

The Winter of all Winters

On the Northern Plains it came early . . . and stayed.

SOMETIMES OL' MAN WINTER

packs an arsenal that defies mortal man's best management efforts. Just ask folks on the Northern Plains. Still reeling from perhaps the worst winter on record, livestock producers in the Dakotas and western Minnesota know what it's like when the Ol' Man blows in, makes camp and stays.

The results came in the form of snow driven by powerful winds that sculpted drifts reaching heights of 20 to 30 feet. Cold temperatures offered little relief for weeks on end as the drifts piled higher. Windblown snow covered the fences and cattle drifted for miles with the storm. Many weakened, went down and were trampled, died of exposure, or smothered as the relentless wind covered their bodies with more snow.

When the drifts receded in late spring, they revealed the toll taken by winter. Flooded creeks and rivers have claimed still more. North Dakota estimates exceed 150,000 head of cattle lost. South Dakota's tally runs in excess of 200,000 and the carcass count wasn't complete at the time this report went to press.



STORY BY TROY SMITH ■ PHOTOS BY MIKE BOYATT

The Dakotas were declared federal disaster areas due to severe winter weather and flooding. Other states joining that status were Minnesota, Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Washington and Oregon.

From his headquarters in Ipswich, S.D., Edmunds County Extension Agent Dale Curtis has been helping local USDA officials get a handle on the extent of cattle lost. Curtis feels the north-central part of his state was particularly hard hit, with cattle losses pushing 30,000 head in Edmunds County alone.

Counting carcasses is much easier than estimating the long-term effects of Winter 1996-97, he says. Damaged bulls, sorry conception rates, poor-doing calves and light weaning weights are likely to follow. Those contribute to the economic trauma, but producers also must heal from the physical and emotional stress of battling a winter that came early and stayed late.

"Most people will tell you the winter-like weather started last October," says Curtis. "The trouble really started in with all the rain we received in September. That affected crop production and delayed the corn and sunflower harvests. Some fields went unharvested."

Coming from a region that normally receives a scant 18 inches of annual precipitation, Curtis hates to complain about extra moisture. And the total of 23 inches that fell on Edmunds County during 1996, would have been a greater blessing if not for the fact that nearly 7 inches of it arrived during September. Wet, sloppy conditions complicated producers' efforts to move their hay bales and stacks from the fields to winter storage areas.

"Rain turned to snow in October," adds Curtis, further delaying everything. Everybody thought it would quit, or at least turn colder and freeze up. Then they could get some work done and move their feed supplies in closer. The moisture did make for a lot of grass and a lot of cattle were out in the pastures late. If they could get the corn out, it looked like there would be plenty more grazing — enough to last until the first of the year. But it started snowing and didn't stop until everything was covered up."

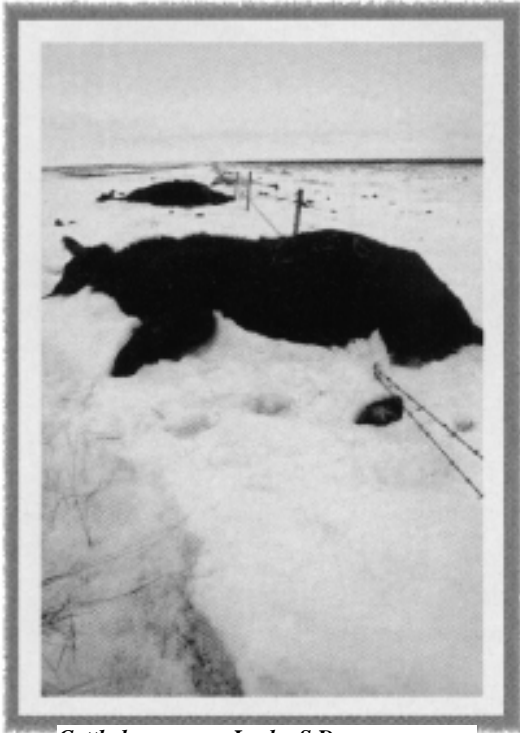


Jim Bush (right) and Richard Thorpe spent many long days keeping cattle fed, clearing barn lots and digging out fences on the Bush Ranch near Britton, S.D.

