

It was 41 below on Friday morning. TCB 1/18/2009

That reminded me of the two other times that I can recall the temperature getting so low. The first was a Sunday in January of 1977 and the other was in December of 1993.

In January of 1977 I was building a house. I was also farming 500 acres of corn and working full time at Medtronic. House building was a late night and weekend deal. My cousin Gerry Courteau and I started building on the Fourth of July, 1976 and we moved into the house in April 1977. Gerry worked six days a week at the Ebner sawmill in Elk River. He would drive up from Elk River every Sunday to put in 12 hours working for me.

Gerry was a good and dependable workman but on this particular Sunday he called to say his old Chevy wouldn't start. I checked the thermometer on the big box elder on my way to the barn. It read 43 below. My vehicles wouldn't have started either, I didn't even try them. That wasn't a problem for me though. The new house was in the woods on the north end of the farm. It was less than half a mile away. I walked there often.

My oldest son Joel helped me most days but I don't recall him being along this particular day. I suppose he got this Sunday off because of the cold. He was only eight.

There was snow but it wasn't too deep. The trail to the new house followed a ridge across a quarter mile of open field. At the north end of the field the path dipped down to cross the Snake River. The building site was on the far side of the river in wooded pasture. Gerry, Joel and I had cleared the site for the house in the summer of 1975.

There was a stiff wind from the northwest. That wind mattered because the trail was in the open and on a ridge. The wind chill was 70 below.

I left the old house about 7 a.m., fed the cattle and headed for the new house. It was still dark. We had a big Labrador retriever at the time. I didn't like him much but I don't recall ever liking any dog. I know that seems to be contrary to human nature but I've just never cared for dogs. I did provide him with the elements of a good life and on this day particularly, he did have a nice warm doghouse.

The dog wanted to follow me. I sent him back several times. Believing that I had succeeded, I concentrated on my journey to the new house. Once I got into the wind I didn't have much interest in worrying about the dog. At 70 below your eyeballs can freeze in seconds.

I reached the house, which was well closed in. All the windows and doors were on, but the furnace was not yet hooked up. I built a huge fire in the open fireplace and went to work. I was roughing in the plumbing at the time. The fire didn't really heat the house but it did take the edge off and it gave me a nice place to warm up.

After I had worked an hour or two I noticed the black lab sprawled over the top of a pile of scrap wood outside. He wasn't moving. Obviously the damn dog had snuck out contrary to my orders.

I gave some thought to just leaving him on the wood pile. He appeared to be unconscious. He might have been dead already anyhow.

I didn't though. I carried his rigid carcass into the house and placed him on the heated concrete in front of the fireplace.

Most people may not appreciate it, but I consider this particular act to be one of the most tender and magnanimous acts of my life. I can't even stand the smell of dog.

Under the circumstances there wasn't really anything more I could do for the frozen dog, so I went back to work on the plumbing. I was surprised to see the dog thawed out and walking around in less than an hour. The only damage I noticed was to his lip. There were three or four links of heavy chain attached to his collar. I had put those chain links on to give him a handicap when he chased chickens. One link had frozen lengthways along his lower lip and when the dog thawed out a chunk of lip about the size of an index finger stayed with the chain.

Joel read a draft of this story and reminded me that in the spring this dog passed away shortly after killing a farm goose that was laying eggs.

Now I know I'm guilty of not properly training the dog in the first place. I accept that criticism. In my own defense, if the topic of horse training comes up in conversation I will sometimes claim to be good with horses. I have never claimed to be good with dogs.

I have a herd of horses.

I don't own a dog.

I claim that as an example of trying to live within my limitations.

The cold weather in 1993 involved a Vietnamese pot bellied pig. That story doesn't end well for the pig.