

NEW COLUMN

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March 5, 2010

The Cruelty of Winter

The most frequently asked question this winter has been “Are you as sick of winter as I am”? An often overheard expression by many has been “It sure has been a long hard winter”! No doubt about it 2009-10 is definitely one of the worst winters we have had in quite a long time. In my lifetime 1969, 1975, 1997 and this one are those I would categorize as harsh. This winter has been so long. When the calendar turned to December 1st the weather turned cold and the ground froze hard. An immediate blast of 4-6 inches hit in early December, then came the Christmas storm and until the last two days above freezing, the cold and moisture cycle has really never quit!

As bad as it has been, think of how it would be without modern equipment. The M Farmall may have been modern 60 years ago but by today’s standards we would still be digging out Santa Claus from the Christmas blizzard with the old M and B John Deere.

Even with today’s technology, “old man winter” can still pack a punch. Frozen and downed power lines left some state residents without electricity for a few hours to as long as 3 ½ weeks. In visiting with some of the hard working individuals whose task it was to restore that power they described the enormous amount of time the process takes. (Three to five hours to replace one downed power pole). My hats off to all those crews who endured severe cold and blizzard conditions to get power up and running again.

How about the poor state bird? Where state pheasant populations are dense they are dropping by the hundreds. Heavy snow pack causing reduced food supply and inadequate wind protection has spelled disaster for the ring-neck population in some parts of South Dakota during the last 2 ½ months.

In describing this winter a few lines back I used the word “harsh”. Harsh in Webster’s dictionary is defined as crude, severe, rough and physically discomforting. Certainly an accurate term for a bad winter on the northern great plains.

Charles M. Russel (1864-1926) a highly talented western artist captured the landscape, spirit, and culture of the western U.S. during the late 1800’s and early 1900’s. In one of his more famous yet crude paintings, “Waiting for a Chinook-last of 5000: a starving longhorn steer stands in a snow bank surrounded by a pack of wolves. As the story goes this is the last steer in a herd of 5,000 head at the beginning of a long, harsh winter. A Chinook is a warm, dry, southwest wind and in this picture even that will not save the steer from his cruel fate.

Having knowledge of this artist and his work, I never thought I would be able to recapture any of his painted stories in real life until I lived through the winter of 1997. In brief review, that was the worst winter in the last 50 from the standpoint of the extreme combination of sub zero temps and the amount of snow as it negatively affected livestock. Farmers and ranchers lost thousands of head of cattle and sheep that year. Hundreds of head of livestock froze feet, legs, and noses and had to be put down. Thousands more were buried alive by snow and perished. Even where livestock had adequate protection and quality feed they lost weight and condition. Basically you could not feed them enough to maintain let alone gain anything. It was ugly, especially in North Dakota and northern South Dakota. Shelterbelts had 30-40 feet of snow in them. Entire buildings were buried by days of windblown snow. Hundreds of out buildings sustained collapsed roof damage from heavy snow loads.

That winter, I was traveling highway 212 between Gettysburg and Faulkton. It was late February and it had begun to warm up enough to start an early thaw. As I drove east, I noticed several yearling steer carcasses scattered next to the north ditch pasture fence. As I continued on I slowed down to find 10 to 12 dead yearlings in the corner of that same pasture. The blinding, sub zero blizzard conditions had driven them to their death. The confines of the pasture fence did not allow them to walk another yard. As I passed slowly by, I noticed to my right a yearling steer froze to death, standing in a snow drift on the south shoulder of the road. Only his head, neck, and withers were visible. The raging wind and blinding snow had driven him out of the pasture corner, through the north fence and ditch and across the highway. There on the south shoulder he was stuck in a huge drift. He would go no farther. As I passed the carnage of that scene my heart sank. I instantly thought of the C. M. Russel painting “Waiting for a Chinook”. There were no wolves in my real life experience. The cruel harshness of winter 1997 more than took their place.