JIM BUSH REMEMBERS as much as 18 inches of new snow fell in November, but it came with little wind. The Britton, S.D., Angus breeder says the wind didn't complicate matters much until late in December.

"We had 2 feet of snow on the level by Thanksgiving, but it all laid flat. And we managed to get our corn harvested and most of our hay moved in by then," explains Bush. "In December it was cold and we got new snow every three or four days, with windy days in between. It started filling the ditches and tree rows. We already had double our 10-year average of snowfall by Christmas. That's about the time we got a short reprieve."

Those few days of relatively warmer weather proved to be the lull



Cattle losses near Leola, S.D., were devastating. These animals met their fate after drifting with a blizzard and becoming entangled in a fence line.

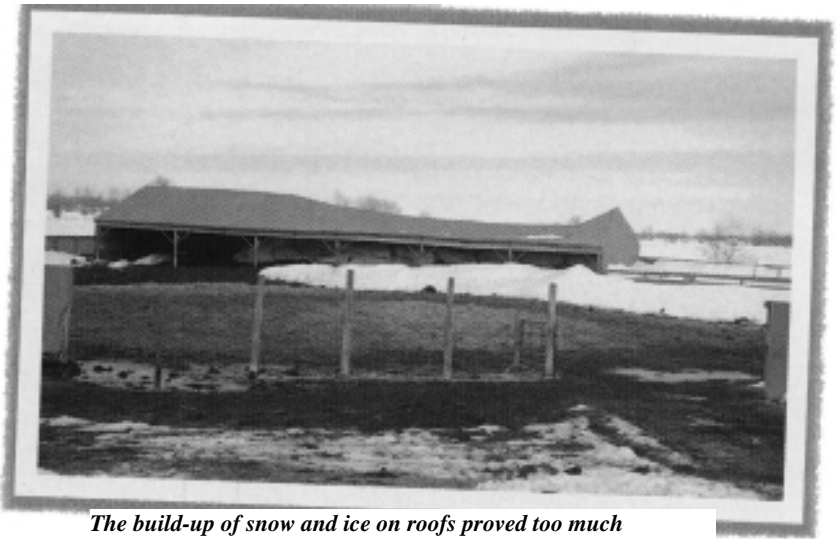
before the storm. Bush says the first weekend in January delivered a three-day blizzard complete with 60 to 70 mph winds, a wind-chill factor of 80 below zero and more snow.

"For more than 20 days it never got warmer than five below zero," notes Bush, "but the snow let up until the last week of January when we got another six inches."

