

The 100th Anniversary of the Great Blizzard

by Richard Gardner

The weather forecast was “partly cloudy”, but as Jefferson County people went about their lives a fierce wind blew upon them early Thursday morning, December 4, 1913. With it came snow, snow and more snow, blowing in and piling relentlessly upon the region. It was unlike any storm Jeffco had ever seen, or seen to this day, and 2013 marks the 100th anniversary of the Great Blizzard.

As the day began Thursday Jeffco residents were toughing out the storm. The tramways continued to make their runs to and from Denver, along with the Colorado & Southern Railroad. Contractor Ryan and his crew were in camp upon Lookout Mountain, building the new road across it. Pioneer John Bergen, a man of nearly 80 years, was tending to his ranch in the area of his family’s name, while dairyman John Klaassens made deliveries in the Golden area. Stagecoach driver George Busbee was making runs in the South Platte area. Nobody was prepared for what came upon them.

The snow piled up more and more, and as it did all life slowed down and stopped. By noon on Thursday it was literally impossible for the tramway to keep their lines open to Golden, and one car stuck on Washington Avenue in Golden until 4pm when it was rescued by a snow plow. The car made it out of the city and made it as far as Clear Creek Junction, but there was stranded in the countryside. Meanwhile another car ventured out from Denver at 2pm along the Denver & Intermountain tracks of West 13th Avenue. In charge of motorman Ray Smith and conductor Ted Haney, it made it to Wight’s Station a today’s 13th and Estes, but could go no farther. On board were passengers Ms. Beamer, W.L. Benson, Arthur Frost, Dr. Dennis E. Garvin, Ben Manheim, banker Harold M. Rubey, Ms. Ryan, John Schlisting Jr., Mr. Stoddard, Mrs. Turney, businessman Rees C. Vidler, J.F. Willett, a Colorado School of Mines student, and a couple of Denver ladies. The 17 huddled in the car heated by its small onboard coal stove.

Rural mail carriers persevered through the blinding trip. By Thursday night Harold Richards and Hugh McKinnies made it back to Golden. Charles Brady of Route 3 got as far as the Lloyd Ranch and took refuge there. George



Morrison’s main street after the 1913 storm.

Courtesy Morrison Historical Society, Horton Collection.

Busbee, for many years driver of the mail stage from South Platte, was also out in the storm. Meanwhile that night John Klaassens left Golden with a load of malt, but a short distance from his home his wagon overturned. Harry Brown, an injured World War I veteran, heard his cries and went out to help. He successfully got Klaassens’ horses unhitched, and the Hollander rode off into the stormy night on one and leading the other. John Bergen, needing to tend to his animals, was wading through great drifts trying to reach his way back home. Those in the Clear Creek Junction car huddled down to spend the night, but aboard the Intermountain car their meager supply of coal was giving out, and the temperature was plunging to zero, putting their lives in jeopardy. Frost, already well-known by the nickname Jack, volunteered to go out into the storm to find a supply of coal. Plunging through great drifts, he made it to a nearby farmhouse (possibly that of Joseph B. Wight), secured a sack of coal and made his way back successfully. With this feat it can literally be said Jack Frost saved the passengers from the Great Blizzard.

As day broke the next morning the huge snowstorm raged unabated. By this time some 30 inches of snow were on the ground in Golden. Some there tried to make a break from their snowbound prisons but the howling wind and swiftly falling snow drove them back inside. The Colorado Transcript wrote “A majority of the people seemed almost dazed at the magnitude of the snowfall, and could only stand around and exclaim.”

Although school was canceled three children nevertheless showed up at Golden's South School, leading the newspaper to chastise "Why parents should send children out on such a terrible morning as Friday is beyond all human understanding." Those stranded at Clear Creek Junction were able to successfully make it to Arvada. Those stranded at Wights Station plunged across great drifts to successfully make it to a farmhouse and safety. That morning the horse team of Klaassens was found, but no sign of the dairyman. James Watkins, engineer for the School of Mines power house, crawled on his hands and knees from there to successfully make it back to his north Golden edge home. Fortunately, unlike other Colorado towns Golden never lost its light, telephone or electricity as the snowstorm raged on outside.

