

‘Fierce Winds and a Blank Whiteness’: The Culture of Dakota Winter, 1870-1915

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ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that accommodation to winter was an important – though not the only – response of early Dakotans to the annual challenges and hazards of winter. It examines first the challenges of winter, then what Dakotans did to protect themselves from and even profit from the season, then the ways that Dakotans spoke in positive ways about their winters or, using winter, themselves.

For my parents

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Introduction

From as early as September to as late as May, settlers of the Dakotas encountered a perilous winter environment.¹ The season brought snow, wind, and bitter cold. These conditions added challenge and danger to Dakotans' lives. This thesis argues that winter posed a serious problem to early Dakotans, and accommodation was an important – though not the only – response to it, in that Dakotans incorporated winter into their lifestyles and conceived ways to positively depict the season and, using it, themselves. Despite these behaviors, Dakotans did not accommodate winter in every way possible; they could have prepared further and taken more precautions. Accommodation was common but was not the only response to winter. This thesis focuses on pointing out the ways that it was a response, however. It focuses on the period from 1870 to 1915 because these were growth years in which the population of the Dakotas rose dramatically, from about 14,000 to well past one million.²

This argument for accommodation does not mean that Dakotans necessarily adjusted their winter habits when they came to the region. As Chapter One will describe in more detail, many Dakotans emigrated from regions that featured a winter season, including Scandinavia, New England, and the Midwest. Regarding their former homelands, historian Howard Lamar has written that the leaders of Dakota Territory – and one would assume other Dakota settlers as well – often shared “common memories

¹ The title comes from Laura Ingalls Wilder, *The Long Winter* (New York: HarperCollins, 1968), 122. Wilder wrote that “Town and prairie were lost in the wild storm which was neither earth nor sky, nothing but fierce winds and a blank whiteness.”

² *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910; Volume I: Population* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913), 30.

of regions with... harsh, brutal winters.”³ They may well have brought practices from those places to bear on the problem of surviving and thriving in winter.

Dakotans were not alone in their experience of harsh winters – though their winters were among the nation’s coldest. New England, Minnesota, Michigan, and other northern areas of the United States also receive cold temperatures and heavy snow, so residents of those places during the decades surrounding the start of the twentieth century would have been able to identify with Dakotans’ winter experiences. Likewise, blizzards were a Plains hazard, not just a Dakota burden.⁴ This study of the problems of winter in the early Dakotas and residents’ responses to them looks at how people of this particular area dealt with that season. It is not a case for the uniqueness of how Dakotans handled winter. No doubt one could find many similarities between winter culture in the Dakotas and winter culture in Minnesota or Nebraska.

Karen Kupperman and Wolfgang Behringer are historians who have examined climate and human behavior. Kupperman has written extensively about ways the English reacted and adapted to the North American climate.⁵ She studied the relationship of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English colonists to the heat they encountered in the

³ Howard R. Lamar, “Public Values and Private Dreams: South Dakota’s Search for Identity, 1850-1900,” *South Dakota History* 8, no. 2 (spring 1978): 127.

⁴ Everett Dick, *The Sod-House Frontier 1854-1890: A Social History of the Northern Plains from the Creation of Kansas & Nebraska to the Admission of the Dakotas* (Lincoln, Neb.: Johnsen Publishing Company, 1954), 223.

⁵ Karen Ordahl Kupperman, “The Puzzle of the American Climate in the Early Colonial Period,” *The American Historical Review* 87, no. 5 (December 1982): 1262-1289; Karen Ordahl Kupperman, “Climate and the Mastery of the Wilderness in Seventeenth-Century New England,” in *Seventeenth-Century New England: A Conference Held by The Colonial Society of Massachusetts June 18 and 19, 1982*, ed. David D. Hall, David Grayson Allen, and Philip Chadwick Foster Smith (Boston: The Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1984); Karen Ordahl Kupperman, “Fear of Hot Climates in the Anglo-American Colonial Experience,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 41, no. 2, Third Series (April 1984): 213-240.

American colonies. The English feared this heat because they believed it unhealthy. They also believed that climate produced national character and feared the effect on what they regarded as their English personality of moving from their temperate homeland to a tropical climate. They never lost their fear of the heat, even in the eighteenth century, but they did learn to live with it. They thought they needed to consume large amounts of alcohol to survive the heat, but the environment kept them from making beer and wine. They turned instead to corn and fruit to make drinks. They designed well-ventilated homes, with kitchens in separate buildings to keep away the heat given off by cooking, and they wore lighter clothing. Men jettisoned wigs, and some women began wearing masks. They avoided strenuous activities to avoid overexertion in the heat. They also put down roots in America. In the 1700s, English settlers, who were by then often born in America, accepted heat as part of their lives and came to view America as home. Kupperman thus showed people adapting to a difficult aspect of the climate but also accepting its constant presence.⁶

Kupperman has also described early New Englanders' twin beliefs that climatic fluctuations indicated God's favor or disfavor toward their behavior and that building homes and establishing farms would moderate the cold. The colonists endured difficult winters from 1630 to 1650, but the climate then grew milder between 1650 and 1680. Surely, thought the New Englanders, their settlement caused the change. But then the Little Ice Age returned with a vengeance during the last two decades of the seventeenth century. According to Kupperman, this left the colonists disappointed and sure that their

⁶ Kupperman, "Fear of Hot Climates."

sin had brought on the calamity.⁷ Kupperman's writing shows American settlers physically and mentally reacting to the challenges of the American climate. Dakotans did likewise.

In contrast to Kupperman's studies of emigrants moving into a new climate, Wolfgang Behringer examined what happened when a new climate overtook a static people by studying the role of the Little Ice Age in European culture. Behringer argued "that even minor changes in the climate may result in huge social, political and religious convulsions" and that responses to the Little Ice Age eventually helped to produce "the world we know today, the 'modern' world after the revolutions in science, communications and agricultural and industrial production."⁸ In those often cold years, people dressed more warmly, struggled to find enough fuel, built stone rather than wood houses, and suffered from sadness or psychological disorders. Writers commonly depicted winter at this time and turned to fearsome images in their work. Increases in religious activity accompanied proclamations that the bad weather was a sign of God's wrath for man's sin. As the Little Ice Age went on, however, Europeans sought government help adapting to the climate rather than God's help in changing the climate. They also became less frightened of the adverse climate.⁹ Behringer wrote about "cultural reactions to climate change."¹⁰ Likewise, using his term, this thesis discusses cultural reactions to winter in the Dakotas.¹¹

⁷ Kupperman, "Climate and the Mastery of the Wilderness," 19-21, 25-27, 30, 36-37.

⁸ Wolfgang Behringer, *A Cultural History of Climate*, trans. Patrick Camiller (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), vii.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 85-156.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, vii.

¹¹ The following sources provided models and inspiration for writing this thesis: Bell Irvin Wiley, *The Life of Johnny Reb: The Common Soldier of the Confederacy* (Baton

Historians have covered the broad history of the early Dakotas, including their growth, politics, railroads, and agriculture.¹² Historians have not yet, however, granted winter in the early Dakotas the focused, detailed treatment it deserves. They have touched on many elements of life in the early Dakotas, but no one has pursued an integrated, in-depth study of Dakota winter. This is the case even though winter was a central concern to early Dakotans and thus a key part of understanding this region. In *The Children's Blizzard*, journalist David Laskin provided some information about historically significant storms and winters in Dakota Territory, but he focused primarily on the famous blizzard of January 12, 1888, which arose suddenly and brought blinding snow followed by intense cold to the territory.¹³ Laskin concluded that the storm sobered

Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978); William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*, first revised edition. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003); A. Roger Ekirch, *At Day's Close: Night in Times Past* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005).

¹² Harry F. Thompson, ed., *A New South Dakota History* (Sioux Falls, S.D.: The Center for Western Studies, 2005); Paula Nelson, *After the West Was Won: Homesteaders and Town-Builders in Western South Dakota, 1900-1917*, 1st ed. (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1986); Herbert S. Schell, "Widening Horizons at the Turn of the Century: The Last Dakota Land Boom," *South Dakota History* 12, no. 2/3 (summer/fall 1982): 93-117; Kenneth M. Hammer, "Come to God's Country: Promotional Efforts in Dakota Territory, 1861-1889," *South Dakota History* 10, no. 4 (fall 1980): 291-309; John R. Milton, *South Dakota: A Bicentennial History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977); Robert P. Wilkins and Wynona H. Wilkins, *North Dakota: A Bicentennial History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977); Herbert Samuel Schell, *History of South Dakota*, 3rd ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975); Hiram M. Drache, *The Challenge of the Prairie: Life and Times of Red River Pioneers* (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1970); Elwyn B. Robinson, *History of North Dakota* (Fargo: North Dakota State University Institute for Regional Studies); Gilbert C. Fite, *The Farmers' Frontier 1865-1900* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966); Howard Roberts Lamar, *Dakota Territory 1861-1889: A Study of Frontier Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956); Dick, *The Sod-House Frontier*.

¹³ David Laskin, *The Children's Blizzard* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004), 2.