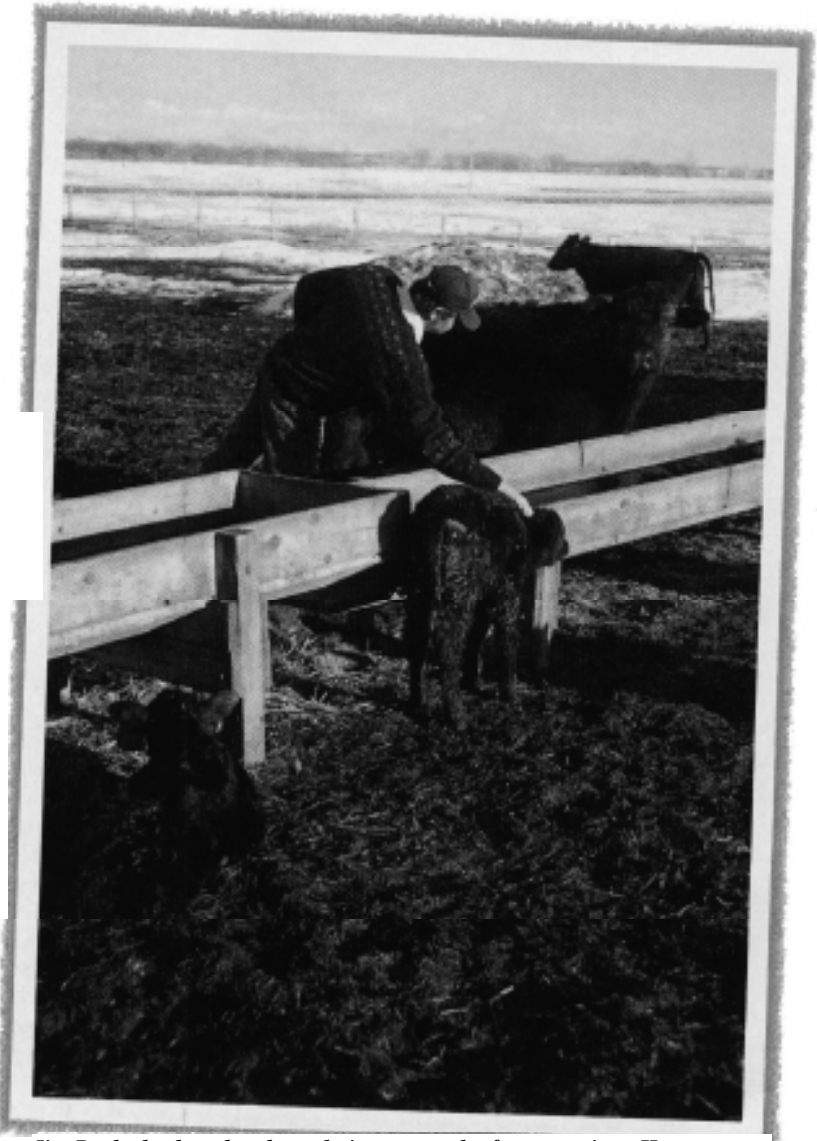
A total of 120 inches fell in the Britton area. Bush feels fortunate that all of his stock could be moved in close to headquarters, which is protected on the north by three windbreaks. Still, with all his cattle close at hand, the Bush Family's biggest chore was digging out fences to keep them there. The next greatest task was keeping them fed.

"We had two loaders, a four-wheel-drive tractor and snow-blower going almost every day. We spent about \$1,000 more on fuel than in any winter I can remember," says Bush. "It took at least twice as long to feed under those conditions. For at least 60 days the cattle couldn't seem to eat enough to keep warm. We try to keep a two-year supply of hay and we pretty much used it up."

Bush says his cattle came through in fair shape, with the most serious problem being weak calves.



The build-up of snow and ice on roofs proved too much for many farm buildings in the Northern Plains.



Jim Bush checks calves brought into a barn lot for protection. He believes the lots, which are near ranch headquarters, and windbreaks helped save his herd from winter blasts.

An ice jam on the frozen, flooded Elm River in South Dakota.



Doug and Molly Hoff could stand on a snow bank and touch the top of 30-foot cedar trees on their ranch near Bison, S.D. in late March.

ON THE FLAT PRAIRIE near Bison, S.D., Doug and Molly Hoff experienced their share of weak calves, among other problems.

“It was so wet early on that it stayed muddy underneath all that snow,” says Doug. “We couldn’t get our hay moved in and the snow drifted as high as the hay stacks. We had silage for the calves and bought extra grain to feed with it, but we battled snow all winter long just to get hay moved to the cows.”

The Hoff’s say many individual Dakota ranchers counted their cattle losses by hundreds. The losses can’t be blamed on mismanagement either. Even with cattle moved in behind good protection, the snow drifted so badly that fences and windbreaks were covered. The wind often pushed cattle out into the open and the brunt of the storm. Hoff’s estimate that close to 80 percent of their own fences were flattened, but they managed to keep their cattle from drifting with the wind-driven snow.

Doug says cows calving during the worst weather would leave their calves, so ranchers had to be with them all the time. His own barns and sheds were full of calves, where the babies were dried and warmed. Of course, that led to some trouble getting cows and calves mothered up again. Even with that feat accomplished, disappointment often followed when weak calves succumbed to pneumonia or scours. Others died from being trampled by cows milling around behind the windbreaks.

“I know people who lost bunches, but our losses came one at a time,” says Hoff. “I’m not sure which is worse. I die a little with every one.”

Not too far from the Hoff’s Scotch Cap Angus Ranch is Sodak Angus Ranch, located near Reva and owned by the Meyer Family. Vaughn Meyer had hoped the worst might be over when late March brought a hint of spring. Then the April blast arrived.