When Saturday morning broke it was clear blue sky, a beautiful sight after such an ordeal, but it



After the 1913 Storm: Three people stand near Gateway Stables, south entrance to Red Rocks Park and Bear Creek Canyon near Morrison.

Courtesy Chambers Collection..

was then just the beginning of the next great challenge. Golden's Mayor Richard Broad knew the danger of having an impassable city at zero degree temperatures, and he posted a call for volunteers requesting all men with the interest of the city at heart to assemble at the train depot to break a wagon trail along Washington Avenue. He got 40 takers, and John T. Williams provided 30 draft horses, and soon a good track through the snow was opened up. Shovels and scoops were in high demand, while people marveling at the magnitude of the storm snapped photos of the great pileup.

Upon Lookout Mountain Ryan and his workers had a situation on their hands. They had weathered the storm okay, and there was plenty of food on hand for the men. However, there was none on hand for their horses, and no way to get to any beneath several feet of snow. So that morning the crew of 17 men started down the slopes of Mt. Zion with 34 horses, cutting a narrow path through 15-foot-high drifts. The Transcript wrote "They waded, plunged and fell down the mountains and arrived here at seven in the evening, having been thirteen hours making the trip." One horse tumbled some 200 feet down the mountainside, but the snow being several feet of fresh powder, was dug out and continued on uninjured.

The tramway also had a situation on its hands. Their snowplow was at Denver, but their locomotive was a Leyden, were the snow was fully 4 feet deep with 15-foot high drifts. Leyden was also their source for coal, not only powering the tramway system but also providing fuel for homes across the metro area. They devoted all efforts to reopening the line to Leyden. Out at the farmhouse Garvin, Smith, Frost and Willett couldn't stand it any longer, and according to the Transcript "started, and walked, or rather crawled, to Golden, and arrived here after an experience they will never forget." In the meantime area carpenters made quick money making skis for \$1 a pair, while the Transcript noted "One liquor emporium completely out of the amber fluid secured a new supply with great difficulty, hauling a keg on a small sled over a rather rough route. No second call for volunteers was necessary."

The snowfall levels were staggering: 5 feet at Golden and Evergreen, 4 feet at Creswell and Morrison. Some had to break through their screen doors just to commence digging. Sheriff Joseph Dennis had his lone prisoner Harvey Phillips out shoveling, getting 2 days off his sentence for every day he worked. The Koenig Mercantile spent 2 days cleaning off their sidewalk, then spent half a day shoveling off their roof and covering it again. Damage would've been much worse if people had not acted quickly to shovel snow off their roofs. As it was the damage was great: Samuel A. Cunningham lost his hacks and buggies when the carriage house of his livery stable collapsed under the snow. Sam Bolitho's ice house was totally wrecked, while the Golden Pressed & Fire Brick Company had the roofs of their engine room, pressed brick machine room, and other buildings cave in.

On Sunday John Erickson found the body of his father-in-law John Bergen. He had made it to the doorsteps of his home, but had died of overexertion. Search teams continued to look for Klaassens, while Brown and others hauled provisions on hand sleds to his stranded wife and small children. At 4:30 Monday afternoon the Colorado & Southern finally broke through into Golden, as the townspeople looked on with fascination, many having never seen a rotary snowplow before. Williams hooked up his teams to heavy clay wagons and got Golden's streets passable by the close of Monday. 30 boys from the State Industrial School were only too happy to give the Intermountain a hand shoveling snow, a rare opportunity to earn spending money. No schools or colleges across Jefferson County had succeeded in reopening until Monday; high schoolers outside of Golden were forced to stay home while Mines students got places by slowly plowing or walking on stone fences, skiing to class, or laying down and rolling to campus.

The tramway finally regained access all the way to Golden on Wednesday the 10th, and life began returning back to normal. However, hope was lost for Klaassens and the search was suspended, with a \$20 reward posted for anyone finding him in the days to come. Meanwhile in south Jeffco the body of George Busbee had been found under one of the great drifts, but it was several days before he could be recovered. Busbee like Bergen was a Jefferson County pioneer, having lived here since its early days, and he was 77 years old. He had driven the South Platte mail stage for many years. He had been born at Schuyler, Illinois in 1837, was married to wife Areanna and had one child.

