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Article Title: Editor's Showcase: The Blizzard of the Century

Full Citation: Jill Koelling, "Editor's Showcase: The Blizzard of the Century," *Nebraska History* 81 (2000): 185

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH2000ShowcaseBliz.pdf>

Date: 11/09/2012

Cataloging Information:

Names: Val Peterson, Guy Henninger, W L Mueller, James S Pittenger

Nebraska Place Names: Lindsay, Chadron

Keywords: Val Peterson, Guy Henninger, W L Mueller, US Fifth Army, Nebraska National Guard, "Operation Snowbound"

Photographs / Images: downtown Chadron, 1949

The Blizzard of the Century

By Jill Marie Koelling

During the winter of 1948-49, Nebraska was hit by a series of intense snowstorms. The first struck on November 18; by April 1949 several Nebraska localities remained isolated by snow. Throughout the winter, letters to Governor Val Peterson's office repeatedly included such phrases as "human suffering," "cattle losses high," and "conditions. . . simply desperate."¹

In January the U.S. Fifth Army and the Nebraska National Guard began "Operation Snowbound." With bulldozers and brute force, soldiers cleared thousands of miles of roads and air-dropped tons of hay to starving cattle. On January 28 Nebraska Adj. Gen. Guy Henninger reported to the governor,

Jill Marie Koelling is curator of photographs at the Nebraska State Historical Society.

"The situation this A.M. is very discouraging. . . more snow and high wind has been forecast and, of course, would undo all that has been done."

On February 2 Governor Peterson telegraphed W. L. Mueller, general superintendent of the Chicago and North Western Railroad, informing him that Lindsay, Nebraska, was completely out of coal and supplies at nearby towns were almost exhausted. "To prevent further deaths and great human suffering absolutely imperative that your railroad be opened immediately," the telegram concluded. Mueller replied that the railroad was making a maximum effort against "unprecedented snow and ice which have resulted in derailment of snow plows and breaking down of rotaries, and ice conditions have further made it necessary to resort to pick and shovel." One enterprising Lincoln citizen urged that army flamethrowers be used to open the roads. Aide James S. Pittenger, perhaps only partly in jest,

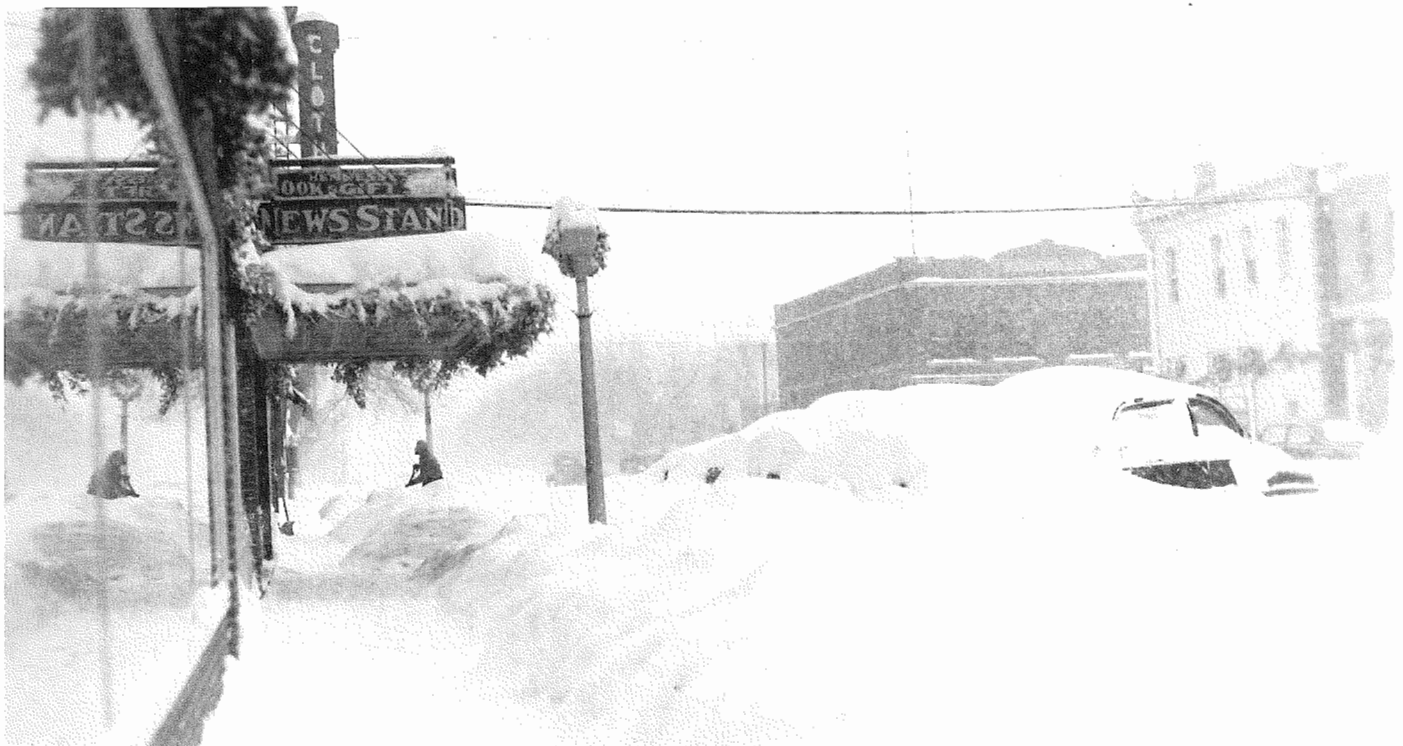
advised the governor that "this might make a bit of [a] human interest story for the press." When the winter of 1948-49 finally ended, fifty-six Nebraskans had lost their lives, approximately half a million head of cattle had perished, and other livestock losses were impossible to estimate.²

Does your family have stories, photographs, or home movies from the blizzard of 1948-49? The Nebraska State Historical Society is interested in adding your memories of that incredible winter to its records. Please contact Jill Koelling at 402-471-4409, or at P.O. Box 82554, Lincoln, NE 68501 to discuss possible donation of such material.

Notes

¹ All cited documents from the governor's office are found in the papers of Governor Val Peterson, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln.

² Joe Duggan, "The Blizzard of '49," *Lincoln Journal-Star*, Jan. 31, 1999: 6A.



Downtown Chadron, 1949. As many as sixty inches of snow fell in parts of Nebraska. Thirty-foot drifts were common. NSHS-RG3139-26