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# Newsworthy: Implications of Gender and Class in the January 12, 1888, Blizzard

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## Abstract

In January of 1888, the residents of Nebraska, Dakota Territory, Montana, Kansas, Wyoming, and even Iowa, Minnesota, and Texas were faced with a snowstorm unlike any they had seen before. Striking the majority of the region at the time school was dismissed, many students and teachers were caught long distances from home as the temperature dropped well below zero and visibility diminished. Striking the majority of the region at the time school was dismissed, it has become known as The Schoolchildren's Blizzard. The disaster was forever ingrained in the minds of those who lived through it. By exploring different perspectives, a transformation of this storm and memory surfaces, fueled in large part by the attention newspapers put on school teachers at the time.

As a prominent institution on the Plains beginning in the middle-to-late 1800s, rural schools stood as a visualization of settlers' commitment to education. Frequently consisting of one room, ideas of these buildings standing alone on the prairie give this educational tradition a romanticized image. The school systems, teachers, and students show a more complex and organized system, however, from which analyses of gender and class can be attained to show how they were perceived in local newspapers when their role of authority was put to the test during the January 12, 1888 blizzard.



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As a prominent institution on the Plains beginning in the middle-to-late 1800s, rural schools stood as a visualization of settlers' commitment to education. Frequently consisting of one room, these buildings standing alone on the prairie give education a romanticized image. The school systems themselves—the teachers and the students—show a more complex and organized system, from which analyses of gender and class can be attained to show how they were perceived through print and by the public when their role of authority was put to the test during the January 12, 1888, blizzard.

In January of 1888, the residents of Nebraska, Dakota Territory, Montana Territory, Kansas, Wyoming Territory, Iowa, and Minnesota were faced with a snowstorm unlike any they had seen before. Striking the majority in the region at the time school was dismissed, it has become known as *The Schoolchildren's Blizzard*.

The characteristics of this blizzard would not have been significant on their own, but in this case were especially dangerous because of the combination of wind, snow, and cold temperatures occurring together. The morning of Thursday, January 12, 1888, was the first nice day (temperatures over 30°) in weeks, thus providing rural residents a chance to run errands and travel to the distant areas of their properties. As the storm overtook the Plains, temperatures across the region dropped 30 to 40 degrees in a matter of hours. The swiftness in which the storm appeared also caught many people off guard. Zero visibility resulted when the old snow on the ground mixed with new snow to create a fine, sandy snow that hung in the air. Strong winds—up to 50 and 60 miles per hour in some locations—accompanied the front to create a dangerous situation all around.<sup>1</sup> This mix of factors made the blizzard one of the worst that has ever occurred on the Great Plains.

The blizzard produced heroic acts from the people living in its wake. Accounts of residents becoming lost between their farms and town, or disoriented mere feet from their barns, or children staying at the school until the blizzard blew itself out overnight saturate the history of the storm. The most publicized heroes by newspapers at the time were the schoolteachers who tried to keep their pupils safe. A group of young schoolchildren, many too far away to get home

safely, with a young teacher in a schoolhouse that may or may not be adequate to protect against such a storm, sets the scene for a potential tragedy.

Residents of Nebraska especially established a connection with the storm by heralding in-state teachers for bravery almost as soon as the blizzard abated. Unlike schools in the more populated towns along the eastern crust of the Plains that had better established facilities, most school buildings in Nebraska were rural and not prepared for such a storm. In many cases, coal and water were insufficiently stocked, and the structures themselves were not sturdy enough to withstand the treacherous winds. The situation was further compounded for those living on the more sparsely populated rural areas because most students also had quite a distance to travel to their homes. Thus, schoolteachers who found themselves facing this dangerous situation had a decision to make: either stay and try to survive the storm in an ill-equipped schoolhouse or somehow guide the children to the nearest residence even though normal landmarks were hidden by zero-visibility.

To understand fully the situation, a closer look at the development of rural schools in America displays the social and gender aspects present in the area at the time. The history of rural schools in states of the Midwest is applicable to the states and territories of the northern Great Plains, who used this educational system as a template for establishing districts and schools once new settlers arrived.

