

Falling through the ice at 40 below.

I have always enjoyed time alone.

Especially hunting alone.

Particularly in harsh weather.

Then I can feel I have the wilderness to myself.

It was a Sunday during Christmas vacation, on the first days of 1961.

It was a true Minnesota winter.

Enough snow and plenty of cold.

We got up early, milked the cows, cleaned up, and went to Mass.

I changed back into work clothes, checked the cows, took care of a problem or two.

Then back to house to dress for hunting in arctic cold.

It was clear and bright; the weatherman promised a high of ten below with wind chills of 40 below.

Just my kind of day.

The wonderful feeling of having the outside world to myself was irresistible.

I dressed right.

Not too heavy so I wouldn't sweat working through deep snow.

with no exposed skin when out in the open.

Excellent boots, a shotgun, ammo, a knife, a twine string to carry game, and matches with a bit of paper to start a fire.

Our farm was situated in a good spot.

I could start off in any direction to hunt.

Just avoid the farmsteads and hunt for many miles, sticking to wood lots, brushy fence lines, sloughs.

A lone hunter to avoid being noticed and hunt for hours.

I headed to the southeast, thinking to walk the mixed terrain between Corbin's, Bill Bouley's, and Croteau's.

My expectations for edible game were modest.

It was too cold for squirrels, and too windy for pheasants to be in the open.

Although I might kick up a pheasant that was burrowed in the snow.

My best chance to spook a cottontail rabbit in a protected spot.

I was hunting the shoreline of a five-acre slough, Bill Bouley owned.

I kicked up and shot a rooster pheasant. Tied him to belt with my twine string.

Then I decided to check out a muskrat lodge. It was the only lodge on the pond.

It was 10 feet from the shore weeds, well into the pond.

I was on the deep side when I broke through the ice without any warning.

Normally you would see signs moisture or hear cracking, but this was instant.

I probably hit a breathing hole or area of turbulence but that I will never know.

My shotgun caught the ice on both sides of the hole.

Instantly I was up to my chest.



The ice was thick everywhere except the hole where I had fallen through.
There was only soft mud under my feet.
I could not jump out.
I shoved my gun and the rooster across the ice to the shore.
My heavy mittens were soaked.
They froze to the ice as I lifted myself out of the hole.
That was helpful.
The ice was solid enough to support me.
My mittens peeled off the ice easily.
To reduce the risk of another dip, I crossed to the shore on all fours.
Time goes very slow for me when I am in a jam.
My guess that wasn't in water for 3 seconds.
Nevertheless, my boots were full of water, my blue jeans were soaked through to my skin, my coat, undergarments, and mittens were all wet.
I was more than a mile from anywhere.
To take the time to build a fire seemed like a poor idea.
I decided it would be easiest to reach Croteau's place.
To get there, I just needed to head south along the edge of the swamp, then cross a small field, to reach the gravel road.

Then it was less than a mile on the road, with my back to the wind.
There was unlikely to be any traffic, I probably wouldn't have accepted help anyway.
Too embarrassing for a young male.
My pants and coat froze immediately.
They did not freeze as wet cloth.
They froze before the water had time to run off.
It wasn't walking in frozen clothes.
It was like walking in a suit of armor but made of ice.



It was frigid, rigid, and heavy.
My knees could not bend.
I walked by swinging my legs out and then forward.
Walking was more painful than I expected.
I assumed the skin of my legs was freezing.
That wasn't it.
When I pulled my pants off, I realized virtually all the body hair below my waist was missing.
It had been frozen to my blue jeans.
Aunt Anna supplied dry clothes.
I spent that Sunday afternoon with my Croteau cousins doing what most people were doing.
Watching TV and keeping warm.
We watched a Pearl Harbor documentary.
That was the first time I learned the details about that attack.
I walked home in time for chores at 4:30.
On the way home I picked up the frozen pheasant.