Dakota Territory settlers, tempering their enthusiasm and belief that they could somehow tame the land.¹⁴

Elwyn Robinson scattered references to winter throughout his history of North Dakota, but he tended to overgeneralize, writing, for example, “The cool, dry climate made them [North Dakotans] a hustling or energetic people who took pride in withstanding the hard winters,” without sufficiently developing his point.¹⁵ Robinson’s point may have been accurate, but he mainly whets the Dakota historian’s appetite for evidence, rather than providing a definitive word. Robinson described winter as a time that sometimes allowed socializing centered around winter sports, but it also confined people to indoor chores, such as fixing tools or making furniture, or entertainment, such as conversation or games. “Winter brought isolation, numbing cold, and blizzards,” he wrote. He later described the “fear of blizzards” as part of a general context of Dakotans’ concern about what the weather would bring next.¹⁶ In his history of South Dakota, Herbert Schell discussed the nature of blizzards in the region and the most memorable blizzards in Dakota Territory history, but he, too, failed to develop this topic in any great depth.¹⁷ The volumes on North and South Dakota published as part of a series of state histories noted the intensity of Dakota winter, winter’s role in Americans’ negative perceptions of the Dakotas, and Dakotans’ sensitivity to negative portrayals of their

¹⁴ Ibid., 267-271.

¹⁵ Robinson, *History of North Dakota*, 289.

¹⁶ Ibid., 166, 168, 550.

¹⁷ Schell, *History of South Dakota*, 180-181.

winters.¹⁸ Paula Nelson briefly noted the preparations for winter and the winter sufferings of settlers in western South Dakota in the early twentieth century.¹⁹

Everett Dick wrote a rather anecdotal history of settler culture in the Dakotas, Kansas, and Nebraska in the late nineteenth century. In his account, winter weather in Dakota Territory fit into a larger context of natural disasters that also included drought, grasshoppers, dust, floods, and fire. But even in a year-round harsh environment, winter weather was especially challenging. “Of all these indications of displeasure on the part of nature, perhaps the most trying were the blizzards,” Dick wrote, and he later described low temperatures as “particularly severe in the Dakotas.” Dick described some of the conditions of winter, the way a blizzard felt, and the famous winter of 1880-1881.²⁰

Hiram Drache has written more than any other Dakota historian about winter. He discussed winter as well as its effects on work, reading, housing, stock-raising, travel, pace of settlement, and opportunities for community in parts, at least, of Minnesota and North Dakota. He portrayed winter as a challenge that settlers certainly recognized, but like other historians, he failed to make it the central focus of his study.²¹ Historians have proved that winter was significant in the Dakotas, but they have not developed this point in sufficient detail.

This thesis aims to do just that, to examine fully the culture of winter in the early Dakotas. To describe this culture, it draws on personal accounts, letters, diaries,

¹⁸ Wilkins and Wilkins, *North Dakota*, 10, 14-17, 54, 198-200; Milton, *South Dakota*, xiii, 3, 5, 85, 88-90, 107-108.

¹⁹ Nelson, *After the West Was Won*, 30, 34-36.

²⁰ Dick, *The Sod-House Frontier*, 202, 221-230, 233.

²¹ Hiram M. Drache, *The Challenge of the Prairie: Life and Times Of Red River Pioneers* (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1970), 8-9, 13-14, 38-39, 41-42, 46-47, 63, 77-78, 86-87, 93-95, 105, 107-109, 111-113, 147-159, 225, 230-231, 234-235, 265-266, 296-299, 301-302, 304.

newspapers, and local histories to learn what settlers, reporters, or early amateur historians recorded about winter. These sources are plentiful and contain rich information. Many settlers and writers substantially described winter. Historian David Wrobel has said that Western settlers wanted to enhance their reputation for undergoing challenges, so when they wrote memoirs or remembered themselves in the decades surrounding the early twentieth century, they spotlighted the ways that they endured worse than those who came after. They also emphasized their superiority over later pioneers or Americans.²² This thesis nevertheless draws on these sources, despite the risk that some are exaggerated. Wrobel's insights were added to this thesis as it was nearing completion, so to re-evaluate all use of memoir or reminiscence would prove a difficult task. It would not certainly yield benefits, either. It is impossible to know for sure which instances are played up for effect and which are not. To dismiss these sources entirely would significantly reduce the amount of evidence on which this thesis draws. The evidence derived from these sources is plausible, though. Other than an instance in chapter three, where it is clear that some sort of exaggeration might be involved, and maybe a very few other places, this thesis has avoided analyzing these sources' motivations or hedging towards them, saying, for example, that these accounts "might have happened."

This thesis examines Dakotans' winter culture in three chapters. The first establishes winter as a problem in Dakota life. It will describe how winter killed settlers and livestock, inspired fear in settlers, hindered transportation, and produced isolation.

²² David M. Wrobel, *Promised Lands: Promotion, Memory, and the Creation of the American West* (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 103-104, 108-119, 121-130, 132-145.

The second looks at how Dakotans accommodated to winter in the ways they lived. They routinely prepared for winter, took alternative jobs in the winter, and put extra winter time to use. Some enjoyed the benefits winter offered to transportation, and some businessmen wanted a harsh winter so that they could make more money. They also, however, failed to take every possible step in preparing for winter and protecting themselves against winter. They accommodated to winter but not as much as they could have. Chapter three examines Dakotans' positive rhetoric about winter. Motivated at least in part by a desire to encourage settlement in the Dakotas, they defended and promoted the season publicly. They explained away or denied its harshness, even proclaiming the superiority of Dakota winters. Conversely, some Dakotans promoted themselves by using winter. They accepted that Dakota winters were harsh and then drew attention to their ability to overcome them. For them, the weather was bad, but the people who underwent it were subject of praise. Other Dakotans, however, reacted to winter, and thus the Dakotas, with distaste.

Chapter One

Mary Woodward's thermometer was inadequate for use in Dakota Territory. Woodward, who resided near Fargo, Dakota Territory, during the 1880s, owned an instrument that could not register temperatures below -40 degrees Fahrenheit. At that point, the mercury collected in a ball in the bottom of the tube and had nowhere else to fall. Consequently, Woodward found herself ignorant of the exact temperature on Christmas Eve, 1884, but she knew it was extremely cold. Though this problem may have been somewhat vexing, her inability to obtain a correct thermometer reading proved the least of the cold-weather problems of Dakotans in the first half-century of their territory.²³

Winter presented much more serious problems to the hundreds of thousands of people who settled in the Dakotas between 1870 and 1915. The harsh winters brought annual challenges. Dakotans faced the prospect of death or severe injury during winter. Harrowing storm or winter experiences proved so searing to Dakotans that they lived for years in their memories. In such an environment, fear of winter spread. Winter killed livestock. Winter weather could halt or hinder travel, which could in turn play a role in supply shortages, a slower economy, and isolation. Even their houses proved inadequate refuges because indoor temperatures dropped below freezing. Snow and cold made routine farm chores more difficult. In short, winter in the Dakotas often proved a miserable experience. Most Dakotans consequently disliked winter weather.

As immigrants to Dakota Territory during the 1880s, Mary Woodward and her family constituted a tiny part of the tremendous population growth of the land that

²³ Mary Dodge Woodward, *The Checkered Years*, ed. Mary Boynton Cowdrey (Caldwell, Idaho: The Caxton Printers, 1937), 59.

became North and South Dakota between its establishment as a territory in 1861 and 1915. The census figure in 1860 for what became Dakota Territory was 4,837.²⁴ There was no great population surge in the early years of the 1860s. Various problems deterred potential settlers: a focus on the Civil War, poor harvests, grasshopper attacks, and the fear of Indians. Dakotans turned around and left because of the challenges of these years. The territory's warts were no secret to residents of the states near Dakota Territory because publications there provided lurid depictions of them, and the territory acquired a bad name.²⁵

Dakota Territory began a notable period of growth in 1866 as the prospect of acquiring land enticed settlers. One way settlers could acquire land was via the Homestead Act. Passed in 1862, the act offered a settler 160 acres of land nearly free of charge, although the settler had to live on such land for five years and work the ground.²⁶ By 1866, Indian conflict had subsided enough to allow settlement to begin again, and throughout the remainder of the decade, the United States government took control of significant amounts of Indian land in the territory. Late in the decade came the beginning of the expansion of one of the most important factors in the growth of the Dakotas: the

²⁴ *Thirteenth Census*, 30.

²⁵ Fite, *The Farmers' Frontier*, 27, 34; Herbert Samuel Schell, *History of South Dakota*, 3rd ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), 78.

²⁶ Fite, *The Farmers' Frontier*, 16-18, 20-24; Schell, *History of South Dakota*, 170-171, 174; Robert P. Wilkins and Wynona H. Wilkins, *North Dakota: A Bicentennial History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977), 38, 108; John Milton, *South Dakota: A Bicentennial History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), 73, 85; Paul W. Gates, ed., "The Homestead Act, 1862," in *An American Primer*, ed. Daniel J. Boorstin (New York: The New American Library, 1966), 507-509; Elwyn B. Robinson, *History of North Dakota* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 148-151, 153. I have used both the reprinted edition of this book, published by the North Dakota State University Institute for Regional Studies, which reprints the 1966 version and adds a postscript and additional preface, as well as the original 1966 version.

railroad. In 1868, builders completed a railroad to Sioux City, Iowa, which allowed farmers in southeastern Dakota Territory to ship their goods east. The census of 1870 showed that Dakota Territory's population had nearly tripled, to 14,181. In 1873, railroads reached both Yankton, in southern Dakota Territory, and Bismarck, in northern Dakota Territory. Stagecoaches and steamboats also contributed to growth by allowing travel into and around the territory. Despite this improvement in transportation infrastructure, the territory's first growth spurt ended in 1873 because of a renewed surge of grasshopper infestations, drought, and an economic panic.²⁷

Marketing also helped Dakota Territory to grow. Dakotans began in the 1860s to speak out on behalf of their territory. Railroads advertised the territory in order to build the population that would need railroads. Settlers wrote letters exhorting family members or friends to join them in Dakota Territory. Steamship companies advertised the merits of the territory overseas to draw foreign immigration. Newspapers praised the territory. The territory promoted itself. Like the railroads, it sent representatives to the eastern United States and overseas to encourage immigration. Both the railroads and the territory also wrote advertisements or promotional literature about Dakota Territory. Railroads offered settlers cheap financing on land, free or reduced fares for transportation, and temporary housing.²⁸

²⁷ Schell, *History of South Dakota*, 79-80, 109, 113; Gary Olson, "Yankee and European Settlement," in *A New South Dakota History*, ed. Harry F. Thompson (Sioux Falls, S.D.: The Center for Western Studies, 2005), 125; Robinson, *History of North Dakota*, 100-106, 108, 122-123, 128-129; Dick, *The Sod-House Frontier*, 185; Fite, *The Farmers' Frontier*, 55, 68; *Thirteenth Census*, 30; Hammer, "Promotional Efforts in Dakota Territory," 291-309.