The creation of extensive school districts and reliance on taxpayer money for funding during the mid-to-late 19<sup>th</sup> century brought accessible education to rural communities in the Middle West, unlike the system of subscription schools that excluded poor persons in the South and East. These new rural schools were run for and by the community, and farmers had direct influence in their school's affairs. Wayne Fuller, a scholar in rural schools of the Midwest, argues that these schools controlled by the farming class were institutions showing the most characteristics of pure democracy than any other area in the country. Board members were elected locally, and the members were not regulated to a certain financial standing.<sup>2</sup>

Schools were built and maintained by the local school boards, and contrary to some idyllic images, not all buildings were quaint and welcoming. Much of a school's upkeep and improvement came from the taxpayers of the district. Therefore, depopulation and fluctuating incomes directly affected the resources available for schools. By 1888, Nebraska students attended class in 749 sod school buildings, 195 made of brick, 37 of stone, 144 of logs, and 4,062 frame structures.<sup>3</sup>

One of the main duties of school boards was to hire, and possibly fire, teachers. Traditionally a career for men, women filled teaching positions—closing the gap between the need for teachers and the lack of male instructors. Few professions were open to women, who willingly took low paying jobs in the one-room schools male teachers typically used as stepping stones in their careers. As women became more accepted as teachers, they eventually outnumbered males in the occupation, though many states' educators believed female teachers were "inefficient."<sup>4</sup> Ideally, school boards hired woman teachers for the fall and spring months because they could be employed for lesser amounts of money than men, and then they employed male teachers during the winter months when older boys attended. Communities were concerned about teachers' (both male and female) abilities to discipline unruly pupils, especially when older boys were in attendance. Some concern also stemmed from the age of females when they took over as teachers. Many were the same age or younger than some of their pupils.

As the sun rose on January 12, 1888, in Nebraska, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction was well aware that the ratio of female teachers to males was 3 to 1. In fact, the *Twentieth Annual Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction* for Nebraska recorded the total number of female teachers employed in the state as 7,184, as opposed to the 2,752 males counted.<sup>5</sup> Though women clearly outnumbered men as teachers, women in Nebraska were paid less. The average monthly wage for females in 1888 was \$35.54, while their male counterparts earned an average of \$43.18.

Though women came to dominate rural education, complex issues of gender and class were apparent. The expectations of female

teachers established an important social status, but also forced strict social guidelines. Though these wage-earning, *single* young women were respected in the community, they were constantly aware that they served as role models, and in many cases had to associate with “good” company or risk losing their jobs. Though women were not allowed to teach after they married, they could be elected as county superintendents. Women district supervisors were not uncommon in the Midwest, and they were expected to serve as role models for their teachers—who in turn were to be good examples for their students.

These teacher traits were the reality for residents of the Plains in January of 1888. They did not immediately appear to be exceptional to the local public. The first news reports of the blizzard in city papers of Omaha, Minneapolis, Chicago, New York, and Washington, D.C., noted the extensive loss of cattle projected, railroad blockages, and a nondescript “unthinking teacher” in Dakota who, it was rumored, let her students go during the blizzard and required search parties with bells and whistles to find them. This is perhaps an exaggerated attempt to add human drama, giving a vague account of an event that could have happened during any blizzard anywhere. The story claims believability because the teacher was assumed to be a young, inexperienced female, and the students facing a precarious situation were magnified by their youth. During the subsequent days, more reports of frozen and missing people appeared on the front pages, with no special attention paid to teachers and their students until January 17, when the story of Minnie Freeman, a nineteen-year-old teacher from the Ord area who tied her students together for survival, made the front page of the *Omaha Bee*.

In contrast, the *Omaha Republican* reported on the morning of January 17 that the newest list of fatalities showed 135 victims, with Dakota Territory having the most deaths. The *Daily Nebraska State Journal* agreed that most fatalities occurred in Dakota Territory, but reported the number of frozen and lost at 200. Tragedies befalling teachers appeared almost daily in both papers and these articles showed that almost every report of instructors freezing or missing involved female teachers. This included the Dakota Territory teacher