One month and seven days after he went missing Klaassens was at last found when the snow had melted enough to reveal him, not far from where his horses were found. Investigators figured out the 37-year-old must've been thrown from his horse in the blizzard, and that the animal then accidentally stepped on his head, leaving Klaassens to die unconscious bleeding in the snow. His discoverers, Swan Dahlberg and Olaf Ecroth, refused the \$20 reward. Klaassens was from Holland and had lived in Golden 6 years, a hardworking man at various dairies until going on his own, and had just been getting a start towards prosperity. He was buried at Golden Cemetery where he rests today.

A century later this great storm stands alone atop Jeffco record books, for most snow in a single storm, most snow in a 24-hour period,

and longest lasting snow cover afterward. It has never been forgotten.

Jeffco's Coldest Day

50 years ago this year on January 11, 1963, Jefferson County experienced a deep freeze the likes of which it had not seen before or since. It set records which stand to this day for all-time record low, record low high, greatest temperature swing in the shortest amount of time, and more. The Golden Transcript reported "Temperatures plummeted last weekend to grip this area in below-zero temperatures as much as 100 degrees within a 2-day period in some parts of Jefferson County. It had been in the mid-60s Wednesday afternoon. High temperature for Friday as recorded in Golden was 11 below zero. It was so cold that Colorado School of Mines weather instruments refused to work so no reading from the station was available for Friday or Saturday."

On Lookout Mountain the Ross Browns read a temperature of -36 degrees, and the Gordon Diers' thermometer read 48 below. Applewood was -40, while Lakewood was a balmy -25. At Beaver Brook watershed supervisor Ab Wale reported -36, with 3 inches of snow. At Buffalo Creek Doc Corbin recorded the temperature of -56 degrees. He said it was the coldest cold he could remember; in fact it is the coldest anyone has ever recorded in Jefferson County. No schools closed but custodians worked round the clock to keep facilities open and buses running, with plant facilities head George McCormack having crews working day and night. Many pipes froze including in the administration building; Wheat Ridge High assistant superintendent Henry Todsinzki took charge of mop up, repairs and thawing pipes there. Lester Witt and his crew kept busses running, including sending second busses to needed rescues.

Golden's temperature swing over those 2 days was 109 degrees, and it recorded its record low high of -11 that day. Several of its 12 auto accidents were attributed to the storm. Service stations had an overwhelming run Friday and Saturday as cars refused to start and radiators froze in temperatures that could turn oil to sludge. Common scenes were cars being pushed or pulled, hoods up to charge batteries or heat engines, and in some blocks where homes had no garages only one or two cars started.

The *Transcript's* "Avenue Flashes" column wrote "It was the scoffing at the Weatherman that did it – last Wednesday even freezing tem-

peratures seemed impossible – then the Arctic dumped it on us – all records shattered – when the high temperature for the day is 11 below zero, as it was Friday, the knight in shining armor riding a white horse to the rescue takes the form of a service station attendant riding a jeep or a tow truck.”

Ingrid Norquest was a music teacher at Jefferson County schools at the time. Having grown up in the southern tip of Texas, where it snowed maybe 5 times the past century, she was spending her first winter here. Living in Lakewood, she wrote her mother

“It’s been pretty cold here, too. In fact, I’ve never seen weather this cold before. My car wouldn’t start Friday but I got it started yesterday. At noon Thursday it was 0 degrees F outside. That night, it went down to about -17 degrees. Friday, the high was -10 degrees. Friday night, it went down to -25 degrees. I was out in that cold weather without a coat. Not for very long, though. Saturday, I got my car started and drove around some. The battery had been almost dead Saturday, I went without a coat nearly all day, and the high was about -5 degrees. The sun was out, though, and it didn’t even feel cold. This morning, I went to church without a coat, and the temp was about 0 degrees. It’s gone up since then and tonight the low will probably be around -3 degrees or so. At night, I have to start my car and leave it running for about a half hour, before I go to bed. It keeps the battery from going dead. In fact, it’s running out there right now.”