²⁸ Olson, "Yankee and European Settlement," 117-118; Robinson, *History of North Dakota*, 129, 131-132, 144-145; Fite, *The Farmers' Frontier*, 24-27, 29, 31-33, 97-98; Drache, *The Challenge of the Prairie: Life and Times of Red River Pioneers*, 16; Schell,

Dakota grew in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, and it acquired a unique diversity, although many immigrants came from northern lands. New England and the Midwest were important sources of immigrants. European immigrants, with the exception of the Russian Germans, came from the northern half of Europe. The Russian Germans were Germans who had resettled along the Black Sea in the early-nineteenth century. Within a century, in the face of mounting oppression in their new home, Dakota Territory seemed to offer them better opportunities. Other major European immigrant groups included Norwegians, Swedes, Finns, English, Scots, Irish, Germans, Bohemians and other Russians. Settlement in the Dakotas proved so popular to Europeans, in fact, that by 1890, 42.7 percent of the new state of North Dakota's population had been born outside the United States. In South Dakota, 26.1 percent of the population had been born outside the United States.²⁹

The rate of immigration to the Dakotas increased again in 1878 with the beginning of "the Great Dakota Boom." In one sense, the boom was technological. Farm machinery had improved enough to grow vast quantities of wheat, and a new milling

History of South Dakota, 117-118, 160; Hammer, "Promotional Efforts in Dakota Territory," 291-309; Dick, *The Sod-House Frontier*, 185-191; Schell, "The Last Dakota Land Boom," 94-96; Lynwood E. Oyos, "Farming: Dependency and Depopulation," in *A New South Dakota History*, ed. Harry F. Thompson (Sioux Falls, S.D.: The Center for Western Studies, 2005), 225-226.

²⁹ Richard A. Bartlett, *The New Country: A Social History of the American Frontier, 1776-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 190; Shirley Fischer Arends, *The Central Dakota Germans: Their History, Language, and Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1989), 5-18, 25, 30-31, 33, 35, 45; Frederick C. Luebke, ed., *Ethnicity on the Great Plains* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), xi, xvii; Olson, "Yankee and European Settlement," 117-142; Robinson, *History of North Dakota*, 129-130, 134-136, 146; Drache, *The Challenge of the Prairie: Life and Times of Red River Pioneers*, 17-19; Schell, *History of South Dakota*, 115-116; Frederick C. Luebke, ed., *European Immigrants in the American West: Community Histories* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), vii, xvii; *Thirteenth Census*, 30; Wilkins and Wilkins, *North Dakota*, 52.

process allowed the refinement of Dakota spring wheat into a product that consumers would buy. Such wheat naturally turned into dark flour, but the new process transformed it into white flour, the same color as the flour that came from winter wheat. The boom also depended on the abundant number of immigrants willing to transplant themselves to the West. Favorable environmental conditions prevailed. During the boom years, the ravenous grasshoppers stayed away, while rain fell plentifully. The growth of the railroad, a great friend of Dakota development, also encouraged growth. Population rose to 135,177 in 1880 and 539,583 a decade later. Declining interest in Dakota Territory and falling wheat prices contributed to ending this 10-year period of success, however.³⁰

The 1890s brought drought and economic depression, but the Dakotas, by then two states, still grew. The Dakotas grew at a faster rate early in the twentieth century, however. This time the growth took place largely in the western halves of the two states. With a drier climate that was more conducive to sustaining grazing lands than wheatfields, livestock, especially cattle, but also including sheep and horses, were raised here. In the period of growth that began in 1898 farmers moved west of the Missouri River, and brought more land into cultivation as they followed the railroads and as the government opened more Indian land to settlement. Still, by 1910 drought began to trouble the Dakotas yet again, and the boom ended by the middle of the decade.³¹

³⁰ Olson, "Yankee and European Settlement," 123, 125; Fite, *The Farmers' Frontier*, 75-76, 78-79, 81, 83-84, 86, 90-91, 93-94, 97-98, 106-108; Robinson, *History of North Dakota*, 134, 140, 143, 154, 227; Bartlett, *The New Country*, 212-214; Schell, *History of South Dakota*, 158-160, 165; audio source: Patrick N. Allitt, *Farming the Great Plains*, vol. 5, 7 vols., The History of the United States, 2nd Edition (Chantilly, Va.: The Teaching Company, 2003); *Thirteenth Census*, 30; Oyos, "Farming," 225-226; Wilkins and Wilkins, *North Dakota*, 52.

³¹ audio source: Allitt, *Farming the Great Plains*; Schell, "The Last Dakota Land Boom," 93-117; Olson, "Yankee and European Settlement," 142; Robinson, *History of North*

Some winters, such as those of 1880-1881, 1886-1887, 1887-1888, 1896-1897, and 1906-1907, stood out for their particularly potent weather.³² But bad weather was not confined to a few outstanding winters. Every year, early Dakotans faced some of the United States' coldest temperatures. John Finley, a United States Signal Service and Weather Bureau meteorologist in the 1880s and 1890s, wrote in 1893, "From an examination of the distribution of temperature over the Northern plains, Manitoba, and Hudson Bay Territory, it is evident that eastern North Dakota lies within the southwest quadrant of the area of maximum cold in the interior of the continent, and that with northeastern Montana and northwestern Minnesota it forms the region of greatest cold in the United States."³³

Dakota winters meant prolonged periods of subfreezing temperatures. Modern-day weather records show that winter weather can persist for much of the year. Average daily low temperatures fall to 32 degrees or below from October into April. Not only daily lows but also highs commonly average at or below freezing between December and February. In some places, the normal daily low temperature during the coldest part of the

Dakota, 174-196, 227, 235-254; Bob Lee, "Ranching East to West," in *A New South Dakota History*, ed. Harry F. Thompson (Sioux Falls, S.D.: The Center for Western Studies, 2005), 255-287; *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1920*, vol. I (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1921), 20-21.

³² For the winter of 1896-1897, see Drache, *Challenge of the Prairie*, 156-158.

³³ A.W. Greely, *American Weather: A Popular Exposition of the Phenomena of the Weather* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1888), page not numbered; John P. Finley, *Certain Climatic Features of the Two Dakotas* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1893), 33; Edward Hogan, "Physical Environment," in *A New South Dakota History*, ed. Harry F. Thompson (Sioux Falls, S.D.: The Center for Western Studies, 2005), 26; Joseph G. Galway, "J.P. Finley: The First Severe Storms Forecaster," *Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society* 66, no. 11 (November 1985): 1389-1395.

winter is not only below freezing but below zero. In Grand Forks, the average daily low temperature is below zero from December 24 through February 4.³⁴

Dakota winters grew so cold that residents could experience subfreezing temperatures even indoors. Their roofs and walls did not always provide an effective barrier against the cold and snow. For some Dakotans, this meant shivering indoors rather than basking in warm temperatures. “It was extremely difficult to maintain a comfortable temperature even in the best built houses,” said the *Bismarck Daily Tribune* regarding life during several days of icy wind that bedeviled the city in early March 1892.³⁵ In the same January 1886 entry in which Woodward described her home’s extensive insulation and judged it “the warmest house in this vicinity,” an “extremely cold” day motivated her to bundle up in her “hood, shawl, and mittens” while making breakfast. Houses could grow so cold that not only did the occupants feel discomfort, but even the items in their houses no longer functioned properly. Cold air that dropped to a temperature of -20 degrees outdoors in March 1885 penetrated Mary Woodward’s home and rendered liquids useless. “The ink jug, bluing bottle, and other things in the kitchen and pantry froze solid,” she recorded.³⁶ “The ink has frozen so guess I shall have to use a pencil,” read one

³⁴ “U.S. Climate Normals: Product Selection,” National Climatic Data Center, last modified June 24, 2005, http://hurricane.ncdc.noaa.gov/cgi-bin/climatenormals/climatenormals.pl?directive=prod_select2&prodtype=CLIM84&subrnum=; “U.S. Climate Normals: Overview,” National Climatic Data Center, last modified June 24, 2005, <http://hurricane.ncdc.noaa.gov/cgi-bin/climatenormals/climatenormals.pl?directive=overview&subrnum=>. This paragraph is based on data from the Grand Forks International Airport, Bismarck Municipal Airport, and Minot International Airport in North Dakota and Pierre Regional Airport, Aberdeen Regional Airport, Yankton, and Aberdeen in South Dakota. These locations show an east-to-west spread across the two Dakotas. This normal temperature data was calculated by averaging readings between 1971 and 2000, according to the NCDC.

