Death on the Prairies: The Murderous Blizzard of 1888

DAVID LASKIN

With the Indians out of the way, Americans were free at last to conquer the vast Great Plains that reached from Texas to the Canadian border in the center of the country. Westering farmers had stopped at the edge of this enormous grassland because its arid climate and shallow topsoil seemed unsuited to agricultural techniques devised in the East. But after the Civil War came the development of new farming techniques and new machinery such as the windmill, the chilled-iron plow, and the combine—all of which made agriculture feasible on the windy prairies. As a consequence, farmers from east of the Mississippi swarmed there during the postwar years, some claiming 160 acres free under the 1862 Homestead Act, most buying their land from speculators or the railroads. In the 1880s alone, more than one million people poured onto the Great Plains from the Great Lakes states. Meanwhile, after the failure of Reconstruction, African Americans headed west as well; they were sodbusters, cowboys, speculators, miners, lawmen, desperadoes, and cavalrymen. Asian and Mexican Americans were present, too, all contributing to the drama of frontier conquest. The pioneers lived in all manner of homes—from dugouts to sod houses—battling tornadoes, hail, dust storms, blizzards, prairie fires, and grasshopper plagues in an endless struggle to make new lives for themselves on the nation’s last frontier.

The westering experience tended to break down traditional male and female “spheres,” which stripped women of all political and legal rights and restricted them to the home while their husbands had jobs and careers in the outside world and ran political affairs. As modern scholarship has demonstrated, frontier women were not chained to the home but were close to equal partners with their menfolk: in addition to their household chores, the women helped their husbands hunt, gather water and fuel, and plant and harvest.

As David Laskin points out in the following selection, male and female migrants to the Dakota and Nebraska frontier were shocked by its violent shifts in weather. Who back East or down South could have conceived of a land where the temperature could fall eighteen degrees in just three minutes? Who would have guessed that farmers and school children could start their days in shirtsleeves, without heavy overcoats, only to experience wind chills that night that were forty degrees below zero?

On January 12, 1888, the most murderous blizzard of that region suddenly struck the Dakota and Nebraska prairie. As Laskin says, “One moment it was mild, the sun was shining, a damp wind blew fitfully out of the south—the next moment frozen hell had broken loose.” The ferocity of the storm killed hundreds of children making their way home after school. Thus it was called “the children’s blizzard.” Neither the children who survived the storm nor their parents would ever forget that terrible day.

Laskin’s vivid description of the blizzard of 1888 will haunt you long after you have read his account. In Laskin’s view, the storm was a tragic example of a dream gone wrong for pioneers who had migrated west in search of a prosperous new life. They learned that “the sudden storms, the violent swings from one meteorological extreme to another, the droughts and torrents and killer blizzards were not freak occurrences but facts of life on the prairie.” For countless pioneer families, the promise of the Homestead Act proved to be a cruel joke. The storm that killed their children demonstrated “that the land they had desired so fervently and had traveled so far to claim wasn’t free after all.”
GLOSSARY

CARNegie, Andrew A Scottish immigrant and a self-made man, Carnegie founded the Carnegie Steel Company. In 1900, it became the largest industrial corporation in the world (see selection 5). In 1878, Carnegie won the steel contract to build the Brooklyn Bridge (see selection 6).

DEPRESSION OF 1893 The greatest economic depression the United States had yet experienced, the depression (or "panic") of 1893 was a product of agricultural and industrial expansion that had produced a surplus of goods. Railroad companies had built too many miles of track, and farmers had borrowed too heavily, forcing many to lose their land as crop prices fell.

EDISON, Thomas Alva From his modern research laboratory in Menlo Park, New Jersey, Edison promised "a minor invention every ten days and a big thing every six months or so." Known as the "Wizard of Menlo Park," a man with little formal education, Edison produced two "big things": the phonograph in 1877 and the electric light, a product of experiments with carbon filaments, in 1879.

GALVESTON HURRICANE This storm of September 8, 1900, was the deadliest hurricane in American history thus far. It devastated this southeastern Texas city, killing over ten thousand people. Galveston was left in ruins with $30 million damage ($700 million in today's dollars).