She sent her letter away, and got a phone call in response, the voice on the other end rendering emphatic renditions of “Don’t you do that!” Ingrid had actually gone only out to the mailbox and in heated cars without a coat, and soon knew the dangers of how Colorado’s dry air makes things seem less cold. By Friday night temperatures were rising 10 to 15 degrees than Denver thanks to Chinook winds. 50 years later, the now Ingrid Norquest Gardner, not scared off from her first Colorado winter, was asked if by the time it got back up to 0 things seemed pretty balmy, and she replied “Boy, does it!”

10th Anniversary of the Blizzard of 2003

Although the Great Blizzard of 1913 is in a class by itself atop Jeffco's record charts, another stands in a class by itself below it. The Blizzard of 2003, which took place on March 18-19, 2003, is the 2nd largest snowstorm in Jefferson County history, with more snowfall totals available to give an idea of magnitude in the mountains:

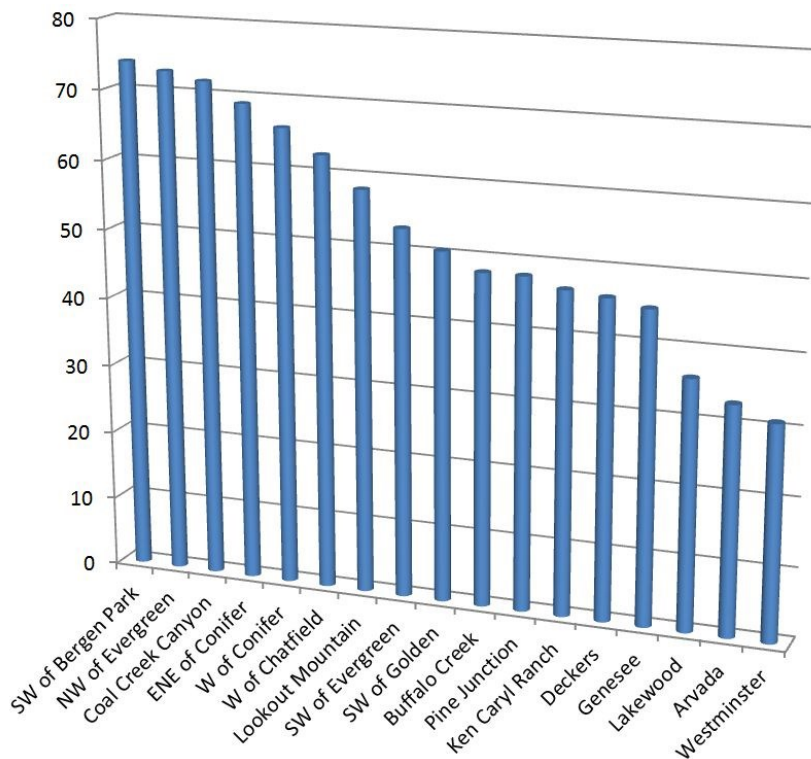
- 74.0 inches – 3 miles SW of Bergen Park
- 72.9 inches – 8 miles NW of Evergreen
- 71.8 inches – Coal Creek Canyon
- 69.0 inches – 4 miles ENE of Conifer
- 66.0 inches – 3 miles W of Conifer
- 62.6 inches – 5 miles W of Chatfield
- 58.2 inches – Lookout Mountain
- 53.2 inches – 1 mile SW of Evergreen
- 50.5 inches – 4 miles SW of Golden
- 48.0 inches – Buffalo Creek
- 48.0 inches – Pine Junction
- 46.6 inches – Ken Caryl Ranch
- 46.0 inches – Deckers
- 45.0 inches – Genesee
- 36.0 inches – Lakewood
- 33.0 inches – Arvada
- 31.0 inches – Westminster



*Morrison's main street right after the March 2003 blizzard.
Photo by S.L. White. More photos at 2003 gallery.*

Sources

- Colorado Transcript, various editions, 1913-1914 and 1963
- Golden Globe, various editions, 1913-1914
- Historical files of Richard Gardner
- Ingrid Norquest, personal letter to Lydia Norquest, 1/13/1963
- Univ of Colorado Dept of Atmospheric & Oceanic Sciences, March 17-20th 2003 *Colorado Winter Storm Totals*



Snow accumulation in inches during the blizzard of March 18-19, 2003. Data compiled by Richard Gardner.