³⁵ *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, N.D., March 10, 1892).

³⁶ Woodward, *The Checkered Years*, 72, 114.

Dakotan's letter, written in January 1887.³⁷ Another wrote that the indoor temperature even in May became cold enough to freeze milk and water. "Such is life in a Claim Shanty of the far west," she reasoned.³⁸

Modification to a house to prepare it for winter and a hot fire could not offset flimsy walls and keep the house of one settler family warm during the winter of 1886-1887. "Some bad days we kept the children in bed to keep them warm," their mother recalled.³⁹ Even beds were not always protection against winter, though. One settler remembered snow dusting his.⁴⁰ Whether the quality of settlers' houses was part of the problem, clearly they struggled at times to stay warm indoors during the winter. Thus winter was not only an outdoor problem but an invasive threat that could come even into a sturdy home and preclude activities such as writing a letter or getting a glass of milk.

The Dakotas regularly experienced cold and snow, but snow did not fall deeply every winter season. In fact, Finley called it an "exceedingly small amount," especially

³⁷ "Edwin and Clara Johnson Letters", July 1987, quoted letter from box 1 folder 6; see also the introduction from box 1 folder 1, NDSU Institute for Regional Studies and NDSU Archives.

³⁸ "Prairie Croquet: Diary of Julia Gage Carpenter," in Elizabeth Hampsten, compiler, *To All Inquiring Friends: Letters, Diaries and Essays in North Dakota 1880-1910*, 2nd ed. (Grand Forks, N.D.: Department of English, University of North Dakota, 1980), 230.

³⁹ Everett C. Albers and D. Jerome Tweton, eds., "On the Banks of the Knife River," in *The Way It Was; The North Dakota Frontier Experience Book Two: Norwegian Homesteaders*, 2nd ed. (Fessenden, N.D.: The Grass Roots Press, 2001), 83-84. Material from *The North Dakota Frontier Experience* series has been subject to some editing. Much if not all of the material in this book, at least, was subject to the editing of the people who interviewed the Dakota pioneers originally as well as the editors of the collection. "In a sense, what follows in the sixteen stories in this collection are an edited interpretation sixty years after someone else edited and interpreted the stories of what early pioneers remembered about the way it was forty to sixty years before," writes one of the editors (iii). In all of the books, the editors have changed some accounts from the third to the first person and made minor edits to the material. An unnumbered page early in this book provides a typical statement of editing from this series.

⁴⁰ Steven J. Bucklin, ed., "'Pioneer Days of South Dakota': The Memoir of Frank Bloodgood," *South Dakota History* 29, no. 2 (summer 1999): 120.

compared with mountain regions of the West. According to Finley, particular regions, including eastern South Dakota, the Red River Valley, and Black Hills could expect more snow. Still, a typical winter, according to Finley's admittedly "not altogether satisfactory" statistics, meant about 30 inches of snow, with heavy years receiving more than 50, and some light years less than 10.⁴¹

However, the conditions accompanying snow could turn moderate snowfall into an epic problem. Blizzards, storms of wind-driven snow, made Dakota snowfall especially dangerous. According to the modern National Weather Service, a blizzard must last at least three hours and involves several elements. A 35 mile per hour wind blows for much, if not all, of the period of the storm, and there must be a good deal of snow in the air, either stirred up from the ground or falling from the sky. Such conditions can limit visibility to less a quarter of a mile. Even if Dakotans never articulated it exactly that way, this is the type of storm they described when they spoke of a blizzard.⁴²

Dakotans overtaken by blizzards faced the combined dangers of suffocation, cold, and near-blindness. Blizzard veterans compared the snow's consistency to flour and said this fine snow and the accompanying wind could kill victims by restricting their ability to breathe. "It is hard to live very long if exposed to the full fury of one of these storms," wrote early Dakota chronicler William Rhoads. "The snow, lashed by the strong wind, gets to be as fine as flour, fills the eyes and nostrils and freezes there, so that it is difficult

⁴¹ Finley, *Climatic Features of the Two Dakotas*, 8, 68-75, quoted on 14; Hogan, "Physical Environment," 25-26; Wilkins and Wilkins, *North Dakota*, 10, 15; Schell, *History of South Dakota*, 11-14; Robinson, *History of North Dakota*, 8-9; Drache, *The Challenge of the Prairie: Life and Times of Red River Pioneers*, 147.

⁴² NWS Internet Services Team, "National Weather Service Glossary," National Weather Service, last modified June 25, 2009, <http://www.weather.gov/glossary/index.php?letter=b>.

to breathe and almost impossible to see. Add to this that the wind will force the snow into any opening in your clothes, clear to the skin, chilling you to death.”⁴³

This combination of blizzards’ blinding clouds of snow and the lack of landmarks to reorient travelers on the treeless, rural Dakota landscape made it possible for them to become lost in these deadly storms. After staring with horror into the wild whiteness of a blizzard, Mary Woodward wrote: “How terrible it must be to become lost on the prairie! No road at all is visible and there is nothing to guide a person. . . . No one is so well acquainted with the country that he can find his way in a storm such as this. When we look out it is like gazing into an eternal empty space.”⁴⁴ Not only did a blizzard obscure orienting clues, such as roads, houses, or fences, but victims found themselves unable to create an effective mental picture of the landmarks they could see. Dakota newspapers in 1888 claimed blizzard victims usually “lose all power of reasoning and do not seem to recognize the most familiar surroundings,” said a late-nineteenth century history of

⁴³ William Rhoads, *Recollections of Dakota Territory* (Ft. Pierre, S.D. (best indication): n.p., 1931), 35; N. J. Dunham, *A History of Jerauld County South Dakota: From the Earliest Settlement to January 1st, 1909* (Wessington Springs, S.D.: None given, 1910), 168-169; Bucklin, “The Memoir of Frank Bloodgood,” 144; David Laskin, *The Children’s Blizzard* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004), 121; *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 30, 1909); George C. Berry, “Homestead Days Clark County, Dakota Territory George C. Berry (1870-1944)”, written in 1939, printed in 1998, 54; Robert D. Crawford, manuscript, box 2, folder 14, Mss 290, NDSU Institute for Regional Studies and NDSU Archives.

⁴⁴ Mary Dodge Woodward, *The Checkered Years*, ed. Mary Boynton Cowdrey (Caldwell, Idaho: The Caxton Printers, 1937), 152-153. 199; Mae Caldwell Moran, “Eight-Hundred Square Miles of Range,” in *The Way It Was; The North Dakota Frontier Experience Book Three: The Cowboys & Ranchers*, ed. Everett C. Albers and D. Jerome Tweton (Fessenden, N.D.: The Grass Roots Press, 2004), 54-55; Dick, *The Sod-House Frontier*, 233; Robinson, *History of North Dakota*, 12-13; Schell, *History of South Dakota*, 13; Thomas R. Negus, “Turner and Swan Lake Townships,” in *Turner County Pioneer History*, by W.H. Stoddard (Sioux Falls, S.D.: Brown & Saenger, 1931), 142.

Minnehaha County, South Dakota.⁴⁵ Such behavior may have been the result of low visibility or the atrophying of brainpower caused by hypothermia.⁴⁶ To experience a blizzard in the open was to risk becoming permanently lost.

This terrible fate of losing one's way in a blizzard was a real enough possibility that Dakota farmers used their clotheslines for protection against getting lost by stretching them from their homes to their barns and following them as a guide during a storm. Settler Sophie Trupin used this method to reach the barn when a blizzard was raging or even imminent. "The thing to do," she wrote, "was to attach a rope to the door of the house and stretch it to the barn. When you got to the barn you took care of the chores as quickly as possible, then you got back to the house by moving your hands along the rope which had been attached to the barn door. It may have been only a few minutes since you left the house, but in those few minutes the whole world could be blotted out."⁴⁷ That numerous Dakotans turned to this method for security suggests the grave danger of low visibility in a blizzard.

But for those out on the prairie, far from a clothesline, death could follow disorientation. When a blizzard forced lost people to stay outdoors, it made them vulnerable to the cold. "It was the turbulence kicked up by the strengthening low that bewildered those caught out on the prairie that afternoon," wrote journalist David Laskin

⁴⁵ Dana R. Bailey, *History of Minnehaha County, South Dakota* (Sioux Falls, S.D.: Brown & Saenger Ptrs., 1899), 213.

⁴⁶ Laskin, *The Children's Blizzard*, 189-193.