GARLAND, Hamlin A product of rural Iowa, Garland wrote novels such as Son of the Middle Border (1890) that described the bleak lives of settlers on the Great Plains.

HOMESTEAD ACT (1862) Legislation that provided 160 acres of government land on the rugged prairie frontier to anyone who promised to live and work on it for five years.

The only requirement was a ten dollar registration fee. Between 1862 and 1900, almost six hundred thousand families received free homesteads on forty-eight million acres of land.

HYPOTHERMIA A medical condition that occurs when a person's body temperature drops significantly below normal. Hypothermia starts when the core body temperature falls below 35 degrees Celsius (95 degrees Fahrenheit).

JOHNTOWN FLOOD On May 31, 1889, heavy rains forced the old South Fork Dam in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, to break, resulting in a deadly flood that killed over 2,209 people in that working-class city.

MORGAN, J. Pierpont In the Gilded Age, Morgan was the most powerful and influential figure in the world of American finance. He established the first billion-dollar company, the United States Steel Corporation.

POWELL, John Wesley An explorer and geologist, Powell was a professor at Illinois Wesleyan University and director of the United States Geological Survey.

ROCKEFELLER, John D. A Cleveland merchant, Rockefeller used ruthless and often illegal methods to build the Standard Oil Company that, by 1879, produced 90 percent of America's oil refining needs (see selection 8).

SCRIBNER, Charles A New York publisher, Scribner started Scribner's Monthly in 1870. Eleven years later, he changed its name to the Century Magazine.

VANDERBILT, Cornelius Nicknamed the "Commodore," Vanderbilt earned millions in the shipping business. Later in life, he built the New York Central Railroad that controlled over 4,500 miles of track from New York City to Chicago.

On January 12, 1888, a blizzard broke over the center of the North American continent. Out of nowhere, a soot gray cloud appeared over the northwest horizon. The air grew still for a long, eerie measure, then the sky began to roar and a wall of ice dust blasted the prairie. Every crevice, every gap and orifice instantly filled with shattered crystals, blinding, smothering, suffocating, burying anything exposed to the wind. The cold front raced down the undefended grasslands like a crack unstoppable army. Montana fell before dawn: North Dakota went while farmers were out doing their early morning chores; South Dakota, during morning recess; Nebraska as school clocks rounded toward dismissal. In three minutes the front subtracted 18 degrees* from the air's temperature. Then evening gathered in and temperatures kept dropping steadily.

*All temperatures are Fahrenheit unless otherwise indicated.

hour after hour, in the northwest gale. Before midnight, windchills were down to 40 below zero. That's when the killing happened. By morning on Friday the thirteenth, hundreds of people lay dead on the Dakota and Nebraska prairie, many of them children who had fled—or been dismissed from—country schools at the moment when the wind shifted and the sky exploded.

Chance is always a silent partner in disaster. Bad luck, bad timing, the wrong choice at a crucial moment, and the door is inexorably shut and barred. The tragedy of the January 12 blizzard was that the bad timing extended across a region and cut through the shared experiences of an entire population. The storm hit the most thickly settled sections of Nebraska and Dakota Territory at the worst possible moment—late in the morning or early in the afternoon on the first mild day in several weeks, a day when children had raced to school with no coats or gloves and farmers were far from home doing chores they had put off during the long siege of cold. But the deadly quirks of chance went deeper and farther than circumstance or time of day. It was the deep current of history that left the prairie peculiarly vulnerable to the storm.

