

One to remember



The WordchipperSM

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In the midst of some of the mildest fall weather I can recall, it's mentally challenging—if not downright blasphemous—to think about blizzards. But this is the Upper Midwest, and we've seen some doozies.

As the sage of Minnesota, Garrison Keillor, frequently says, winter is the price we pay for a beautiful fall and the gift of spring. Lately, though, spring around these parts has seemed more like a booby prize than a reward for having endured—make that *survived*—the previous four months.

Awakening me from the lull of the sunshine, dry pavement and short-sleeve temperatures was an impromptu gift from a life-long friend of mine, Jim Young, originally from Anamoose, N.D., and now wisely spending his winters in Arizona. He and his wife Marie and their three-year-old Yorkshire Terrier spend summers at their home in Drake, N.D., by the tracks of the Soo Line Railroad. Jim and I are rail buffs—our dads were both depot agents in North Dakota—and in July we spent a day visiting the old Soo Line Depot in Minot, now a railroad museum. However, before leaving town, we stopped by my favorite store: Barnes & Noble. While there, Jim presented me with a gift that caused me to think about blizzards.

And what a cool gift—no pun intended—he gave me: a book entitled *One to Remember: The Relentless Blizzard of March 1966*, by two guys who grew up on farms in North Dakota and met at the University of North Dakota in 1984. Douglas Ramsey and Larry Skroch have done a magnificent job with this 661-page soft-cover work, and I'm very pleased to have it in my personal library.

This is far more than a book about a storm. The authors have included much geographic and demographic history of those towns and cities in the Dakotas, Minnesota and Canada that the '66 blizzard brought to a stop during that first week of March. I learned facts about our region I did not know, and their highly readable narrative breezes along. With wind gusts of 30-55 miles-per-hour during the storm, somehow “breezes” doesn't seem like the right word. What I'm trying to say is that their book is a page-turner, enhanced by a good number of photos and reproductions from state historical archives and newspapers.

The northern plains have experienced many remarkable winter storms; some of you recall the blizzards of 1941 and '50, and, of course, all the snow the Red River Valley received during the winter of 1996, causing “the flood of the century” in the spring of '97. But the '66 storm was different: it was more widespread, from low pressure areas starting in Nevada to the wide geography it ended-up covering through the Midwest, from Kansas to Manitoba. The storm stopped trains, and for rail fans, this book is worth having if only for the outstanding coverage of the railroad problems during the storm.

As for my own experience, JoAnne and I and our new baby daughter were living in Valley City at the time. I was the “morning man” at KOVC Radio and, on the morning of the blizzard's worst day, I started out from our apartment in the southwest part of town about 5:00 a.m., headed for the studio downtown. My car became stuck in a drift about a block from our home. So, I walked back to our cozy digs and called a fellow KOVC announcer, Karl Limvere, who lived a couple of blocks from the station. I asked him if he would go over and sign on for me, and he graciously obliged. Then, I went back to bed. As I think about it now, Valley City isn't all that spread-out. I might have been able to *walk* to the station, if dressed appropriately. But I loved “blizzard days” back in school, so why not enjoy one as an adult?

Karl went on to be state secretary for the North Dakota Farmers Union and, today, is pastor of Zion United Church of Christ in Medina, N.D. I talked to him recently about his duty during the storm (while I stayed home), and he told me he ended up sleeping at the station that night. It took a while for other staff to show up. I think the boss had a snowmobile pick me sometime during the afternoon of the second day of the storm. The town was dead. As a Lake Wobegon Lutheran, I still feel guilty about not trying harder to get to work that first morning. But Karl has apparently forgiven me—we had lots of fun reminiscing on the phone—and maybe the God who brings us blizzards as *soul-building exercises* has too.

Keep Ramsey and Skroch's book handy. For anyone who's been through one of our region's trademark storms, this history will spark your memories and warm your heart when you most likely will need it most: during our next blizzard.