⁴⁷ Arthur E. Towne, *Old Prairie Days: A Historic Narrative of the Stirring Pioneer Days in Dakota Territory in the Eighties* (Otsego, Mich.: The Otsego Union Press, 1941), 116; Della Wehe, "Reminiscences of the Early Eighties in Dakota", 2, SC 718, NDSU Institute for Regional Studies and NDSU Archives; Sophie Trupin, *Dakota Diaspora: Memoirs of a Jewish Homesteader* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 82-83; John A. Stanley, *From Then Until Now* (No place given: No publisher given, 1948), 21-22.

of the January 12, 1888, storm. “But it was the high that dropped down in the wake of the low that killed them.”⁴⁸ This terrible fate happened not only in 1888. Agnes Gargan, a western North Dakota schoolteacher, left her boarding house to make the six-mile trip to her mother’s house one Friday afternoon in late January 1912. She never reached home because she foolishly departed in a blizzard. With the storm restricting her visibility, she failed to locate the road that would have taken her home. Days later, reported *The Grand Forks Daily Herald*, “searchers found her body, leaning against the stump of a tree.”⁴⁹

Winter weather in the Dakotas also endangered settlers because it could change quickly, before they could prepare or take cover. “Even on clear days, the fiercest storms sometimes started within a few hours,” recalled Peter Anderson who moved to the territory in 1886.⁵⁰ An 1892 report from St. Paul, Minnesota, describing a blizzard that involved the Dakotas, stated that “a heavy loss of life is feared on the prairies on account of the suddenness of the change” in temperature.⁵¹ The most famous surprise Dakota storm was the January 12, 1888, blizzard, when Dakotans went outside and let their children attend school because the weather early in the day appeared so benign – when in fact a uniquely powerful storm system was bearing down on them. Therefore, when it came, it “struck without a second’s warning.”⁵² Apparently no one ever managed a

⁴⁸ Laskin, *The Children’s Blizzard*, 173 and 128-221 for examples of deaths from becoming lost in that storm.

⁴⁹ *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., November 29, 1896); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., February 6, 1912).

⁵⁰ Peter B. Anderson, “Pre-empting, Tree Claiming and Homesteading in Eddy and Wells Counties,” in *The Way It Was; The North Dakota Frontier Experience Book Two: Norwegian Homesteaders*, ed. Everett C. Albers and D. Jerome Tweton, 2nd ed. (Fessenden, N.D.: The Grass Roots Press, 2001), 10-11.

⁵¹ *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., March 11, 1892).

⁵² Laskin, *The Children’s Blizzard*, 1-8, 65-83, 109-116, 121-179; Dunham, *History of Jerauld County*, 164-185; Bucklin, “The Memoir of Frank Bloodgood,” 142.

precise count of the victims, for a recent history of the storm offers a broad range of 250 to 500 deaths in Dakota Territory and Nebraska. This monograph's statement that the storm claimed victims in 32 of the 44 counties in the southeastern quarter of Dakota Territory suggests that a significant number of Dakotans felt a personal connection to the storm, however.⁵³

While exposure to winter weather meant death for some Dakotans, others faced lesser but still unpleasant fates: amputation or severe skin damage from exposure to the cold. After a storm in late January of 1872, the *Dakota Republican* reported that one person in the area froze to death in the storm, another froze his arms and legs so severely that amputation was sure to follow. Dakota schoolteacher Eliza Brophy had a two-mile commute to her schoolhouse. Trying to make that trip on a -40-degree day chilled her feet so badly that she lost the skin on the bottom of both of them.⁵⁴ Dakotans who suffered winter-related injuries escaped the worst fate, but they were reminded of the terror of the weather by their subsequent pain or by a lifetime of disfigurement and inconvenience.

Other Dakotans experienced psychological wounds because of winter's killing power. Those left behind after such disasters endured painful memories connected with

⁵³ Laskin, *The Children's Blizzard*, 2, 6, 199, 252.

⁵⁴ Angus Neil, "A Story of Pioneer Days," in *To All Inquiring Friends: Letters, Diaries and Essays in North Dakota 1880-1910*, compiled by Elizabeth Hampsten, 2nd ed. (Grand Forks, N.D.: Department of English, University of North Dakota, 1980), 307; *The Dakota Republican* (Vermillion, S.D., February 1, 1872); Rueben Humes, "Land Locator, Cowboy, Shepherd," in *The Way It Was; The North Dakota Frontier Experience Book Three: The Cowboys & Ranchers*, ed. Everett C. Albers and D. Jerome Tweton (Fessenden, N.D.: The Grass Roots Press, 2004), 31-32; Laskin, *The Children's Blizzard*, 213-218; Dunham, *A History of Jerauld County, South Dakota*, 166-173, 180; Alex C. Johnson, "The Dakota Years of Alex C. Johnson: A Memoir," ed. Joanita Kant, *South Dakota History* 21, no. 4 (1991): 411-416; Eliza St. John Brophy, *Twice a Pioneer* (Jericho, N.Y.: Exposition Press, 1972), 95-96; *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., January 29, 1912).

losing a friend or loved one. A Dakota blizzard killed the schoolteacher of Merton Field, who settled with his family near Bismarck in 1880. “The passing of my teacher produced a profound impression upon me,” Field recalled. “It was my nearest approach to death.”⁵⁵

Even Dakotans whose winter losses were not so personal still encountered stories of death or terror in the winter. They could find stories that must have frightened or sobered them in their newspapers. In one such story, published in the *Aberdeen Daily News* in 1913, a father, mother, and at least three of their children were found dead in their wagon, killed by a snowstorm while traveling in western South Dakota. Another son was injured by the storm, and another, along with two cowboys searching for the missing family, was believed dead. Some of the clothes worn by the dead children came from their parents, who had reduced their own chances at survival in an attempt to warm their children. To compound the tragedy, the deaths need not even have happened. The family had come close to safety. “In clear weather,” the story stated, “the ranchhouse could easily have been seen, but the driving snow shut out everything in view.”⁵⁶

Mary Woodward’s journal of the mid-1880s, in which she would relate in her own words statistics or accounts about winter disasters in Dakota Territory or the surrounding region that she read in the newspaper, suggests that Dakotans paid attention to these sad and terrifying tales. In two February 1887 entries, Woodward recorded frightening accounts in the area. A woman froze to death on her claim, a man lost both

⁵⁵ “Merton Field Papers”, box 1, folder 1, Mss 28, NDSU Institute for Regional Studies and NDSU Archives; Sarah Thal, “Early Days: The Story of Sarah Thal, Wife of a Jewish Pioneer Farmer, Nelson County, North Dakota 1880-1900,” ed. Martha Thal, *Western States Jewish History* 39, no. 1 (2006): 76-77; Merton Field, “By Many Trails,” unpublished, 34-36, Mss 28, NDSU Institute for Regional Studies and NDSU Archives.
⁵⁶ *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., March 18, 1913); *Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, D.T., December 9, 1882); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., August 7, 1903).

his hands and feet after becoming lost in a blizzard and spending the night outdoors, and a homebound schoolteacher “was lost in a blizzard.” Woodward noted eye-opening statistics about the region, as well. In her diary entry for January 29, 1888, she reported that newspapers carried “blizzard editions with casualty columns” after the January 12 storm. In one of her February 1887 entries, she noted a report “that sixty frozen corpses have been found in this country this winter.”⁵⁷

It did not take a newspaper to learn of such stories. Sophie Trupin’s brother gave her a disturbing story to brood over. “He and my father,” Trupin recalled, “narrowly escaped being lost in a blizzard.” Dakotans lived in an environment that provided plenty of fuel to kindle fear of winter, whether it came through a newspaper, a personal story, or a personal loss. They knew that a journey into the winter could go terribly wrong, and winter provoked fear in at least some of them. This story or another about a neighbor who died in a blizzard “only a few feet from the house,” which he could not see through the snow, gave Trupin reason for her regular fears about the onset of another blizzard. To her, treacherous winter always lurked and humans provided its prey. “During the North Dakota winters,” she wrote, “there were no wolf packs, but we had their equivalent – the white fangs and bloodcurdling howls of the awesome blizzard that lay waiting to pounce without warning. Always there was the dread of being caught outside.”⁵⁸

Trupin was not the only Dakotan who felt fear during the winter. Dakotans expressed concern for those they cared about who spent time outdoors in the winter. Family members left at home worried about their traveling loved ones during the winter. The arrival of a blizzard during the course of a journey but also the mere prospect of “a

⁵⁷ Woodward, *The Checkered Years*, 210-212, 214-215, 161, 163.

⁵⁸ Trupin, *Dakota Diaspora*, 82-84.

sudden storm,” as one settler put it, could make the wait for a traveler’s return an ordeal. Knowledge of the terrible January 12 storm likely contributed to Woodward’s fear when her son, Walter, ventured off the “six solitary miles” to Fargo with the temperature at 38 below. “I begged him to stay at home,” she confided to her diary. “I worry all the time he is gone. He wears two fur coats and a mask, but if the horses should refuse to travel or he should lose his way, what then?” Fear could also stem from concern for others who were trying to survive Dakota winter. Mary Woodward could not get warm the night of January 11-12, 1888, though she possessed the comforts of “bedclothes and fire.” If that were the case, she wondered, becoming so agitated she was unable to sleep, “What of the poor children in Dakota homes who do not have these comforts?”⁵⁹

The trauma produced by a frightening or deeply saddening experience could leave behind lasting memories. A March 1888 *Daily Grand Forks Herald* article reported that a Yankton schoolteacher manifested “symptoms of insanity” in March 1888 after the January 12 blizzard forced her and her class to take shelter for the ensuing night in their schoolhouse. Her friends blamed “the terrors of the fateful night” for her breakdown, as a newspaper account put it.⁶⁰ O.W. Coursey’s mother remembered to the end of her days the anxious night of January 12-13, 1888, when her son slept in the schoolhouse seeking refuge from the storm. On her deathbed more than a quarter-century later, in 1914, she told Coursey, “Son, you will never know the burden that was lifted from my heart the

⁵⁹ Nicolai Berg, “Opening Up Steele County,” in *The Way It Was; The North Dakota Frontier Experience Book Two: Norwegian Homesteaders*, ed. Everett C. Albers and D. Jerome Tweton, 2nd ed. (Fessenden, N.D.: The Grass Roots Press, 2001), 22, 25; Wehe, “Reminiscences of the Early Eighties in Dakota,” 1-2; Woodward, *The Checkered Years*, 1-2, 158, 208-210; Philip L. Gerber, ed., *Bachelor Bess: The Homesteading Letters of Elizabeth Corey, 1909-1919* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1990), 59.