"It started on Friday, April 4 and lasted through Sunday. I got caught in it on the way home from a sale," tells Meyers. "I got home in time to pull out 16 cows that had drifted into a stock dam. We lost two calves during the storm and another dozen since, and I'm sure those can be blamed on stress from that storm."

Meyer reports Harding County cattle producers lost close to 10,000 head between December and April and nearly that many more as a result of the April storm. Many were calves since a lot of area producers were in the midst of calving season. But losses included older cattle, too, whose faces became caked with wet snow and ice. As the bewildered animals drifted with the high winds, they stumbled into dams and creeks where they died from hypothermia or by drowning.

Meyer figures the 360 head of bull calves and replacement heifers he had in lots gained an average of .9 pound less than a year ago. That represents about \$21,000 lost due to poorer gains. And overall, his average winter feed costs were up by about \$24,000.

It was another verse of the same tune in south-central North Dakota. Jim and Judy Krueger's Angus cattle ranch is near McKenzie where 89 inches of snow were recorded. Seventeen inches of that, plus rain and sleet, came during April.

Like many other ranchers, Kruegers had turned cattle out in pastures during late March to get them on sod and escape the mud. They had their lots cleaned and nearly dry just prior to the last storm. They managed to get most of their cattle moved in close again before the worst of it hit. Some ranchers weren't so fortunate.

"Some guys had cattle out behind little wire fences and couldn't get them in early enough. In that storm, the cattle wouldn't follow a feed wagon and you couldn't drive them. They just went with the storm, over or through fences and piled up and trampled one another. There were some big-time losses," says Jim Krueger. "We had one group of 150 head that drifted near a dam and milled around until their eyes covered with ice. A bunch of them finally wandered out on the thin ice and fell through. We got them pulled out, but it was tough."

Krueger estimates his calf losses to be double that of a normal year. In the feedlot, average daily gains dropped to 2.53 pounds, even though the cattle ate every day. Weights on his feedlot cattle are as much as 50 pounds lighter than they should be.

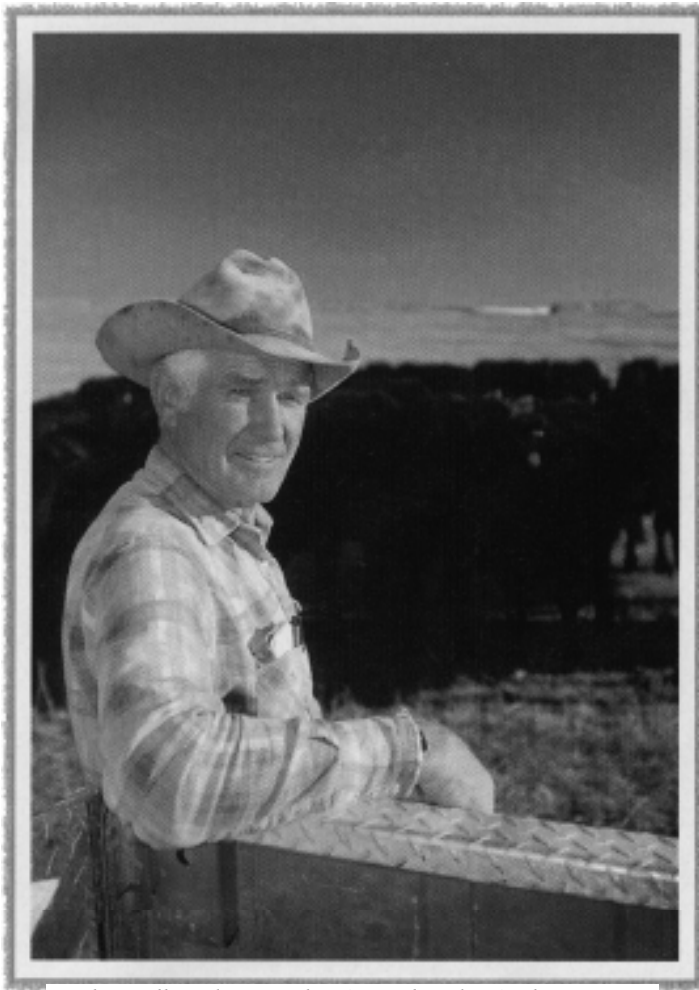
"In spite of working 36 hours a day, there's only so much you can do. Some days you sure don't feel like going out, but you just get up and go to do the best you can," says Krueger.



