

A Blizzard in 1972

We had a nice blizzard last week that caused me to recall a storm from 1972. It was not a particularly exceptional storm but the story will tell a little about the way things were back then.

I was driving an already old Chevy II. A Chevy II was a cheaply made small car with rear wheel drive. All cars in those days except an Oldsmobile Toronado were rear wheel drive. Rear wheel drive was terrible on either ice or snow. No weight over the driving tires.

Our roads were all gravel or sand at the time. The township roads and even some of the county roads did not have ditches. We already had some snow but this was the first heavy snow of the winter.

I left work in Fridley about 5 pm. Of course it was dark. It had been snowing and blowing hard since noon.

My route home was from Big Lake, along Eagle Lake Road through Orrock. The east west road from Orrock, which is now County Road #5, was sand with no ditches.

As I drove north from Big Lake the road had scattered drifts up to two feet high. The only way to cross those with the Chevy II was to hit them going as fast as possible and hope to make it across. I did that successfully for about four miles but then the drifts got too high. I knew I could not get much farther. I did not want the snowplow to total the car when it did come through so I just parked it on a clear shoulder.

I kept a full set of winter clothes in the car. A parka, stocking cap, mittens and sorrels. I also had a big scoop shovel. I figured that shovel might be my ticket for a ride and it was.

About a half mile up the road I came upon four men with a full sized car. They were struggling to push through a drift. What they needed most was a good shovel.

I had a ride!

We pushed and shoveled our way to Orrock. By the time we reached the little bar at Orrock, we were snow covered, wet and froze.

We had some hot food and warmed up. It had been about two hours since I left Big Lake eight miles away.

There was a fellow that I knew a little bit who had a snow mobile and it was running. He agreed to try to give me a ride the four miles to home. He was foolish to do so. It was hard ride and we were lucky to make it.

Snowmobiles were not so big and powerful then. It could barely handle two of us in the deep drifts. I had to push through the heavy spots. It was kind of a wild ride when we would hit an open patch as we were headed into the wind.

When we got close enough to home that I could see the light through the kitchen window, I sent him back to Orrock. It was easier going with only one rider and the wind at his back.

Everything was ok in the house. My wife and kids were warm. The oil burner was working fine and the electricity was still on.

I changed clothes, warmed up again, and went to the barn to check the animals. Everything that was in the barn and coops was ok for the night.

My cattle were not so well off. They were twenty head still in an open pasture just south of the farm buildings. I had intended to move them to the barnyard in a few days. They were in trouble now.

The pasture had no trees or windbreak. In such a situation cattle will huddle in a tight circle for warmth. The animals on the windy side would keep working around to the downwind side to escape the cold. The net effect is a slow grinding movement downwind.

In a similar situation a herd of hogs will create hog pile. The outer ones will continually try to push underneath the others. If necessary the heat of their bodies will melt the snow and even the frozen ground. The net effect is actually pretty good for them. They will effectively dig a hole for a nest. With enough hogs the hole can be a couple feet deep and fifteen or twenty feet across. Loose dirt piles up on the rim and they create nest shaped like a bowl.

Horses will just stand with their tails to the wind and their heads half down. They will be fine if the storm does not keep them from feed for too long. They need food in their bellies to keep warm.

Bison will face the wind and go to sleep. Their big shaggy heads and heavy shoulder capes keep them warm as toast in any blizzard.

The cattle pasture was rectangular and about ten acres in size. It was dark of course and with the blizzard, visibility was short. I walked the fence line hoping to find the cattle and to avoid the possibility of getting disoriented and lost.

When I reached the south side of the pasture, all I found was twenty-five foot hole in the fence. The cattle mob had just ground their way through it. I doubt if they even noticed in the wind and cold.

The next barrier was a tree line on the south side of my neighbor's property. I found them just about the time they reached the south line. I suppose it took them about four hours to move $\frac{1}{4}$ mile.

They were all there and not really in bad shape. It was quite a challenge to drive them north against the wind. It took a couple hours to move them back across the open fields to the barnyard. They were not inclined to walk into that wind.

The storm lasted a day but it took three days for a plow to open the roads. That was normal after a good blow.

The electricity stayed on although we would have been ok without it. The oil burner did not need electricity.

When the roads were open I got a ride to my car with a neighbor. Nobody had bothered the car while it rested on the shoulder of the road. We needed to jump the battery but it ran ok.

Things were simpler then. I liked those days.