⁶⁰ *Daily Grand Forks Herald* (Grand Forks, D.T., March 7, 1888).

next morning after the Big Blizzard, when I looked out and saw you four older children scampering home over the snow-drifts, when I was positively sure you had all perished in the storm.” Then followed “A few moments of intense silence,” wrote Coursey. “Then she was dead.” The Big Blizzard had caused so much trauma that it had served as her last words.⁶¹

On top of all this, winter weather added difficulty to routine chores. It meant more steps to complete duties that were surely much simpler in the summer. “Doing chores is not much fun in Dakota in wintertime,” Mary Woodward wrote in December 1884, after her sons became “half frozen” completing their daily work on a day which featured a temperature of -18 degrees.⁶² Beyond enduring the pain of stiffening fingers and frozen ears, farmers had to bear the inconvenience and backbreaking effort of shoveling heavy snowfall. Heavy snow made it difficult to access barns and water sources. “The boys shovel their way around now to do chores,” Woodward wrote in January 1887. Her entry for February 1 stated that her son, Fred, had begun digging into the snow to reach the pump and vegetable cellar. K.B. Stoddard may have regretted his agreement to care for 50 cattle during the infamous winter of 1880-1881. “I shoveled tons and tons of snow that winter,” he recalled, writing of the difficulty of caring for them. He used a hole in the barn roof to pass straw to the animals. Having to clear snow away so often could grow tiresome. Constant shoveling wore on Fannie Draper’s brother, Joe, she recorded in

⁶¹ Thal, “Early Days,” 76-77; O.W. Coursey, *Pioneering in Dakota* (Mitchell, S.D.: Educator Supply Company, 1937), 110-112.

⁶² Woodward, *The Checkered Years*, 58.

February 1887. “He says he is ‘awful tired’ of digging out of the snow day after day for it is hard work,” Fannie Draper wrote.⁶³

Harsh winter weather made feeding and watering range animals more difficult as well. William Rhoads recalled ranchers in central South Dakota resorting to cutting cottonwood trees for their hungry cattle to feed on during early 1881 because the animals were unable to reach grass through the deep snow. Other stock raisers turned to clearing the snow from the grass as a solution to their animals’ hunger. The winter of 1884-1885 featured “an unusually heavy snow fall,” according to Dakotan Arthur Towne. “This covered the buffalo grass and made the outlook bad for many of the farmers who had already gone into stock raising.” Fortunately, they had a solution: contraptions that could uncover the grass. “Some of the stockmen constructed horse-drawn wooden affairs with which they scraped the snow into windrows, the cattle grazing in the cleared spaces between,” wrote Towne.⁶⁴ Ike Blasingame, an early twentieth century cowboy in South Dakota, also recalled the added difficulty of watering animals during the winter. Once temperatures consistently dropped below freezing, animals could no longer simply approach a body of water and drink. Instead, he and other cowboys chopped two holes in the frozen Missouri River connected by a shallow trench that did not reach quite to the water level. Water thus flowed out of one hole, down the trench, and into the other hole,

⁶³ Ibid., 159, 161, 219; Arthur Gibbs Draper, ed., *My Ever Dear Charlie: Letters Home from the Dakota Territory* (Guilford, Conn.: TwoDot, 2006), xii, 156; Earle R. Hubbard, *My Seventeen Years with the Pioneers: Thistles and Hay-Needles* (Raymond, S.D.: none given, 1950), 3, 15; K.B. Stoddard, “The Experience of a Pioneer During the Hard Winter of 1880-1881 While Living on the N.E. 1/4 Sec. 32, Germantown Twp.,” in *Turner County Pioneer History*, by W.H. Stoddard (Sioux Falls, S.D.: Brown & Saenger, 1931), 408-410.

⁶⁴ Rhoads, *Recollections of Dakota Territory*, 24-25; Towne, *Old Prairie Days*, 211.

so animals could drink from a “trough” of ice.⁶⁵ Dakota winter produced extra work for those who had to labor outdoors. Freezing temperatures and snow meant that routines now took longer and involved more inconvenience.

Dakotans lived in a culture in which winter was commonly perceived as a threat. They knew firsthand or had read or heard of or could at least guess the mortal threat it posed to their bodies. Dakotans responded to winter with fear. Some bore mental scars of winters past. Winter thus meant physical suffering from the conditions themselves and mental anguish over what might happen in the future or had happened in the past as a result of the season.

Winter not only endangered, killed, and injured humans; it also wrecked their livelihoods. Winter took a toll on livestock. The most famous destructive winter in this regard was that of 1886-1887. During the early 1880s, Dakotans in the western half of the Territory were content to let their cattle run free on the range. Plenty of easy winters deceived them about the sorts of conditions they could expect, and their herds flourished. The winter of 1886-1887, with its blizzards and subzero temperatures, provided a ghastly dose of reality. Nearly a million cattle inhabited the range when the winter started, but the weather inflicted terrible casualties. It killed about three fourths of the cattle in the northern part of the territory and a lower overall percentage in the southern part of the territory but still as high as 90 percent for some. Chastened, some ranchers quit, and others did more to provide feed and shelter for their at least some of their animals in the

⁶⁵ Ike Blasingame, *Dakota Cowboy: My Life in the Old Days* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1958), 42-43, 56, 155, 225-230.

winters to come, although the accounts of other winters after 1887 show that not all or even most cattle were moved indoors or fed during ensuing winters.⁶⁶

Other years proved destructive as well.⁶⁷ The winter of 1896-1897 killed half of the Iversen family's cattle – and the family member who recorded the experience said her family fared better than many.⁶⁸ “Dakota Cowboy” Ike Blasingame offered a vivid description of the effects on cattle of the winter of 1906-1907, when storms came often and temperatures plunged to -50 in January. The animals ran short of food and turned to drastic measures for relief. “Cattle ate anything they could find, from felled timber to all of the underbrush and lower tree branches that they could reach,” Blasingame wrote.⁶⁹ Even during seasons that have not received infamous or iconic status, winter weather could strike and take a terrible toll. Thomas Jefferson (born, ironically, in England) worked for a Williston, North Dakota, ranch owner who purchased 300 purebred Black Angus cattle at a cost of \$100 apiece in 1900. That September a blizzard wiped out the \$30,000 investment by killing all but three.⁷⁰ A March 1902 storm killed sheep by the hundreds, including a loss of about 1,700 out of one flock of 4,000.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Lee, “Ranching East to West,” 255-287; Blasingame, *Dakota Cowboy*, 226; D. Jerome Tweton, “From the Old West to the New West,” in *The Way It Was; The North Dakota Frontier Experience Book Three: The Cowboys & Ranchers* (Fessenden, N.D.: The Grass Roots Press, 2004), iii-vi; Robinson, *History of North Dakota*, 190; Schell, *History of South Dakota*, 244-245; Wilkins and Wilkins, *North Dakota*, 54.

⁶⁷ See Rhoads, *Recollections of Dakota Territory*, 24, for example.

⁶⁸ “Herding Cows and Waiting Tables: The Diary of Laura Aleta Iversen Abrahamson,” *South Dakota History* 20, no. 1 (spring 1990): 30-31.

⁶⁹ Blasingame, *Dakota Cowboy*, 225-230, quoted on 229.

⁷⁰ Thomas Jefferson, “From England to McKenzie County in the 1890s,” in *The Way It Was; The North Dakota Frontier Experience Book Three: The Cowboys & Ranchers*, ed. Everett C. Albers and D. Jerome Tweton (Fessenden, N.D.: The Grass Roots Press, 2004), 38-39.

⁷¹ *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., March 20, 1902); Towne, *Old Prairie Days*, 231-232; *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., March 13, 1892).

Blizzards herded cattle into compromising positions. If a wind howled from the northeast, the cattle would lumber southwest together. If a gale howled from the west, they would head east. “Cattle mostly strayed away while ‘going along’ with winter storms, tail to the wind, walking to keep warm,” wrote Blasingame. Following the seemingly capricious path set by a storm could send animals far from home on a confusing, aimless trail with an uncertain destination. Blasingame recalled that as late as fall 1907, following the previous winter’s terrible weather, “Men were still looking for stock that had drifted with the blizzards.”⁷² This behavior may seem as if it led animals away from the worst of the storm, but it could also lead to their destruction. The wind could push wandering animals into a deadly hazard, such as an unfrozen river, or into an obstruction, such as a steep river bank, which trapped them and held them in place for the weather to lash and destroy. T.B. Knight, who moved to western North Dakota in 1889, described the ghastly results of the winter of 1896-1897 on the cattle there once the wind drove the animals into a dead end. “In the spring,” he wrote, “herds were found packed tightly together still standing as they had frozen.”⁷³

Animals could die of suffocation as well. Laura Ingalls Wilder’s novel *The Long Winter* depicted one way this could have happen. The novel featured Wilder’s family as characters and described the hard Dakota winter of 1880-1881, a season she really did

⁷² Blasingame, *Dakota Cowboy*, 18.