Bessie Standfields, who left the school to get help and froze to death. The newspapers printed the fate of Miss Steubierner, a teacher who spent the night covered in snow a mile from the school she had left in order to find help. She died shortly after being found the next morning.<sup>6</sup> Articles also told of a teacher from Millette, Dakota Territory, who was still missing after going in search of help while four of her students froze to death alone in the schoolhouse. Indeed, the fate of Minnie Freeman's class was the first good news to be reported from the blizzard, and she automatically gained fame as a heroine. Possibly because it was the first story of its kind to get exposure, and because the experience seemed unique, Freeman and her schoolchildren became icons of the storm after "a highly colored version of it was broadcast across the country."<sup>7</sup>

Soon after Freeman's actions made headlines, the story of Lois May Royce, a teacher near Plainview, Nebraska, made the papers. Royce tried to take her three remaining pupils (the other six had gone home at lunch) to her boarding house "200 yards north of the schoolhouse" after she realized the fuel at her school would not last long. She got lost in the blinding conditions, and by morning the children (ages 9, 9, and 6) had died. Royce herself crawled to the safety of a farmhouse nearby. In the weeks following the blizzard, her feet were amputated due to the severe frostbite she suffered. Though Royce was not able to save her students, the *Omaha Bee* praised her as a heroine and began a "Fund for Heroines" to collect money and divide it between Royce and Freeman. The names of contributors and the amount of their donations were printed in the *Bee*, and a running tally of the proceeds was reported almost daily. A running total was estimated through early February, but no final amount was published.<sup>8</sup>

The *Bee* seemed predisposed to heralding "heroes" before the Heroine Fund graced its pages. On January 13, 1888, the paper published a fairly extensive article of a Wyoming wife who participated in conflicts with "savages" and "imperiling herself for her husband's welfare." A few days later, the *Bee* announced "A Chicago Hero" on the front page—a resident of the Windy City who carried his wife and child from their burning home.

The paper also wrote of a “Hero” from Saunders County, a 16-year old hired man who tried to take five students home from school in his sleigh. When his team of mules refused to continue, he unhitched them and turned the sleigh over and the six survived there.<sup>9</sup> A fund for the hired man probably seemed inappropriate because though his actions were heroic, they were within the bounds of expected actions for his gender. The Wyoming woman and Chicago man were worthy of the paper’s recognition, but since they had no personal connections to the area, they were not worthy of Nebraskans’ money.

A few days after the fund began, one more teacher was added as a beneficiary: Etta Shadduck. Shadduck had lost her way in the storm and took refuge in a hay bail, where she was stuck until rescuers found her three days later, barely alive. Not long after that, a fund in conjunction with that for the three heroines was established to aid a ten-year-old orphan girl, Lena Woebbecke, who needed her feet amputated because of the storm.

The Heroine’s Fund was exclusively for the young women because of their actions, though their tales were not unique. Before Shadduck was even found, the *Daily Nebraska State Journal* ran a short article about Ed Maxwell, a young farmer near David City, who found refuge in a haystack overnight when his buggy got stuck in a ravine. Additionally, the story was printed within days of the storm about a male teacher who tried to take three students home and got stuck for twenty-two hours. In a situation very similar to that of Lois Royce, one student froze to death and though the teacher and remaining pupils were alive, their conditions were severe.<sup>10</sup> There was no mention of funding for them.

Though a person could assume that the actions of these young women would be most favorably reported on by women newspaper writers, this is probably not the case here. Women writers were present in Nebraska, but were not allowed to join the Nebraska Press Association until 1896. In 1898, of the 145 members listed, only eight were women, and six of them appeared directly under their husband’s names. Their presence in the Association show women’s participation in news reporting across the state, but given their pro-



portionately low numbers and how much attention the teachers' stories received, their influence cannot accurately be discerned.<sup>11</sup>

Each beneficiary seemed to be significant for different reasons. The commonality that they were all female apparently heightened the impressiveness of their survivability to the public. However, the one in need of the most charity, Lena Woebbecke, was probably pitied for multiple reasons—she was young, orphaned, and crippled by a force over which she had no control.

Etta Shadduck was perhaps equally in need of charity and respect and illustrates the role of a working daughter. Shadduck's story of incredible survival through multiple days of subzero weather made her an excellent candidate for the fund. The fact that she was a teacher added to her character, but it was through her good commonsense of seeking shelter in the hay bail and endurance of the elements for three days that made her a heroine. Though she was found alive, she died during the first week of February.<sup>12</sup> The *Bee* assured patrons that her share of the money was to go to her estate, of which her parents and siblings, who depended on her income for living, were beneficiaries. This seems to have been a very acceptable situation, because money continued to be donated on her behalf after her funeral was widely published and attended.