For nearly all of the nation's short life span, the grasslands at the heart of the country had been ignored, overlooked, skirted, or raced over. On maps the words Great American Desert hovered vaguely between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains, and the rest was left blank or faintly labeled Indian Territory. But then, after the Civil War, when the swelling cities of the East Coast settled down to the serious business of industrial capitalism, the Great American Desert was reborn and rechristened. Suddenly this immense expanse of open land was not waste, but paradise—and like paradise, it was free, or all but free. Railroad companies flush with millions of acres of government land grants promised new settlers the sky and sold them the earth at irresistible prices. Under the Homestead Act, the U.S. government gave every comer 160 acres free and clear in exchange for the investment of a small filing fee and five years of farming. The dream of free land let loose a stampede. In the three decades after 1870, some 325 million acres of the continent's heartland were broken, stripped of sod, and planted with crops—more land than had been "improved" in the preceding 263 years of white settlement in the United States. On the last frontier was enacted the greatest human migration the earth had yet endured.

It was late in the day to be an American pioneer. While Thomas Edison was making the first moving pictures in New Jersey, while electric lights shone from Chicago skyscrapers raised on steel skeletons, while Vanderbilts, Carnegies, Morgans, and Rockefellers were adorning their neo-Gothic and Renaissance palaces with the treasures of Europe, homesteaders in Dakota warmed themselves in sod huts at fires of buffalo bones. It wasn't that the sodbusters didn't know that elegant Pullman sleeping cars skidded over the train tracks at the edges of their wheat fields or that the future price of that wheat depended on tycoons in New York and the number of mouths to feed in Russia. Whether they had come from Europe in the reeking steerage of immigrant ships or boarded converted cattle cars in Chicago, Saint Paul, or New York, they had witnessed with their own eyes the newborn marvels of the industrial world. Someday, they believed, these marvels would be theirs. If they worked hard enough, if their children worked hard enough, the land in time would provide.

And so the settlers of the prairie banked on the future and put their trust in land they loved but didn't really understand. They got down to work so quickly they didn't have time to figure out the vagaries of soil and climate, the cycles of the seasons, the fickle violent moods of the sky. Deprived of both the folk wisdom born of deep familiarity with a single place and the brash abstractions of the new science, the pioneers were vulnerable and exposed. There hadn't been time to put up fences. Children waded into tall grass and vanished. Infants were accidentally dropped in snowdrifts. Infections flourished in the primitive, unsanitary claim shanties.

Coded messages hummed through the telegraph wires strung alongside the train tracks, but settlers' farms were too far from the offices where the messages were received and decoded to do them any good. When the cloud descended from the northwest,
and filled the air with snow, they had no warning. Unaware of the risk, they wandered out in pursuit of a single precious cow and lost their way between sod hut and barn. Their fuel gave out, their roofs blew off, their animals suffocated. Their children froze to death in the furrows of their fields.

“All around no-one knew of any-one else’s predicament,” wrote a Dakota pioneer after the storm, “so each acted as he or she thought fit and people survived or died according to their temperament. You can’t preach about it. If a young fellow had every penny of his cash tied up in an uninsured herd of cattle... what would most of us have done? No-one knew THEN that this was the day which was to be remembered when all the days of 70 years would be forgotten.”

One of the many tragedies of that day was the failure of the weather forecasters, a failure compounded of faulty science, primitive technology, human error, narrow-mindedness, and sheer ignorance. America in 1888 had the benefit of an established, well-funded, nationwide weather service attached to the Army and headed by a charismatic general—yet the top priority on any given day was not weather, but political infighting. Forecasters—“indications officers,” as they were styled then—insisted their forecasts were correct 83.7 percent of the time for the next twenty-four hours, but they were forbidden to use the word tornado in any prediction; they believed that America’s major coastal cities were immune to hurricanes; they relied more on geometry and cartography than on physics in tracking storms; they lacked the means and, for the most part, the desire to pursue meteorological research. “[T]he promise of a science of profound interest to the scholar and of vast usefulness to the people is being rapidly realized,” wrote explorer and geologist Major John Wesley Powell of meteorology in 1891. “While the science has not yet reached that stage when directions can be successfully given at what hour it is wise to carry an umbrella on a showery day, it has reached that stage when the great storms and waves of intense heat or intense cold can be predicted for all the land in advance of their coming so as to be of great value to all industries of the land. All the discomforts of the weather cannot be avoided, but the great disasters can be anticipated and obviated.” Mighty rhetoric—and many believed it. But in truth, when it came to weather prediction, government forecasters in the last decades of the nineteenth century were still relying more on empirical observations and even proverbs of the “red sky at night, sailor’s delight” school than on a sound scientific understanding of the atmosphere. Many of the “great storms and waves of intense heat or intense cold” escaped them altogether—or were mentioned in their daily “indications” too late, too vaguely, too timidly to do anyone any good. When it came to “great disasters,” they knew far less than they thought they knew.