⁷³ T.B. Knight, “Hunting, Ranching and Forced to Farm in McKenzie County,” in *The Way It Was; The North Dakota Frontier Experience Book Three: The Cowboys & Ranchers*, ed. Everett C. Albers and D. Jerome Tweton (Fessenden, N.D.: The Grass Roots Press, 2004), 43-44, 49; Stoddard, “Experience of a Pioneer During the Hard Winter,” 408.

endure there as a teenage girl.⁷⁴ The novel seems reliable as a source on Dakota winter because she features her family in it and because other primary sources second its account. In the novel, Wilder described cattle with their heads stuck to the ground by ice after the October blizzard of 1880. The frozen covering came not only from the storm's precipitation but from their freezing breath. The ice and snow around their heads hindered the breathing of the animals, and they would probably have died had Wilder's father not set them loose. The idea that an animal's breath could kill it shook the young Laura Ingalls. "Pa!" she exclaimed. "Their own breath! Smothering them."⁷⁵

Other animals were not so fortunate. According to a local history of Jerauld County, Dakota Territory, during the January 12, 1888, storm, sheep "suffocated with the snow and ice that had formed over their noses."⁷⁶ Suffocation could happen to animals even indoors during the winter. A barn did not offer an impregnable refuge. A blizzard on January 3 and 4, 1897, buried one North Dakotan's barn under almost six feet of snow, according to the state's *Steele County Tribune*. After the storm let up and the man could enter the building once again, he found that most of the 27 animals that had weathered the storm there had suffocated. The storm snuffed out "six good horses, six head of cattle, eight hogs and three sheep."⁷⁷ Even if a Dakota farmer or rancher took precautions and stored his stock indoors, he still might face heavy losses during winter weather. Even a barn could not thwart this environmental threat with certainty.

⁷⁴ Laskin, *The Children's Blizzard*, 59; Wilder, *The Long Winter*, 321; Janet Spaeth, *Laura Ingalls Wilder* (Boston: Twayne, 1987), 3-4.

⁷⁵ Wilder, *The Long Winter*, 46-50.

⁷⁶ Dunham, *History of Jerauld County*, 182-183, quoted on 182.

⁷⁷ *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 21, 1897).

Winter challenged Dakotans by threatening or destroying their lives and property. It further challenged them by hindering their ability to travel. Heavy snow or intense cold clogged roads, blocked railroads, and hardened rivers that had once served as pathways for boats. Snow's hindrance of travel played a role in economic stagnation, supply shortages, and social isolation.

Concern about what might happen on a journey could constrain Dakota winter travel. North Dakota settler Sophie Trupin wrote that it took the spring snowmelt to make her father comfortable enough to go to town and buy supplies. "He wouldn't venture to travel so far in the dead of winter," she wrote, "for the treacherous blizzards could pounce without warning."⁷⁸ The actual weather conditions presented the more daunting challenge, though. Albert Hoiland was probably referring to either the roads between the local rail terminus and the town or the town and his local area when he noted the unreliability of winter roads. "Whenever we went to town, we would bring the mail for the entire neighborhood for miles around," Hoiland recalled of his childhood in Barnes County, Dakota Territory, where he moved in 1879. "In the summer, they would get their mail about once a week, but in the winter when the roads were bad and travel difficult, it would be a month or more before the mail would come."⁷⁹

Deep snow accumulation could challenge or prevent travel by animal-drawn conveyances. Snow accumulation and drifting from a storm that ensued from February 3

⁷⁸ Trupin, *Dakota Diaspora*, 89.

⁷⁹ Albert Hoiland, "Making Money and Dancing the Night Away," in *The Way It Was; The North Dakota Frontier Experience Book Two: Norwegian Homesteaders*, ed. Everett C. Albers and D. Jerome Tweton, 2nd ed. (Fessenden, N.D.: The Grass Roots Press, 2001), 47-52; John F. Stover, *American Railroads* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 63, 160-161, 174-175; Schell, *History of South Dakota*, 184; *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, D.T., January 5, 1887).

to 5, 1881, proved problematic enough that it reduced residents of Brown County, Dakota Territory, to one travel method. “The only means of getting about was on snowshoes,” a retrospective article in the *Aberdeen Daily News* recalled in 1901.⁸⁰ Snowy roads proved not only difficult but also hazardous to traverse. “The snow is so very deep and in many places so badly drifted that in many places it is extremely dangerous to force a team through,” reported the *Bismarck Daily Tribune* about “almost impassable” local roads in January 1887.⁸¹

The layering of the snow, in addition to its great depth, could make travel challenging. When ice glazed a foundation of more powdery snow, draft animals struggled to walk because with each step their hooves sank through the snow, and they then had to extricate them from the ground cover. Walking in such snow also meant the potential for painful cuts. “The snow has frozen on top just enough so that the horses would break through,” Mary Woodward wrote in March 1886, “which makes hauling difficult.”⁸² Snow and ice also hindered travel in Jerauld County, South Dakota, during December 1902. “It was impossible to drive animals through the snow,” wrote N.J. Dunham, “because the ice crust cut their legs like glass.”⁸³

Snow or ice had to accumulate to trouble travel. Frozen rivers, on the other hand, posed a more regular obstruction to Dakota travel. Winter meant the seasonal end of

⁸⁰ *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., February 4, 1901); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 26, 1907); Rhoads, *Recollections of Dakota Territory*, 24; *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 23, 1906); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 30, 1907).

⁸¹ *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, D.T., January 23, 1887); Nina Farley Wishek, *Along the Trails of Yesterday: A Story of McIntosh County* (Froh, Pohl, Moench: The Ashley Tribune, 1941), 105-106.

⁸² Woodward, *The Checkered Years*, 124.

⁸³ Dunham, *History of Jerauld County*, 285.

travel on the Dakotas' two major waterways: the Missouri and Red Rivers. Dakotans could expect those rivers to freeze sometime in the month of November in a normal year. Once that happened, of course, boats could not run. In North Dakota, especially, the end of boat travel prior to the total freezing of the river seems to have been part of the winter routine that received notice in local papers. A December 1, 1899, report from Bismarck referred to boats no longer traveling the Missouri River by that date even though it had not frozen yet because of the likelihood that it would freeze.⁸⁴

The most troublesome way in which winter disrupted transportation, though, was hindering or halting travel on the railroads. This problem could be caused by snow in neighboring Minnesota or in the Dakotas themselves.⁸⁵ Either way, Dakotans were facing the challenges of living in a far Northern environment. Dakotans never spoke of privations ensuing from frozen rivers, and winter conditions proved more of a challenge to overland travel than an outright restrictor of it.⁸⁶ In some cases, when the railroads were blocked by snow, Dakotans turned to overland travel as an alternative. A climactic

⁸⁴ *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck N.D., November 15, 1900); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., November 12, 1907); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., November 9, 1909); *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, N.D., November 23, 1892); *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, N.D., December 1, 1899); *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., December 8, 1908); *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., December 29, 1894); *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., November 19, 1896); *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., November 24, 1906); *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., December 3, 1912); *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., December 15, 1913); *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., December 26, 1907).

⁸⁵ *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, D.T., January 5, 1887); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 1, 1909); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 31, 1908); Robert J. Casey and W. A. S. Douglas, *Pioneer Railroad: The Story of the Chicago and North Western System* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1948), 223, 255, 298, 307.

⁸⁶ Gilbert Fite has said that winter had little effect on late-nineteenth-century Western travel, although his comment seems based more on overland than rail travel. See Fite, *Farmers' Frontier*, 220-221.

scene of *The Long Winter* involved two men, Cap Garland and Laura Ingalls' future husband, Almanzo Wilder, risking the possibility that a blizzard might overtake them and venturing out on a journey by sled to bring wheat for the town where Laura and her family lived when it was cut off from rail service and running short on food.⁸⁷

Winter could bring low the transportation source that had meant so much to the Dakotas' settlement. Deep snow blocked trains. Intense cold could prevent locomotives from pulling with as much power as they possessed in warmer conditions. Cold temperatures might also lead to broken rails. Snow that could reach great depths delayed and interrupted rail travel. "Railroads are naturally the worst off as a result of the storm," said an article in the *Grand Forks Daily Herald* about a late-November 1905 storm that delayed and "annulled" North Dakota trains. "The fall of snow is simply tremendous," said a report from Aberdeen about an early-April 1892 storm which struck South Dakota, "and in consequence railroads are quite badly tied up." Snow removal crews could be tasked with removing truly daunting amounts of snow. A snowstorm that hit North Dakota in mid-March 1902 heaped 10 feet of snow in a railroad yard in Devils Lake and 15 feet of snow at a yard in Minot. Snow could pile into massive drifts. It piled as high as 12 feet in cuts belonging to the Chicago & Northwestern railroad in South Dakota as of mid-March 1897. A drift reached even more dynamic proportions according to a report in *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* in January 1907. The paper said that a rotary snow plow

⁸⁷ Wilder, *The Long Winter*, 249-284, 294-301; *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., January 18, 1912); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 16, 1907).

