



THE ATMOSPHERIC RESERVOIR

Examining the Atmosphere and Atmospheric Resource Management

THE CHILDREN'S BLIZZARD OF 1888

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On January 12, 1888, one year before North Dakota's statehood and four years before the first tractor was invented, the Midwestern U.S. experienced a horrific blizzard that became known as the *Children's Blizzard* or *Schoolhouse Blizzard*. Unfortunately, its name originated from the many children that lost their lives, either caught outside in the wind, cold, and snow or huddled together in the one-room schoolhouses (some with their roofs blown off) that used to dot our landscape. It is estimated that 250-500 people lost their lives in this storm, many of these fatalities occurring afterwards from pneumonia and infections due to frostbite-caused amputations.

The conditions that preceded the blizzard were as much a factor in the loss of life as the storm itself. In December of 1887 and during the first week of January, cold, snowy conditions kept people cooped up inside. As a strong surface low pressure system developed over northeastern Colorado and Nebraska on January 11-12, a warm front advanced northward through the plains, giving the false impression of a milder weather pattern. People ventured outside to enjoy this warmer reprieve and many of them left their hats, mittens, and heavy coats at home. The approaching cold front from the northwestern side of this surface low moved southeastward at an impressive 45 miles per hour through southern Canada, northeastern Montana, and down through what was then "Dakota Territory." As this cold front advanced, it caught people off-guard and before many of them could take shelter, they froze in the near zero visibilities that the windswept snow created.

From a weather forecaster's perspective, the meteorological knowledge and tools that were available in 1888 were primitive in comparison to modern times where the development and evolution of storms can be foreseen days in advance. It was documented that at the time of the blizzard, a "cold wave" warning wasn't forecasted by the Army Signal Office in St. Paul for fear of "crying wolf." A "cold wave" warning was defined as the abnormal fall of temperature by at least 15 degrees Fahrenheit in a 24-hour period. A sudden drop in temperature was implied by this warning, because under normal definition, nighttime cooling of 15 degrees



Credit: Frank Leslie's Weekly, January 28, 1888 - Scenes and Incidents from the Recent Terrible Blizzard in Dakota

or greater could be considered a "cold wave." There were impacts in other parts of the US that made the *Children's Blizzard* an exceptional storm. According to the *MinnPost* publication, "Ice skating was reported in San Francisco on January 14, along with frozen water mains in Los Angeles. Fort Elliott, Texas registered a 7-below-zero temperature on the 14th, and for the first time in anyone's memory, parts of the Colorado River in Texas froze over."

Try to imagine living in the late 1800s when North Dakotans were without electricity, indoor plumbing, telephones, and motorized transportation. Telegraphs were the only means of speedy, long-distance communication, but these were only of value to people living in cities or larger communities. Two months after the *Children's Blizzard*, the *Great Blizzard* of 1888 moved across the eastern coast of the U.S. and caused over 400 deaths. What was quite apparent in 1888 and still relevant today is that the weather can change quite rapidly and we should always be prepared for the unexpected.