

## NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

### THE STUDY OF PIONEER LIFE: A COMMUNICATION

LINNTON, OREGON, April 16, 1930

TO THE EDITOR:

The Davis-Hoidale-Klovstad symposium anent Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth*, in the December and March issues of MINNESOTA HISTORY,<sup>1</sup> is of exceeding interest to me, rich as it is in memories of the long ago. Being a sort of second-generation pioneer of the Gopher State, I appreciate fully the contributions of the three gentlemen named and cannot resist an impulse to make the trio a quartet. If what I have to say be tintured unduly by purely personal recollections ("too much of enough," as a German friend put it) natural to a garrulous old fellow perilously near the open gate of octogenarianism, the reader may be charitable enough to pardon me and his honor Judge Public suspend sentence.

In April, 1867, I came to Minnesota from my eastern home to live with my brother, Captain Byron Talman, a Civil war veteran who had served with the Twenty-second New York Cavalry. He was "farming it" in the township of Cascade, Olmsted County, seven miles from Rochester. Our place was on the dividing line between cultivated farms and a vast expanse of rolling prairie lying "such as creation's dawn beheld." That fenceless, treeless, all but houseless waste was crossed by a few winding and not too well defined wagon roads where one might get lost without half an effort, especially in snowstorms, which meant death to many an ill-starred wayfarer. I assisted in breaking several patches of this virgin soil. The sharp plow tore through sod almost as tough as wire, turning a furrow scarcely three inches deep. Out on this prairie two miles from our abiding place dwelt a "bonnie Scot," John Frank, well read and a thinker like most of his countrymen, who introduced me to Macaulay, of whom he was an ardent admirer.

A few hundred yards back of our house rose a height so densely crowded with dwarf oak and underbrush as to be all but inac-

<sup>1</sup> *Ante*, 10: 430-435; 11: 63-74. *Ed.*

cessible. It was the habitation of various feral animals large and small, notably wildcats; and neighborhood rumor located an occasional panther there.

Those were the earliest days of reaping machines. I ran a McCormick reaper, which, like all of its kind then in market, had no automatic rake; driving a horse team around a hundred-acre wheat field day after day and "raking off" at the same time.

Messrs. Davis, Hoidale, and Klovstad have a good deal to say about the slow and proverbially patient ox. That reminds me. (Jehu! what an original remark!) One of the coldest days in the winter of 1867-68 I drove a yoke of oxen over the prairie four miles and back for a load of firewood, freezing both ears and coming within an ace of losing one of them.

In the symposium that incited me to get a few troublesome things off my chest, reference is made to the amazingly rapid rise, incident to deluging rainfalls, of existing Minnesota streams and the creation of deep, swiftly flowing rivers that vanished in a day. We lived within a mile of the Zumbro River, which I have known to rise six feet in half as many hours. That erratic stream will remain forever a rosebud of memory. When summer storms were raging I would make for the bank, plunge in the angry waters, and amid the heavy downpour, the lightning's glare, and the thunder's reverberating organ peal know an ecstasy, a delirious exaltation of soul, never experienced thereafter.

In the spring of 1868 my brother removed with his family to Iowa and I remained in Minnesota as the hired man (*æt.* 16) of George Waldron in the adjoining township of Kalmar. In that capacity it swelled my already stupendous self-conceit to set a record for the amount of plowing done in one day — nearly five acres. George paid me eighteen dollars a month and gave it out cold that he would rather have me than any twenty-five dollar man he knew of. (Hot blushes scorch me as I write.) In harvest time, every Sunday found me toiling in the wheat field "all by my lonesome" for the extra \$2.50 a day and (equally important) a keg of beer. One of the farmer neighbors was Mr. Graham, one of the worthiest and mellowest of Scots, whose family included a little shaver of tender years destined to become the well-known Dr. Christopher Graham of the Mayo hospital staff.

Late in the following autumn I returned to my home in Rochester, New York. Southern Minnesota's awful storm of the winter of 1872-73 created almost as profound an impression on the Atlantic seaboard as in the Middle West. It was the theme of "Dead in the Snow," a poem of mine the publication of which at the time was no doubt voted by public opinion hardly less regrettable than the sad event it commemorated.

August, 1879, found me back in Minnesota beginning my forty-seven-year "stop" in St. Paul. As combined telegraph editor and railroad reporter of the *Pioneer Press*, editing and helping to gather all the press news of the Northwest in common with the rest of the world, I "got wise" to every detail of the historic snowfall of the winter of 1880-81; and so far as memory goes I can corroborate Mr. Hoidale's every statement in connection therewith. With what blockades did the railroads and country roads do battle then! While traffic suspensions of greater or less duration prevailed all over the Northwest, the St. Paul and Sioux City Railroad, later absorbed in the Omaha system, was the worst sufferer of all. So frequent and persistent were the stoppages on that line that they became a standard joke among "newspaperists"—a joke of much richer tang for us than for the long-visaged stockholders.

Yes, the affair of 1880-81 was "some storm." Unless memory plays a "dirty trick," it was likewise a blizzard. And just what is a blizzard?<sup>2</sup> Let me quote the aptest definition I have come across up to date: "If four men can hold a blanket over a gimlet hole in the door it is not a blizzard."

JOHN TALMAN

<sup>2</sup> It may be of interest, in connection with Mr. Talman's comment, to note that the origins of "The Word *Blizzard*" are examined by Mr. Allen W. Read in *American Speech* for February, 1928. He asserts that the first use of the word in the meaning of "a furious snowstorm" occurred in the *Northern Vindicator* of Estherville, Iowa, in its issue for April 23, 1870, in reference to a severe storm of the preceding March. In *American Speech* for February, 1930, Mr. Read returns to the subject with a note entitled "'Blizzard' Again," in which he refutes the theory—derived from the *Lyon County News* of Marshall, Minnesota, for March 2, 1883—that the word in its present significance was first used in Marshall in connection with the great storm of 1873. *Ed.*



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