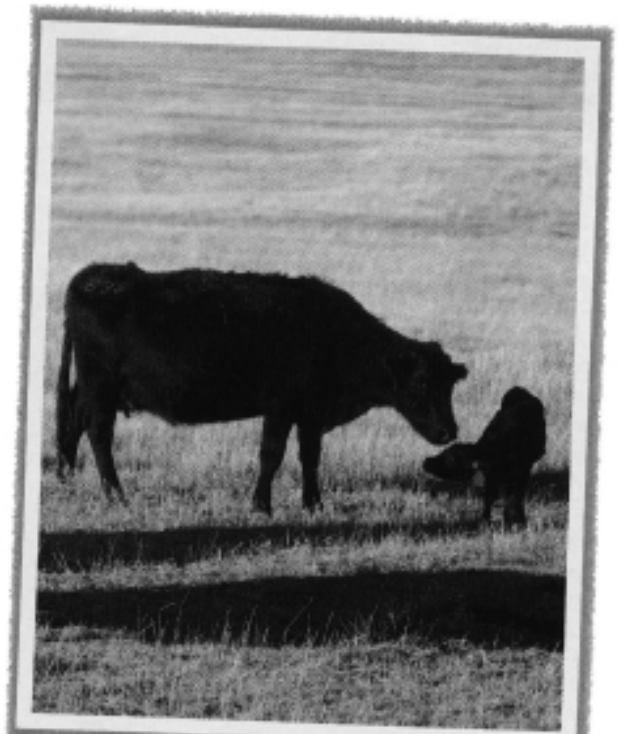
Many rural roads and crossings were flooded after the snow melt in April.



Doug Hoff and a neighboring rancher stop to inspect a flooded river plains area near Bison, S.D.



Hugh Ingalls and many other Angus breeders in the Dakotas are keeping the faith, despite severe winter stress and economic set-backs.



This Angus cow-calf pair weathered the winter of 1996-97. Breeders are concerned, however, about weak calves and breed-back conception rates.



Four-wheel drive tractors got a true test this past winter on the Ingalls Ranch.

ON HIS RANCH NEAR FAITH, S.D.: Hugh Ingalls had 1,100 head of Angus cattle to feed. With bale piles snowed under all winter, digging out feed and hauling it to cattle was an all-day job, every day.

“We really put our four-wheel-drive feed tractor to the test, but we managed to get every mouth fed every day,” says Ingalls. “There were days when we went out at daylight and didn’t come back to the house until well after dark. I’m just thankful for a good hired man and an understanding mate.”

Like many seedstock producers, Ingalls paid particular attention to his bulls, keeping them well-bedded and out of the wind. He feared some would suffer testicle freeze damage, but testing this spring revealed none. Still, in addition to ongoing problems with weak calves, he fears the winter stress will greatly affect conception rates.

“I’m sure breed-back will be affected. How much will vary with how much success different ranchers had while trying to keep their cattle fed and protected. Warm spring weather and green grass will help. They make a great tonic;” says Ingalls.



Farm families stick together in tough times. Halverson Family members (l to r): Craig, Mike, Evan, Brian, and employee Arnie Wagner join forces on their farm near Baker, Minn.



A snow-covered fuel pump on the Halverson farm.

THE DOWN-SIDE TO SPRING snow melt was the flooding that affected many areas of the Northern Plains in April and May. Jim Krueger reported 1,500 to 2,000 acres of their ranch under water. Water covered many local roads and several of the bridges that hadn't washed out were in jeopardy.

Dry ground was in short supply near the Halverson farm too, where the Brian Halverson Family raises Angus cattle and seed potatoes. Located in the now infamous Red River Valley, Halversons aren't very far from

Fargo, N.D., but they operate on the Minnesota side of the river, near the community of Baker. Fortunately, that's some distance away from the devastation floods caused in and around the city of Grand Forks.

