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Forum

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Snow and Cold

...back in the good old days

By Harold Ratzburg

When I read the news from years back in the Marion Advertiser, being an Old Geezer, I always start remembering how things were back in the good old days. Kay Reminger's article about the "Joys of Winter Weather in the January 15, 2009 paper also stirred up a coupla flashbacks. And like most Old Geezers, it always seems that my memory of the way things were back then means that we think that we had it a little tougher than kids and grownups of today.

Take for instance snow and winter survival. I read where Wisconsin is having record snowfall this year. The weather stations on TV keep us pretty well up to date, so I always keep an eye on the weather in the old home town.

It does seem that when I was a kid-----and we had to walk 4 miles to and from school in the blizzards, up hill, both ways----(well, maybe it was only 1 3/4 miles, and we did get a ride to school cause each morning Dad had to haul our milk to the cheese factory which was just kitty corner across the road from Maple Valley Grade School) And truthfully, if it was too cold, Dad would come top pick us after school or somebody else was there to help out.

But on some days we had to hoof it all the way home between the snowbanks. One year I

remember the banks that had been plowed up beside the road where really heavy drifting occurred, were so high that walking on the top of the banks, like any red blooded kid would do, we could reach up and touch the telephone wires along side the road. I am wondering if Wisconsin still gets snow like that? Part of it was also the snow plowing equipment the Country had. I remember the big plows, which I believe were called "wing plows", that had a special blade that could pile the drifted snow really high beside the road. I wonder too, if the counties in Wisconsin still have the big "V" snow plows, that were needed to open the roads after a real heavy storm and drifting. Most plows I see today in New Jersey are the simple single blade that can be angled to one side or the other.

Childhood memories also include one winter when we had an ice storm on top of about 10 inches of snow. The crust was so thick that you could walk on top without breaking through. It was heaven for a kid with his Flexible Flyer sled. (Hey, did you know that you can always tell an antique collectible Flexible Flyer by the way the runners at the rear do not curve up and back into the sled so that there is no way that you can spear yourself in the leg when running with the sled to make a "belly flopper" start down the hill? Those old sled's runners came straight back almost to a point. Us "collectors" know all that stuff.) Anyway, getting back to the ice sledding, we had a hill that gave us a run of about two or three hundred yards---on ice--- so it was a real kick. Our only problem was that the run went from the cow pasture down to an open field at the bottom of the hill and there was a barbed wire fence to separate the two. Us kids tied the bottom strand of barbed wire to the top one between two posts so that there was clearance enough for us on our Flexible Flyers, but we had to be careful to slide through the fence where the wire was tied up the highest. That got a little dicey on glare ice, but I am happy to say that we managed to hit the right spot every time and never tore ourselves up on the wire. We had one heck of a week of sledding before a melt came and ruined it for us.

I don't believe that there are too many old Geezers around anymore that can remember the old farm house refrigeration systems. Those systems

centered around the farm "ice house", which was a wooden frame building, (on our farm I remember it as being about fifteen by twenty feet) filled to about four or five feet with sawdust, in which ice was buried in the winter to keep it from melting in the summer. In the warm weather, the ice was dug out of the sawdust a block at a time and carried into the cellar in the house where there was a home made ice box, made by my Grandpa. It consisted of a heavy wooden frame and sides, lined with tin of some kind. That's where we used to keep the milk and other food from spoiling.

On special occasions when company dropped in, a block of ice was dug out of the sawdust and chipped up, and put around the old hand cranked ice cream maker to make good old home made ice cream. That was always a real treat for us kids.

Now, how do you suppose that the ice came to be buried in the sawdust in the first place? There were no ice delivery trucks around. No Sir Ree. That there ice came from Kinney Lake, about three miles up the road from our farm, where the big campground is located now. The way it worked was that people got together to help each other, so at some appointed time, they would show up at Kinney Lake with their horse drawn sleds and ice cutting tools, and cut the ice blocks out of the lake and haul it home on their horse drawn sleds. This could be done because back then, it was an accepted fact that the roadways would not always be clean down to the pavement or gravel surface. There was a frozen layer of packed snow over the whole roadway which made sledding possible. Come a thaw, that kinda killed the surface for the sleds, so ice for the iceboxes had to be harvested in the coldest part of the winter.

The ride to and from the lake was a long one behind a team of horses. Dad did not get our first Ford-Ferguson, kinda high speed, rubber tired tractor until 1942. The old Fordson tractor with the big iron cleats on the wheels that we had before just was not suitable for a slow haul of three miles, and those iron cleats were not welcome on the roadways either. It's weight on the ice of Kinney Lake could have caused a problem also. Come to think of it, hand cranking that old Fordson to start in that cold was almost, if not totally, impossible. It was difficult enough in

warm weather. On the really cold winter nights, the old Model A Ford family car was kept in the cow barn so that it was warm enough to start in the morning.

Working with a team of horses made one daily job a lot harder. That job was to clean the cow barn. Those damn cows produced plenty of fecal matter (also known as cow sh---oops, I mean manure) in the gutters every day so it had to be shoveled out twice a day. Motorized barn cleaners were unknown back then. To make it more difficult in the winter, with lots of snow, it was sometimes not possible to haul the manure away in the wheeled spreader and spread it directly on the field because the snow was too deep, but it was possible to haul it out to the field with the horse drawn sled and put it on a pile there until spring came along. Bottom line, it meant that that good old fecal matter had to be shoveled three times as much, first to get it out from behind the cows, then unloaded by hand from the sled, and then shoveled by hand AGAIN to put it in the manure spreader to fling it out on the fields. Hopefully, when you were finally spreading the stuff, if you could manage to drive INTO the wind, it made the job a lot more pleasant and cleaner for the driver. Those old spreaders were quite good at spreading the stuff up high and around, and a good stiff wind could really carry it forward.

Enough of the memories of an old Geezer. I hope you have enjoyed my rambling old stories.

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