It was the age of confidence. Arrogance was epidemic.

The officer in charge of the experimental indications office that had been established in Saint Paul for the express purpose of predicting blizzards and outbreaks of extreme cold on the prairie did not entirely miss the January 12 storm. He knew before midnight on January 11 that it would snow in Dakota Territory and Nebraska the following afternoon and get colder that night. His indications “verified.” But they helped few, if any, people in the region escape or protect themselves. Warnings were not posted in time. No one reading the indications for that day would have guessed that an historic storm was bearing down on them. Those in positions of authority neither recognized nor cared about the forecasting failure. To the extent that knuckles got rapped as a result of the storm, it had to do with sleet-covered sugar plantations in the Deep South, not frozen children on the prairie.

It was the Gilded Age. Disaster meant financial ruin.

Even in a region known for abrupt and radical meteorological change, the blizzard of 1888 was unprecedented in its violence and suddenness. There was no atmospheric herald. No eerie green tinge to the sky or fleeting cirrus forewarning. One moment...
The settlers on the prairie were not prepared for the dramatic changes in weather conditions they faced in this new land. On January 12, 1888, a low-pressure system swept a frigid arctic air mass down from Canada. "The cold front raced down the undefended prairies like a rack uncontrollable army; Montana fell before dawn; North Dakota went while farmers were out doing their early morning chores; South Dakota, during morning recess; Nebraska as school clocks rounded toward dismissal. In three minutes the front subtracted 18 degrees from the air's temperature."
wild, the sun was shining, a damp wind blew fitfully out of the south—the next moment frozen hell had broken loose. The air was so thick with fine-ground wind-lashed ice crystals that people could not breathe. The ice dust webbed their eyelashes and sealed their eyes shut. It sifted into the loose weave of their coats, shirts, dresses, and underwear until their skin was packed in snow. Farmers who had spent a decade walking the same worn paths became disoriented in seconds.

The pioneers of the prairie, even those who had lived there only a few seasons, were accustomed to seeing hail rip open the bases of enormous black clouds and winds of summer fire stream out of the west. They had crouched by their stoves for dark days and nights while winter gales blew without ceasing. They had watched houses get sucked in whirling fragments up the bases of funnel clouds. But nobody had any idea that the atmosphere was capable of a storm like this.

The blizzard of January 12, 1888, known as “the Schoolchildren’s Blizzard” because so many of the victims were children caught out on their way home from school, became a marker in the lives of the settlers, the watershed event that separated before and after. The number of deaths—estimated at between 250 and 500—was small compared to that of the Johnstown Flood that wiped out an entire industrial town in western Pennsylvania the following year or the Galveston hurricane of 1900 that left more than eight thousand dead. But it was traumatic enough that it left an indelible bruise on the consciousness of the region. The pioneers were by and large a taciturn lot, reserved and sober Germans and Scandinavians who rarely put their thoughts or feelings down on paper, and when they did avoided hyperbole at all costs. Yet their accounts of the blizzard of 1888 are shot through with amazement, awe, disbelief. There are thousands of these eyewitness accounts of the storm. Even those who never wrote another word about themselves put down on paper everything they could remember about the great blizzard of 1888. Indeed, it was the storm that has preserved these lives from oblivion. The blizzard literally froze a single day in time. It sent a clean, fine blade through the history of the prairie. It forced people to stop and look at their existences—the earth and sky they had staked their future on, the climate and environment they had brought their children to, the peculiar forces of nature and of nature’s God that determined whether they would live or die. . . .

