The Blizzard of '86

The pioneers of Thomas County experienced two bad snowstorms the first week of January 1886. The first of these was a snow that fell on Sunday, January 3, not much worse than the usual snowstorm in western Kansas. An estimated four inches of snow fell Sunday; the wind was moderate, and the temperature not severe. Sunday night the snow stopped, and Monday, although threatening, was not a bad day except that it was very cold and blustery.

The second of these storms occurred Wednesday, January 6,1886, and is generally believed to have been the worst blizzard ever to strike western Kansas. The snow was heavy and wet at first, lashed about by winds estimated later at 40 miles per hour. As the storm progressed the temperature fell, the winds grew stronger, and the wet snow turned to icy sleet that stung exposed flesh almost to the point of breaking the skin. It was difficult for a man to keep his eyes open, and even with his eyes open it was impossible to see anything. This second storm lasted two full days and nights and is known as "the Blizzard of '86." When the storm abated on Friday it was learned that six men who called Colby home had lost their lives in five separate incidents. These men were Samuel Stewardson, 26,Thomas County Clerk; Alfred Gould 19; Fred Gould 17; Henry Upson, about 45; Issac Griffin about 35; and an unidentified man about whom nothing is known.

W. I. Jones, a homesteader who located north and east of Colby in the spring of '85, tells about his experiences in the first storm in an article written by him in 1935 and published in a collection edited by George Kinkle. Jones had completed his sod house and was earning some money by hauling freight for the new stores in Colby.

"I left Colby Saturday morning to go to Monument for a load of freight for Mike Donelan," he wrote. "I had a large freight wagon pulled by two teams of horses. I got to Monument without incident and loaded up with 3,500 pounds of freight for Donelan's new store. When I had finished feeding the horses and was getting ready to leave for Colby Sunday morning the weather was threatening so I covered the freight with a tarpaulin, put the horses in shelter, and went to make arrangements to board with Mr. and Mrs. F. A. Koons until the storm was over.

"It snowed and blew for most of two days, them cleared up Monday evening. It was still clear Tuesday morning so I decided it would be all right to start for Colby," Jones reported later. "Mr. Koons tried to talk me out of it, but it looked all right to me, so I decided to try it."

The biggest problem of traveling in those days was getting lost. Even under the best of conditions it was not unusual for someone to lose his way. There were no roads, no telegraph poles, no trees, no mountains, no railroads, no windmills—nothing at all to guide someone except now and then a sod house on the horizon and all the sod houses looked pretty much alike when viewed from far away. The

common thing to do was to pick out a point. At night, when the weather was clear and the stars visible, travelers would use the stars much the same as sailors did at sea.

Since fresh fallen snow covered the ground and obliterated all signs of wagon tracks, Jones was more apprehensive than ever about losing his way. " I said to Mr. Koons that if he would pilot me to the divide I believed I could make it to Colby, so he got on a horse and accompanied me for several miles. He showed me a house in the distance and told me to head for that.

"About noon I came to the Saline," Jones said. "It was drifted full of snow, but I picked out a place I thought would be all right to cross. I could see no trails, roads or anything to guide me. Just had to go across the country. I drove into the Saline and the first thing I knew my horses were floundering around in the snow in great shape. They were soon all entangled in the harness and I could not even get a tug unfastened. After awhile two men came along with a shovel and helped me dig a road through the snow to the north bank of the Saline. I had lost a lot of time but I traveled right along after that. At sunset I reached the home of Morgan Williams, about nine miles south of Colby, on the east side of the Range line.

"At first Mr. Williams said he could not keep me, as he did not have any place to put my horses, but we finally arranged that by crowding his horses some we could make room for three of mine in the barn. We left one out by a haystack. I had blankets for that horse and while the night was bitterly cold he did not suffer any injury."

Wednesday, January 6, 1886, dawned clear and cold in western Kansas. The temperature the night before had dropped or 12 degrees, but the sun came up bright and clear on Wednesday and shone brightly all morning. Mr. Jones left right after breakfast for Colby. The ground was still covered with four inches of snow that had fallen Sunday and it was still drifting a little. By noon the temperature was in the upper 20's with very little wind blowing, other than a few gusts now and then. "By the time I got to Colby I was still ahead of the second storm, but not by much. A great, dark cloud was building up in the northwest."

In the north part of the county the Oberlin stagecoach that had left Colby right after dinner ran into some trouble. The stage got within two miles of Halfway House operated by the Henry Claars when the storm struck. The driver drafted one of the male passengers to take the lines while he crawled on his hands and knees, feeling with his bare hands for the frozen ruts beneath the snow. The stagecoach was not able to reach the Halfway House, but the driver did locate a home where the passengers could wait in safety for the blizzard to abate.