

Atlas

Stephanie Anderson

The term “Indian summer” first appears in print in 1782, in *Letters From An American Farmer* by J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur. He noted that winter in America is “often preceded by a short interval of smoke and mildness, called the Indian Summer. This is in general the invariable rule: winter is not said properly to begin until these few moderate days. . . .”

On October 3, 2013, a Thursday, temperatures in western South Dakota reached the 80s. Some tasks area ranchers were completing, as described in news stories: planting winter wheat, hauling hay from the fields, and moving cattle to fresh pastures.

Imagine the largest number of dead animals you’ve seen at one time.

The *Old Farmer’s Almanac* (1985) offers a stricter interpretation of an Indian summer: Daytime temperatures must be warm, the atmosphere hazy or smoky, the air still, the barometer high, and the nights clear and chilly. The occurrence must follow cold weather or a hard frost, and happen between November 11 and 20.

Now imagine those animals as cattle, sheep, and horses. Imagine them drowned and muddy, their bodies piled in a creek bed.

Whether western South Dakota experienced a true Indian summer or not that first weekend of October doesn’t matter. What’s important to remember is that the weather was unseasonably, deceptively warm, ranchers still had their livestock on summer ranges, and the animals hadn’t grown their winter coats.

Now imagine fifty thousand of them.

Descriptions of that week’s weather forecasts vary. Some people claim local meteorologists predicted three to six inches of snow for the coming weekend; others heard four to six, and still others expected six to twelve. One rancher told a reporter that a weatherman forecasted “a change in temperature.” No meteorologist predicted two to five feet of snow, preceded by freezing rain and accompanied by sub-zero temperatures and seventy-mile-per-hour winds.

First-time visitors to western South Dakota often marvel at how “empty” the prairie is. Farmsteads can be dozens of miles apart, towns much farther. Few trees defy the dry climate. There isn’t much to shelter behind, little to stop a human or animal from wandering unimpeded in a blizzard until succumbing to hypothermia.

No one thought it necessary to bring livestock closer to home and feed that week, although in the end it wouldn't have mattered anyway.

Then a somewhat newly established Floridian, I was camping in the Florida Keys the first weekend of October 2013. Temperatures were also in the 80s.

In the short story "Wickedness," Ron Hansen provides a fictional but historically accurate account of the Schoolhouse Blizzard, which blasted Nebraska and what was then the Dakota Territory in January 1888, killing thousands of livestock and wild animals and hundreds of people. As Hansen writes, "Everything about the blizzard seemed to have personality and hateful intention."

On Thursday, hours of rain soaked and weakened the cattle, sheep, and horses, all reluctant to graze in such weather. Early Friday morning the storm's cold core slid over the plains, and ice hardened on their bodies. The rain turned to snow, which did not stop falling until late Saturday.

The Schoolhouse Blizzard is so named because 213 of the 235 people killed were children. Fooled by that morning's Indian summer weather, parents sent their kids to the country schools dotted across the prairie. Some walked, others rode several miles on horseback. When snow began to fall and temperatures plunged, teachers dismissed the students, who became lost when the wind whipped the snow into a blizzard. To drench the livestock for half a day, then freeze them, then snow on them for two days, when they didn't have winter coats? I call that hateful intention.

People sometimes refer to the storm as the Cattlemen's Blizzard. My family just calls it "the October blizzard." Watch carefully when they say the words and you'll see a flash of feeling: fear, nausea, anger, and grief, a physical reaction to a memory they wish they could forget.

Encased in ice, blinded by snow, hungry, and pushed by sustained winds of fifty miles per hour, with gusts of seventy and higher, livestock drifted into the storm and quickly died of hypothermia. In an interview with *American Cowboy*, rancher Jeff Grill of Edgemont, S.D., described the "trail of death" that resulted: "We kept finding piles of dead cows—some that piled up in fence lines and some that drowned in the wet rain and snow. Many mothers and babies were found lying dead together. I found long lines of cows that must have finally succumbed to the elements as they tried to move away from the storm."

The children who died in the Schoolhouse Blizzard suffered much the same fate, but without their mothers.

Heavy with ice, power lines tipped like dominoes. My parents couldn't heat the house, or cook, or call anyone (the generator was hooked up, but the snow buried it, rendering it useless). Because the blizzard

barely made national news—no one cares what happens on the plains—I, like the rest of America, had no knowledge of it as I swam in the bathwater ocean of the Keys.

“Everything she knew was no longer there,” Hansen’s narrator says about six-year-old Emily Flint as she leaves her country schoolhouse and heads into the blizzard on horseback with a local boy. “She was in a book without descriptions. She could put her hand out and her hand would disappear.”

With roads and vehicles buried, drifts six feet high and blocking front doors, and the outside world an impenetrable wall of snow, ranchers could not reach their livestock. And even if they could have, I’m not sure what they would have done. Even animals in corrals with bellies full of hay perished.

The National Weather Service is a federal agency. On October 1, 2013, three days before the storm, the federal government shut down over budget disagreements, meaning NWS employees were away on unpaid leave that week. Perhaps this partly accounts for the inaccurate forecasts.