“Everything changes; nothing does,” the poet James Merril wrote in a poem called “After the Fire.” The effects of disaster, no matter how extreme, do not last forever. We bury our dead, nurse the wounded, rebuild, and get on with our lives. Today, aside from a few fine marble headstones in country graveyards and the occasional roadside historical marker, not a trace of the blizzard of 1888 remains on the prairie. Yet in the imagination and identity of the region, the storm is as sharply etched as ever: This is a place where blizzards kill children on their way home from school. To understand why and how the deadliest Midwestern blizzard happened the way it did is to understand something essential about the history of the American prairie—indeed about the history of America itself.

We’ll never know how many spent that night out on the prairie. It had to be at least several thousand, most of them in the southern and eastern parts of Dakota Territory, in the eastern half of Nebraska, and in southwestern Minnesota. Northern Dakota was largely spared because the storm blew through so early that people remained home and kept their children in. Iowa, though it received the heaviest snow, also suffered relatively few casualties. The storm didn’t hit there until late in the day, when evening was gathering and farmers and their children were back home. But in southern Dakota and Nebraska the timing could not have been worse. . . .

The catalog of their suffering is terrible. They froze alone or with their parents or perished in frantic, hopeless pursuit of loved ones. They died with the frozen bloody skin torn from their faces, where they had clawed off the mask of ice again and again. Some died within hours of getting lost; some lived
through the night and died before first light. They were found standing waist deep in drifts with their hands frozen to barbed-wire fences, clutching at straw pikes, buried under overturned wagons, on their backs, facedown on the snow with their arms outstretched as if trying to crawl. Mothers died sitting up with their children around them in fireless houses when the hay or coal or bits of furniture were exhausted and they were too weak or too frightened to go on for more.

A young Dutch couple in Minnesota died kneeling side by side with their hands held high above their heads.

A nine-year-old Nebraska boy named Roman Hytrek was walking the prairie with his dog when the storm overtook them. That evening the dog turned up scratching at the door of a neighbor’s house. Roman’s empty coat was found in March. Eventually a search party recovered the boy’s body. Roman had died alone leaning against the side of a hill. They speculated that he had unbuttoned his coat so that he could cradle his dog next to him in it and that the wind ripped it from his shoulders.

William Klemp, a newly married Dakotan in the full vigor of young manhood, left his pregnant wife at home and went out in the storm to care for their livestock. He never returned. A few weeks later, Klemp’s wife gave birth to a son. It was spring when they found his body in a sod shanty a mile from the house. Klemp’s face had been eaten away by mice and gophers.

In the region that would soon become the state of South Dakota there were deaths in thirty-two of the forty-four counties east of the Missouri River. Every pioneer who wrote a memoir, every family that recorded its history included a story of someone who died in the blizzard. Every story is heartbreaking.

Lois Royce, a young teacher of a Nebraska country school, huddled on the open prairie all night with three of her pupils—two nine-year-old boys and a six-year-old girl. The children cried themselves to sleep. Lois stretched out on the ground, lying on her side with her back to the wind and the children cradled in the hollow of her body. She covered their sleeping bodies with her cloak. The boys died first. Lois felt one of the bodies cease to breathe and go cold. Then, a few hours later, the other. The boys went in silence. The little girl, Hattie Rosberg, had begged her teacher through the night for more covers to keep her warm. She died at daybreak deliriously crying, “I’m so cold, mama, please cover me up.” When the air had cleared enough to see, Lois left the three dead children lying together and crawled on her hands and knees a quarter of a mile to the nearest farmhouse.

In Dakota’s Beadle County... Robert Chambers, a farmer in his early thirties, was outside watering cattle with his two sons and their Newfoundland dog when the weather turned. The older boy, who was eleven, suffered from rheumatism, so Chambers sent him home before the storm got bad. He thought that he and nine-year-old Johnny could drive the cattle to the barn themselves. The dog would know the way. But... father and son were overtaken and bewildered. When Chambers realized there was no hope of finding their farmhouse, he burrowed into a drift, wrapped Johnny in his jacket and vest (neither of them had come out with overcoats), and told the boy to get into the hollow out of the wind. Robert Chambers stood in the storm shouting for help as long as his voice held. The dog barked frantically. But no one heard them over the wind.