"We got about 120 inches of snow, so there was bound to be some water. But we're used to getting beat up by winter and we try to prepare for it," says Brian Halverson. "We brought everything in early and started feeding silage and hay. We

bought shelled corn and extra hay. Actually, our cattle came through the winter in pretty good shape, but the winter still cost us. We had to hire big payloaders to come in and move snow, just to have everything blow shut again. The snow blew into our sheds and barns, too, so we'd get the payloaders back and dig out again."

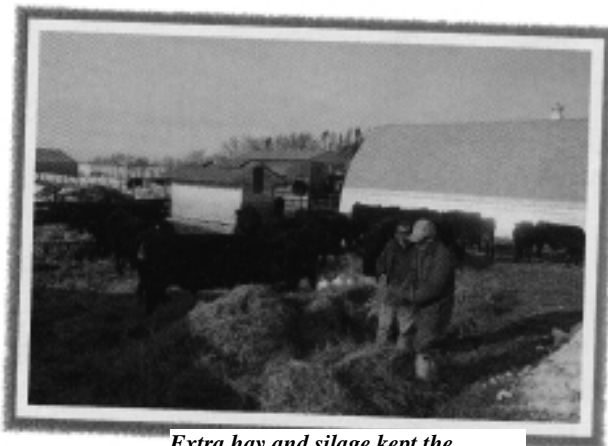
The build-up of ice and snow proved to be too much for many farm buildings in that area. Halverson says hundreds of roofs and even whole structures have collapsed. The April ice and snow windrowed miles of power poles leaving some areas without electricity for up to two weeks. Subsequent flooding has washed out roads and bridges and some farmers have been forced to move their stock to higher ground. Crop planting and haying were also delayed.



Evan Halverson and the family dog found it a challenge to climb the snow banks surrounding their home.



Removing extra snow and mud in the cattle lots was a weekly chore for the Halversons.



Extra hay and silage kept the Halverson Angus herd in good shape through the long winter.

The Recovery Stage Continues

NORTH DAKOTAN JIM KRUEGER believes it's time for victims to get together and talk about what has happened and what they have learned.

"We could help each other be better prepared for the next time," says Krueger. "We know now that shelter belts or windbreaks need to be 200 feet from buildings and some will want to build dikes to direct snow-melt away from their feedlots. We could help each other get ready for another bad

winter. It could happen again."

Extension agent Dale Curtis says some people are getting together to talk about their experiences for emotional stress-reduction reasons too. He says people are finally getting out, talking more about burdens they have harbored all winter long.

"It's been a terrible load to shoulder for so many people," adds Curtis. "They are drained, economically, physically and emotionally. They need to take

care of themselves."

Curtis encourages producers to take advantage of the assistance available through projects such as McKennan Hospital's Farm Crisis Program. Headquartered in Sioux Falls, S.D., Ann Schwartz is the program's outreach coordinator.

"We have a 24-hour crisis hotline aimed at serving farmers and ranchers but it's available to anyone suffering from the effects of weather-related stress," says Schwartz.

"We've also held a series of community programs to educate people on the effects of stress and how it might cause physical and emotional problems. And we offer support. These things affect very normal healthy people who have gone through a devastating winter and spring. We're talking about hardy, resourceful people who might have a hard time speaking up and asking for help. But a lot of them will use the hotline and feedback tells us the programs help. People don't have to work it out alone."



Disaster relief package available to producers

A federal disaster assistance package was secured by USDA in late April to assist hard-hit beef producers in the Dakotas and Minnesota.

USDA will extend the Foundation Livestock Relief Program, allow emergency grazing on Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) acres, allow payment deferrals for Farm Service Agency (FSA) borrowers and give local FSA offices the discretion to mitigate the initiation of foreclosure proceedings. Also, in counties declared disaster areas, \$46 million is available for low-interest loans to producers who qualify, and the administration is seeking an additional \$60 million.

Eligible losses for the emergency loan program include death and calving losses, injury to breeding animals, damage to buildings, fences, equipment and pastures.

Supporting this disaster assistance program have been state cattlemen's organizations, the National Cattlemen's Beef Association and congressional delegations from the Dakotas.

HELP IS A PHONE CALL AWAY

Farm Crisis Hotline
1-800-691-4336.

North Dakota Agriculture
Department Mediation Service
1-800-642-4752

Mental Health Hotline
for Ranchers
1-800-472-2911