The Fund continued through February, and the *Bee* was almost constantly printing the names and donations of contributors during this time, perhaps changing the nature of the fund in the process. The newspaper had originally suggested the fund as a way to collect money to reward Freeman and Royce, and was then expanded to include relief money for Shadduck, then charity for Woebbecke. In the process, the fund was increasingly referred to as the "*Bee's*" fund, and its reporting included tales of schoolchildren collecting pennies along with communities sponsoring fundraisers. After a short time, the fund was receiving more attention than the actions of those it was set up to benefit.

Lois Royce, who faced multiple amputations, was in great need of help, but her worthiness in the Heroine Fund was widely questioned. Like Freeman, Royce attempted to save her pupils, and like Shadduck, she had survived an incredible storm. However, her bravery

was marred because the students in her care had perished. In order to promote her image, *and the Fund*, the *Bee* declared that if she had acted in her own self-interest and saved only herself, she would not need to have her limbs amputated. The paper rallied for support using Royce's dedication to her job, and then promoted her image as a caring young woman, who was with each child as they died and "did the best her circumstances allowed." For her final defense, the *Bee* declared, "Now, in the midst of her trial, will those who love and admire heroism aid in the effort to provide for the future of this brave and self-sacrificing girl!"<sup>13</sup>

Though the blizzard produced victims and heroes across the region, newspapers, especially the *Omaha Bee*, seemed keen on celebrating individuals of their own state. On February 24, 1888, the Omaha daily published a dispatch from Red Oak, Iowa, of a fund there that had generated only \$120 for Johnnie Delinger, "who braved sixteen hours of the blizzard of January 12. Little Johnnie was only seven years old, but he took off his coat and wrapped it around his little brother on that eventful night, and in consequence has lost both feet and part of the fingers of one hand, thereby making him a cripple for life." The *Bee* comments on this situation while simultaneously congratulating itself by stating, "the people of Iowa should feel enough interest in [Johnny] to see that a sufficient fund is raised . . . Nebraska has nobly come to the rescue of her heroines. What will Iowa do for her brave son!"<sup>14</sup>

Of course, as can be the case in any public charity endeavor, some people exploit the situation for their own personal benefit. This was the case for a woman in Omaha who used the public's support for the Heroines' Fund as an opportunity to collect her *own* contributions. The *Bee* cautioned readers about her scandal. After a somewhat thorough description of her appearance, the article concludes by warning "It is reported that the woman is using the money collected for drink. All persons visited by her will do well to refuse her request."<sup>15</sup>

The unquestionable heroine of the disaster was Minnie Freeman, who received much more than money after her story made headlines. In the midst of widespread tragedy, the *Bee* promoted the communi-

ty's debt to her: "Her action of Thursday has endeared her stronger than words can portray to those whose little ones she cared for so well, and the display of rare courage and judgment entitles her to the esteem of all who admire heroism with a true ring."<sup>16</sup> Though she claimed she had done nothing any other teacher would do, her share of the Heroine Fund served as a reward for her actions, rather than a charity effort. As she became the star figure in newspapers across the country, gifts from strangers arrived for her<sup>17</sup> Freeman's image as a role model increased for many different reasons. She had a solid place in the community already as a teacher, but it was through her actions of courage that set her apart. She was lauded for what she did and not just because of who she was. This perspective did not seem to carry quite as much significance as one would hope, because after newspapers saw a picture of the nineteen-year-old, advertisements appeared that sold photos of Freeman and her students in front of their sod schoolhouse. Within two weeks of the story's publication, it was reported through a Kansas City affiliate that Freeman had received nine marriage proposals:

But she has excellent good sense as well as courage, and the nine suitors are still awaiting answers.<sup>18</sup>

Whether she liked it or not, Freeman had become the star of the blizzard.