By evening Chambers was too cold to do anything but lie down in the snow next to his son. He put the dog beside them for extra warmth. Johnny could feel how frigid his father’s body was. He urged his father to get up and to look for the line of the trees they had planted by the house. But Chambers would not leave his son.

As the night wore on, father and son talked about death. Chambers assured Johnny that they would survive and repeated over and over that the boy must lie still. Johnny knew that his father was freezing to death. At some point the boy dozed off. When he woke, his father was still alive, but barely. Chambers told his son to pray and that he would now with him...
At daylight a rescue party heard the Newfoundland barking and found them. The snow had drifted so deeply that Johnny was entirely buried but for a small opening by his mouth. The dog was standing guard. Robert Chambers was dead.

The Westphalen girls, Eda and Matilda, also died in the night. Though born five years apart, the daughters of German immigrants, the girls had grown close to each other in the tragedies that had befallen their family during the past few years. Diphtheria struck the Westphalens in the winter of 1883. Two days before Christmas, six-year-old Frederick died. Six weeks later, their father, Peter, deranged by grief, hanged himself. Since then their mother had managed alone with six children. The winter of the blizzard, Eda was thirteen, Matilda, eight. The storm hit when the girls were at their country school in a hilly section of eastern Nebraska near the railroad town of Scribner (named by an Eastern railroad official for his son-in-law, New York publisher Charles Scribner). The teacher, Nellie Forsythe, told the children to go home. Eda and Matilda left together. The schoolhouse was halfway up the side of a smooth rounded hill; their house was a mile due north at the bottom of a valley cut by a creek. Usually it was an easy walk downhill across the fields. But in the storm the girls had the wind in their faces. No matter how they struggled against it, the northwest wind pushed them east into a series of ravines. For a while they wandered in circles. Then they drifted east and south with the wind. Only when they came to a wire fence did Eda realize they had gone in the wrong direction. They needed to turn around—but turning meant walking into the wind. Matilda failed, and Eda took off her wraps and covered her younger sister.

Most victims of hypothermia curl up on their sides and die in a fetal position. Eda and Matilda died face-down. Very likely they dropped while fighting to walk into the wind. Once they fell, they must have lost consciousness very quickly. They lay on the snow a few feet apart on the side of a hill. The windward side. All night the wind blew snow over their bodies, covering them and leaving them bare again.

In the course of the night, the haystack in which Etta Shattuck had taken refuge became her prison. The hay had become so compacted and heavy with drifting snow that it pinned Etta in the small hollow she had dug for herself. As the temperature plunged, the fibers tightened. Etta’s torso stayed fairly warm, but the cave was so shallow that she was unable to shelter her legs or feet. Exposed to the cold, her legs turned to blocks of wood. She was powerless to escape.

Etta drifted in and out of consciousness, but she never fell into a deep sleep. She felt mice rustling through the stack and nibbling at her wrists and somehow that comforted her. It seemed miraculous that something else was alive in the storm. When she was most alert, Etta prayed. She moved her lips and tried to summon the voice to sing hymns. She ran the words through her mind, but the sound that came from her mouth was hardly more than labored breathing. She was glad as never before that she had found God. God had brought her to the haystack; she was sure of it. God would guide the steps of a rescuer. Etta had faith. She knew she would be saved.

At some point in the night the wind died down enough for her to hear coyotes howling. That keening yelp. Or maybe it was still the wind. Etta’s eyes fluttered open and the air looked a little brighter. It must be morning. Whoever had forked the prairie grass into this stack would come. Etta tried her voice to see if she could cry out for help. She could move her mouth and neck and shoulders. But her body was caught in the vise of the frozen haystack and her legs were paralyzed. The hymns and prayers would keep her going until someone came and pulled her out.

If nothing else, as long as she could sing and pray, Etta could ward off deep sleep—the sleep from which she would never rouse herself. . . .

