures as to the privations caused by the snow blockade. Food and fuel grew scarce as connections with the outside world were cut off.

Some of the newly settled areas along the Upper Sioux and in the James Valley were snowbound for as long as from October to March.

Winter of 1880-01, Brown County, Nebraska

The winter of 1880-'81 has gone into history as one of the most severe that was ever known.

The prairies were covered with snow so deep that the cattle could not graze on the buffalo grass on which the ranchers relied for their winter feed.

The snow came early in the fall and laid on the ground all winter.

It was so deep that the cattle could not travel, and at times a crust of ice covered the surface of it making travel impossible as the cattle sank into the snow and thousands of head starved to death, sometimes in sight of the hay which ranchers had put up to be fed when the cattle could not graze. Of the 3,000 head on the Cook ranch only 800 were left in the spring.

Other ranchers had similar losses and were obliged to close out, thus leaving the fertile prairies open to settlement by the farmers who came a few years later.

To these hardy frontiersmen much credit is due for their efforts to establish cattle ranches in this country to which it is so well adapted.

Had they understood the climate they could have protected their stock from blizzards as is now done and saved themselves from losses.

Among these early ranchers were Cook and Tower on Bone creek, A. M. Brinckerhoff at the mouth of Pine creek, G. W. Howenstein, J. W. Roselle, James Abernathy and G. W. Kirkpatrick.

The little log cabin built by Bill Woods on his homestead in 1879, still stands. It is on highway 7, on W ½ NW¼ of section 13, township 30 range 22., four miles north of Ainsworth. It is probably the oldest house in the county.

Mary Paulson, a child of the immigrant Norwegian parents, in Yellow Medicine County, Minnesota, remembers opening the door on the morning of October 15 to a wall of snow that just fell into the house. Her father had to get up on a chair to make a hole in the snow in order to crawl out of the house. Children were able to slide from the peaks of the roofs during breaks in the snow much of the winter. Even substantial two-story homes had snow up to the second floor windows. No one was prepared for the deep snow so early in the season and farmers all over the region were caught with their crops to harvest and with fuel supplies low. They had not yet milled their grain or dug out their potatoes when the first blizzard of this snow winter arrived.

By Christmas, starvation loomed again just as it had in their first two winters on the plains. Some families were boiling their milled wheat kernels into a kind of mush but she knew she could not keep her children alive on that diet without flour; they would never survive the winter. When it was clear that the weather wouldn't break and they wouldn't have a chance to get their crops in, six Schweizer farmers decide to make a 16 mile trip to the nearest mill together. Each farmer took a wagon loaded with grain sacks and a team of horses, and each team broke a trail for half a mile or so until the animals were exhausted; then the team would drop to the rear and the next in line would break through the drifts for the next half mile. It was a long gruesome trip, but the men returned with a flour and the family survived the winter. By January of 1881 the train service was almost entirely suspended from the region. Railroads hired scores of men to dig out the tracks but it was a wasted effort. As soon as they had finished shoveling a stretch of line a new storm arrived filling up the line and rendering

their work useless. The blizzard of February 2 a terrible storm with thunder and lightning and according to Osten, halted the train traffic from Sioux Falls completely. The train did not run again until June 15- 4 1/2 months later.

When the snow finally melted in late spring of 1881, huge sections of the plains were flooded. Children remember parents rowing boats to town over their corn and wheat fields. Most of the town of Yankton, in what is now South Dakota, was washed away when the Missouri River overflowed its banks, and downriver the town of Vermillion was also swept away.