The focus continued to shift from the severity of the storm to the teachers and students. In response to the public's sudden attraction to schools and teachers, Nebraska State Superintendent of Schools George Lane issued a request to county superintendents for the number of students who perished or were "maimed," as well as the names of "every teacher, or other person, who performed heroic services in the state in saving or attempting to save the lives of school-children or others, [so they] may be fittingly recognized."<sup>19</sup>

Seasoned students and teachers knew the importance of staying in the schools until any such blizzards ended, and most of the reports from school superintendents confirmed that the majority of educators and pupils in school that day followed that strategy. Travel

in the storm generally occurred only if the teacher could not keep the students inside or the schoolhouse failed.

As reports arrived from counties around the state, report after report stated that few or no school-related fatalities occurred because most weathered the storm in the schoolhouses. These findings not only showed that teachers who left the schoolhouses were the exceptions to the rule (at least in Nebraska), but they contradicted Freeman's public claim that she did what any teacher would do. To the public, she was clearly not *any* teacher. Ironically, though Freeman was teaching during the winter semester, which was thought to be most suitable for men, the presence of older boys that day was possibly the reason the group arrived safely.

Expectations of gender and the influence of class were present and prevalent during the January 12 blizzard, especially involving schools. Though school districts in rural communities leveled class distinctions within the area—regarding involvement in running schools—the schools themselves varied widely in quality, maintenance, and ability to afford experienced teachers. Though male teachers were the most highly sought teachers, Nebraska employed significantly more women educators in 1888. When the blizzard forced teachers (both men and women) to assess their best chances for survivability, the actions taken did not seem to be divided down gendered lines. How men and women were perceived differently for the same actions shows the gendered expectations of the time. The Heroines Fund celebrated Nebraska females while unifying the state by suggesting it rally behind its local heroes/heroines. To date, scenes of courageous teachers leading students through the storm have become the most enduring images of the blizzard.

## Notes

- 1 W. H. O'Gara, comp., and Ora A. Clement, ed., *In All Its Fury: A History of the Blizzard of January 12, 1888*, (Lincoln, Nebraska: Union College Press, 1947), 20.
- 2 See Wayne E. Fuller's *The Old Country School: The Story of Rural Education in the Middle West* (1982), and *One-Room Schools of the Middle West: An Illustrated History* (1994).
- 3 George Lane, Nebraska State Superintendent, *Twentieth Annual Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction* for the years 1887-1888, Nebraska State Historical Society Archives, 10-11.
- 4 Fuller, *The Old Country School*, 157-184.
- 5 Lane, 7.
- 6 "Further Fatalities," *Daily Nebraska State Journal*, 17 January 1888.
- 7 "Its Frightful Havoc," *Omaha Republican*, 17 January 1888; O'Gara, 43.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 43.
- 9 "A Brave Woman," *Omaha Daily Bee*, 13 January 1888; "A Chicago Hero" *Omaha Daily Bee*, 16 January 1888; "Another Heroine" *Omaha Daily Bee*, 24 January 1888. "A Saunders County Hero" *Omaha Daily Bee*, 24 January 1888.
- 10 "Leaving Death in its Trail," *Daily Nebraska State Journal*, 14 January 1888; "Death in the Big Storm," *Omaha Daily Bee*, 14 January 1888; *Daily Nebraska State Journal*, 15 January 1888; "A Night in a Haystack," *Omaha Daily Bee*, 24 January 1888.
- 11 *26<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of Nebraska Press Association*, 25-26 January 1898, Nebraska State Historical Society Archives; information on the acceptance of women is from "'30' Is In" speech given to Association, author unknown, circa 1924, Nebraska State Historical Society Archives.
- 12 *Omaha Daily Bee*, 6 February 1888; *Omaha Republican* 7 February 1888.
- 13 "Two Cases," *Omaha Daily Bee*, 7 February 1888.
- 14 "An Iowa Victim of the Blizzard," *Omaha Daily Bee*, 24 February 1888.
- 15 "Refuse Her Request," *Omaha Daily Bee*, 24 February 1888.
- 16 "Latest City News," *Omaha Daily Bee*, 17 January 1888.
- 17 "Rewarding a Heroine," *Omaha Republican*, 27 January 1888.
- 18 "Nine Offers of Marriage," *Omaha Daily Bee*, 30 January 1888.
- 19 The State Superintendent's request appeared in multiple newspapers, including the *Bee* and *Republican* on January 24, 1888.