“I have seen the Dread of Dakota. A genuine blizzard and am now ready to leave anytime, that we can sell,” pioneer wife Sadie Shaw wrote to relatives back east from her Dakota homestead in Douglas County. “Oh, it was terrible. I have often read about Blizzards but they have to be seen to be fully realized.”
The Slaws did not sell. . . . There were many such threats and much misgiving after the blizzard of 1888, but few families left—at least not right away. The weather finally moderated. Summer came and the prairie turned hot and dry. Day after day the sun sucked the moisture out of the black soil of the prairie. Grieving families got on with their lives, prayed for rain, had more children.

The blizzard of January 12, 1888, did not put an end to the great white endeavor of settling and taming the prairie, but it did mark a turning point, a change of mood and direction. The Dakota boom had ended. Immigration to the prairie frontier slowed to a trickle in the last years of the 1880s. A time of rectoning and taking stock had set in. A new mood of caution, suspicion, and bitterness took hold. “Good bye, Lord, I am going west,” Arthur Towne remembered the church deacon shouting as Dakota-bound families streamed out of their Vermont village in 1881. By the close of the decade the joy was gone and the Townes were exhausted. “It did seem as if the whole James River valley was just a dumping ground for blasted hopes,” Towne’s mother told him wearily. “The holiday spirit of eight years before had entirely vanished,” wrote Hamlin Garland of the sullen mood of the decade’s end. “The stress of misfortune had not only destroyed hope, it had brought out the evil side of many men. Dissension had grown common. Two of my father’s neighbors had gone insane over the failure of their crops. . . . Something gray had settled down over the plain. Graveyards, jails, asylums, all the accompaniments of civilization, were now quite firmly established. . . . No green thing was in sight, and no shade offered save that made by the little cabin. On every side stretched scanty yellowing fields of grain, and from every worn road, dust rose like smoke from crevices.”

The truth was beginning to sink in: The sudden storms, the violent swings from one meteorological extreme to another, the droughts and torrents and killer blizzards were not freak occurrences but facts of life on the prairie. This was not a garden. Rain did not follow the snow. Laying a perfect grid of mile-sided squares on the grassland did not suppress the chaos of the elements. The settlers had to face the facts. Living here and making a living off this land was never going to be easy.

Weather that takes lives and destroys hopes presents a moral quandary. Call it an act of God or a natural disaster, somebody or something made this storm happen. But what? . . . Were the immigrant parents themselves to blame for uprooting their families from the relatively safe enclaves of the Ukraine, Vermont, Prussia, and Norway and exposing them to the brutal cold fronts and lows that sweep down off the Canadian Rockies?

Or should one condemn an economic system that gave some families mansions on Summit Avenue and left others so poor that they would risk their children and their own lives for the sake of a single cow? They called it “The School Children’s Blizzard” because so many of the victims were so young—but in a way the entire pioneer period was a kind of children’s disaster. Children were the unpaid workforce of the prairie, the hands that did the work no one else had time for or stomach for. The outpouring of grief after scores of children were found frozen to death among the cattle on Friday, January 13, was at least in part an expression of remorse for what children were subjected to every day—remorse for the fact that most children had no childhood. This was a society that could not afford to sentimentalize its living and working children. Only in death or on the verge of death were their young granted the . . . long columns of sobbing verse, the stately granite monuments. A safe and carefree childhood was a luxury the pioneer prairie could not afford.

“The dark, blinding, roaring storm once experienced, ever remains an actual living presence, that has marked its pathway with ruin, desolation and death,” wrote South Dakota historian Caleb Holt Ellis in 1909. “The 12th of January, 1888, is, and long will be, remembered, not only by Dakotans, but by many in the northwest, not for the things we enjoy, love, and would see repeated; but for its darkness, desolation, ruin and death.”
Homesteaders, many of whom were recent immigrants, took advantage of the free land offered by the federal government and moved west in hopes of finding a better life. The family shown here poses in their Sunday best against the background of their modest sod house. Alas, many of these families saw their dreams shattered by violent storms, voracious insects, and topsoil too shallow for growing crops. As David Laskin concludes, “the land that they had desired so fervently and had traveled so far to claim wasn’t free after all.” (© Bettmann-CORBIS)