Livestock that didn’t die of hypothermia while walking found shelter behind cutbanks and windbreaks, against trees and fences, in barnyards and draws. Too feeble to move, the snow buried many thousands of them alive.

Imagine the helplessness those men and women felt, huddled under blankets in their cold homes, or peering out the whitened windows. Imagine their sorrow, their rage, their guilt.

A common occurrence: when herds stopped at a creek, the cows in the back crowded the leaders into the water, probably slowly, probably one hoof at a time. They churned the ground beneath them into mud, sinking to their knees, then their bellies, then their chests. Herd mates climbed on top of them, drowning them in a muddy grave. Meanwhile the snow drifted higher, suffocating the cows at the top.

Reports disagree as to how many livestock died. In a personal email to me, South Dakota State Veterinarian Dustin Oedekoven says that’s because the storm covered such a large area (all of western South Dakota and parts of northern Nebraska and western Wyoming), ranchers were not required to report losses, and carcass disposal methods varied. He wrote that “there are no official numbers, but our best estimate is that over fifty thousand cattle, horses, sheep, and goats perished in the storm.”

For a storm to kill so horrifically and thoroughly? I suppose that is personality, though it can only

be the devil's.

Some examples: the Reinhold family, who raise quarter horses twenty miles north of Rapid City, lost 91 of 231 horses. A rancher near Edgemont lost 150 of 400 heifers. Richard Papousek of Quinn, S.D., lost thirty-seven percent of his herd, or 230 cattle.

"It was a family effort to ride and check on everything," Scenic, S.D., rancher Heather Hamilton-Maude wrote in a first-person article for *Beef Magazine*. "We held each other up when we found half of our missing yearling heifers in a creek bed, buried in snow, and we forced ourselves to look beyond them to the white grave that we assumed held the rest of our count."

Many ranchers in western South Dakota lost half to two-thirds of their livestock.

"There is no describing what goes through your mind when you come upon a pile of partially exposed animals that froze, suffocated or died of hypothermia," Hamilton-Maude went on. "The challenge of mentally bracing yourself as you climb down off your horse and wade through deep snow to resolutely dig until you expose an ear tag is difficult. So is the sickness deep inside you as you wait to discover if the animal is one of yours. Never mind the gut-wrenching, almost physical pain when you discover it is your own."

The power line damage was so widespread that some ranches did not have power for more than two weeks. I considered flying to South Dakota to be with my parents the week after the storm. But as the horror unfolded, I decided no, I couldn't bear it.

Warm weather followed the storm and melted much of the snow. Then came rain. Dead animals floated in creeks and ditches. Livestock that hadn't been accounted for seemed to sprout from the prairie like large gruesome mushrooms.

The government remained shut down until October 16. Federal emergency funds and material aid went undispersed for more than ten days, even longer for most programs. Legislators didn't pass a Farm Bill with an aid package until February 2014.

I find the aerial photos of creek beds clogged with dead cattle most sickening.

State and county workers dragged dead livestock from highways, bridges, underpasses, ditches, even the lanes of Interstate 90, and buried them in pits. Ranchers did the same, or burned them, to prevent disease. Hugh Ingalls, a rancher near Faith, S.D., found most of the 189 cattle he lost near the pasture gate. As he told *Progressive Cattlemen*, "They were waiting for me." The reporter notes that Ingalls said this "softly."

Imagine the psychological toll of witnessing death on such a scale. Of facing bankruptcy, of potentially losing family land and livestock bloodlines generations in the making. Of living in rural South Dakota, where ranchers do not cry and seeing a counselor is a sign of weakness, particularly for men.

My parents heard of people secreting to carcasses along highways during the night, carving away meat. I could not verify those stories. But I can tell you western South Dakota hides many hungry people in its picturesque prairie hills.

The Weather Channel later named the storm Atlas, after the Greek titan who battled Zeus and lost. Zeus condemned Atlas to stand on the western side of the earth and hold the sky on his shoulders, forever.

When stories and photos finally appeared in the national news, many urban readers accused ranchers of neglect, demanding to know why they did not bring the cattle indoors. As if ranchers have barns that can accommodate large herds, as if they could have forced the animals to grow winter coats, as if they should have somehow known what no meteorologist foresaw. As if ranchers are heartless, their animals nothing more than money-making machines.

"It's one of those things when if you come over the hill and you see dead cows dotted over the prairie, your first thought is it's your responsibility to take care of those livestock," rancher Gary Cammack of Union Center, S.D., told *South Dakota Magazine*. "I don't think there's one person whose first thought was about their equity. Their first thought was that they'd failed their stewardship responsibility to those animals."

The popular image of Atlas propping the globe on his shoulders, then, is inaccurate. I try to picture him holding the sky instead, but I find it difficult. How can a person, even a mythical one, shoulder something so immense?

But, some miracles. Shawn Freeland of Caputa, S.D., for example, found a neighbor's beloved cow nine days after the storm, buried in a snow bank but still alive. Ranchers began receiving presents from strangers—cards made by school children, food, cash, even live cattle to replenish their herds. *The Rapid City Journal* called the response "a campaign of generosity never before seen in South Dakota."

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