the sorrow, sadness and heartache that followed in its train.” To this day, nearly a century after Ellis wrote these words, the storm remains “an actual living presence” in the region. Mention the date to anyone whose family experienced the storm and you’ll get a story of death or narrow escape. “There are those who say that that storm was no worse than others we have had,” wrote Austen Rollag fifty years later, “but those who speak thus could not have been out of the house but sitting around the stove. I have seen many snowstorms in the more than sixty years I have been living here, but not one can compare with the storm of January 12, 1888.”

The memories still burn. They burn all the fiercer because sorrow, sadness, and heartache did indeed follow in the blizzard’s train. Drought ravaged the prairie in the early 1890s. Thousands who had borrowed against their homesteads went bankrupt in the financial panic that inaugurated the depression of 1893. Farm income slipped steadily in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The price of corn fell by half between the mid-1870s and the 1890s. A
great exodas commenced on the prairie. By the time the rains returned late in the 1890s, over 60 percent of the pioneer families had abandoned their homesteads. Settlers came back, tried to make a go of it in the Dakotas or even farther west—and once again got burned out, frozen out, and blown away. Out-migration is on the rise once more. Nearly 70 percent of the counties in the Great Plains states have fewer people now than they did in 1950. These days nearly one million acres of the plains are so sparsely populated that they meet the condition of frontier as defined by the Census Bureau in the nineteenth century. Seven of our nation's twelve poorest counties are in Nebraska. As whites flee to cities and coasts, Native Americans and the bison that sustained them for thousands of years are returning. Indian and buffalo populations have now reached levels that the region has not seen since the 1870s. The white farmers and townpeople who remain would shun you for daring to say it, but in large stretches of prairie it's beginning to look like European agricultural settlement is a completed chapter of history. "It's time for us to acknowledge one of America's greatest mistakes," wrote Nicholas D. Kristof on the op-ed page of the New York Times, "a 140-year-old scheme that has failed at a cost of trillions of dollars, countless lives and immeasurable heartbreak: the settlement of the Great Plains."

The blizzard of January 12, 1888, was an early sign of that mistake. In the storm that came without warning, the pioneers learned that the land they had desired so fervently and had traveled so far to claim wasn't free after all. Who could have predicted that the bill would arrive with a sudden shift of wind in the middle of a mild January morning? A thousand storms of dust and ice and poverty and despair have come and gone since then, but this is the one they remember. After that day, the sky never looked the same.

**QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER**

1. Why does Laskin state that the horrible blizzard of 1888 "hit the most thickly settled sections of Nebraska and Dakota Territory at the worse possible moment"? Describe the dramatic change in temperatures that accompanied this storm. Why were the humble people of this raw region of the prairie prone to take risks, even in the face of a devastating blizzard?

2. In the post-Civil War years, what factors encouraged the stampede of settlers into America's heartland, which earlier had been thought to be a worthless desert? Compare the lifestyle of these "sodbusters" to the luxuries enjoyed by the wealthy industrial tycoons back East.

3. Compare twenty-first-century weather forecasting (satellite imagery, the technology of the Weather Channel) with that of the late nineteenth century. What advance warning did the prairie settlers have of the blizzard of 1888?

4. This selection describes many personal stories of humble people who faced tragedy with an inner courage that is both compelling and memorable. Which of these stories touched you the most and why? Try to imagine yourself as a settler caught in the killer blizzard of 1888. Imagine what you and your children would have experienced, and explain whether you would have stayed or left that violent land.

5. Describe the change in "mood and direction" caused by the blizzard of 1888 on settlers living on the prairie and people who thought about moving there. Why does Laskin conclude "that most children had no childhood" on the bleak prairies?

6. Why do some historians conclude that "the settlement of the Great Plains" was "one of America's greatest mistakes"? How has the population of that rugged region changed over the past sixty years?