“went into and through a bank of snow, literally tunneling it, the bank being so firm at the top that it did not break down – leaving a tunnel of snow.”⁸⁸

Dakota railroads struggled to clear their rails. “There was not a moment of the time when our lives were not in danger,” recalled Ed Gunn, a South Dakota snowplow engineer about a mission in the early 1890s. “It was a rough experience and one that I do not care to repeat.” Locomotive-driven snowplows did not cut gently through snow like a hot knife through butter. Instead, when drifts proved stubborn enough, crews would back the locomotive away from the drift and slam it into the obstruction at high speed over and over until they broke through. One Northern Pacific employee described the use of this process on his railroad during the winter of 1888. A crew would position the snowplow-equipped locomotive one to two miles from the drift and then accelerate to 75 miles per hour until striking the drift. If the plow got stuck, a crew of snow shovelers and a “drag-out engine” would work together to extricate it. The plow would then back away so that it could bash the drift again at 75 miles per hour. “The men performing this service,” he recalled, “were made of iron.”⁸⁹

⁸⁸ *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, D.T., February 27, 1887); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 4, 1891); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., April 6, 1892); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., March 19, 1902); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., November 29, 1905); *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, N.D., March 6, 1896); *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., March 13, 1897); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 24, 1907); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 14, 1906); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., February 28, 1907); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 5, 1896); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., February 16, 1893); *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, N.D., March 21, 1894); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., May 21, 1908); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 7, 1909); *Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, D.T., December 8, 1882); *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., February 9, 1907).

⁸⁹ Pierce Blewett, “Railroad Man and Jamestown Politician,” in *The Way It Was; The North Dakota Frontier Experience Book Six: The Townspeople*, ed. Everett C Albers and

Even into the twentieth century, Dakota railroads continued to use locomotive-driven snowplows and even snow shovelers to keep the tracks clear. In 1907, Crystal, North Dakota, “laboring men” earned \$1.75 per hour shoveling snow for the Great Northern railroad.⁹⁰ But in addition, a new invention, the rotary snowplow, also began to clear Dakota rails during the 1880s. Though the idea for a rotary plow was conceived at least as early as the 1860s, the real decade of its development was the 1880s. The first version of the most common variety of rotary plow was built in 1883-1884, and it came into use later in the decade after modifications. A locomotive pushed the plow, which used its steam engine not for propulsion but to operate a spinning, upright wheel of blades that removed snow from the tracks and blew it away. A January 1888 report in the *Daily Grand Forks Herald* said those whirling blades “can cut through a drift at the rate of ten miles per hour.” With the help of the rotary plow, the *Aberdeen Daily American* predicted in 1898 that the Dakotas would not suffer another disastrous winter like that of 1880-1881, with its widespread, long-term closures of railroads by snow.⁹¹ Snow bedeviled Dakota railroads throughout the period between 1870 and 1915, despite the rotary’s presence, though.

D. Jerome Tweton (Fessenden, N.D.: The Grass Roots Press, 2004), 10-11; Johnson, “Dakota Years of Alex C. Johnson,” 412; G. Davidson, *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, N.D., January 27, 1893); audio source: Patrick N. Allitt, *Transcontinental Railroads*, vol. 5, 7 vols., The History of the United States, 2nd Edition (Chantilly, Va.: The Teaching Company, 2003); Patrick N. Allitt, *The History of the United States, 2nd Edition, Part V* (Chantilly, Va.: The Teaching Company, 2003), 32-33.

⁹⁰ *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 16, 1907).

⁹¹ *Daily Grand Forks Herald* (Grand Forks, D.T., January 18, 1888); G. Davidson, *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, N.D., January 27, 1893); *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., October 19, 1898); Bernard Mergen, *Snow in America* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), 48-49; Brian Solomon, *Railway Maintenance: The Men and Machines That Keep the Railroads Running* (St. Paul, Minn.: MBI Publishing, 2004), 117-121; audio source: Allitt, *Transcontinental Railroads*; Allitt, *The History of the United States, 2nd Edition, Part V*, 33.

Snow on the rails was the far more pressing problem for railroads and their patrons, but cold weather posed a hindrance to railroads. Dakota newspaper accounts noted a connection between cold temperatures and broken rails. Some scientists at the time disputed that cold made metal more likely to break. High phosphorus content or frozen ballast underneath made rails more susceptible to breaking in the cold, though. If these conditions were present, they may explain what Dakotans observed. Cold temperatures are a cause of broken rails today, so they probably were a century and more ago, too. Cold also hindered engines' efficiency. When cold weather in the Dakotas and surrounding states in January 1912 caused locomotives to pull with only one third of their "usual hauling power," and "practically paralyzed traffic for a full month," railroads lost "millions of dollars," according to *The Grand Forks Daily Herald*. "From an operating standpoint," said the *Herald*, "January to the roads in general proved the most expensive month in their history, except in cases of strikes." "It is absolutely impossible to keep engines alive and generate steam with the thermometer twenty or thirty below," declared the *Daily Herald* of Grand Forks in December 1882. It is not surprising, then, that February 1907 cold prevented "very heavy trains" from operating, according to the *Aberdeen Daily American*.⁹²

⁹² *Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, D.T., December 8, 1882); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 7, 1909); *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., February 9, 1907); *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., November 22, 1912); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 7, 1912); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., February 14, 1912); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 6, 1909); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 24, 1905); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 30, 1907); Stanley A. Changnon, *Railroads and Weather: From Fogs to Floods and Heat to Hurricanes, the Impacts of Weather and Climate on American Railroad* (Boston, Mass.: American Meteorological Society, 2006), 70-71; For a dissenting opinion from the time see the Chicago Tribune in *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., July 11,

Harsh winter conditions meant hardships for more people than just the snowplow drivers who smashed engines into drifts and the “trackwalkers” who trudged through bitter cold scanning the tracks for broken rails.⁹³ Railroads were the key arteries in and out of the Dakotas during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Therefore, snow-covered rails could mean interrupted rail service and therefore breaks in the flow of coal, mail, kerosene, food, and animal feed. To be cut off from the railroad was to be “cut off from communication from the outside world,” as the *Grand Forks Daily Herald* put it in December 1896.⁹⁴ This phrase, or one like it, appeared more than once regarding a place cut off by snow from the railroad. Dakotans referred to snow’s hindrance of rail travel as a “snow blockade.”⁹⁵ Clearly, losing the railroad left Dakotans feeling isolated and alone.

Snow could interrupt rail service for a long time. Watertown, Dakota Territory went without a train for two months during winter 1888. The railroad finally began its attempt to clear that section of the road on April 2.⁹⁶ Most famously, snow in Minnesota and Dakota Territory cut off rail service during winter 1880-1881, when more than 11 feet of snow fell, according to Doane Robinson’s 1904 history of South Dakota.⁹⁷ In

1912); for explanations that give credence to Dakotans’ connection between broken rails and winter, see Mark Aldrich, “‘The Peril of the Broken Rail’: The Carriers, the Steel Companies, and Rail Technology, 1900-1945,” *Technology and Culture* 40, no. 2 (April 1999): 266-267; Mark Aldrich, *Death Rode the Rails: American Railroad Accidents and Safety 1828-1965* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 50-51, 55, 201-202, 207.

⁹³ *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 7, 1912).

⁹⁴ *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 5, 1896).

⁹⁵ See the *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, D.T., December 6, 1887) for an example.

⁹⁶ *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, D.T., April 3, 1888).

⁹⁷ Doane Robinson, *History of South Dakota* (B.F. Bowen, 1904), 307; Elbert W. Smith, *Pioneering in Dakota: A Reminiscent Narrative of the Days of the Covered Wagon, the Sod Shanty, and the Pioneer Settlers Who Transformed a Prairie Wilderness into a Great*

Wilder's *Long Winter*, the first train of 1881 arrived on the first of May.⁹⁸ Other accounts confirm that Wilder did not exaggerate. The "snow blockade" in the eastern part of the territory that cut off rail service to Pierre, Dakota Territory, lasted from late 1880, through May 8, 1881, according to William Rhoads' account.⁹⁹ Elbert Smith, of Brookings County, Dakota Territory, seconded Rhoads and Wilder. With that winter's "continuous snow-storm" building a barrier of snow across the railroad tracks, between November 15 and May 9, "only one small freight train" reached the county.¹⁰⁰

Life in a town without railroad service was miserable. Wilder described an anxious, irritating winter of 1880-1881 defined by shortages of food and fuel. The excitement residents showed when their trains finally returned to service after a winter-related break in service also suggests the extremity of the discomfort caused by losing this lifeline. Marion, North Dakota, residents waited a long time for a train after one came in late December 1906. According to a report in *The Grand Forks Daily Herald*, their service was restored along with the rest of a North Dakota branch line in late February 1907, leaving the residents who used the line "overjoyed." Residents of Langdon, North Dakota, wanted the coal their trains bore. Unfortunately, "a snow blockade" kept them from receiving deliveries by rail. With their fuel supplies running low during February 1893, they responded with "rejoicing" to the arrival of a train after a week and a half

Commonwealth (LaConner, Wash.: Puget Sound Mail, 1929), 42-44; Wilder, *The Long Winter*, 214.

⁹⁸ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *The Long Winter* (New York: Harper, 1940), 309.

⁹⁹ Rhoads, *Recollections of Dakota Territory*, 23-24.

¹⁰⁰ Smith, *Pioneering in Dakota*, 41-45.

without service.¹⁰¹ Only if the loss of rail service during the winter meant great suffering could its resumption produce such passion.

The most common problematic shortage when trains stopped running was fuel. Snow blockades were not the only reason for fuel shortages, but they certainly contributed to them. Dakotans purchased fuel before winter but also replenished their supply during the season. Some Dakotans probably procured their coal another way, but trains were a key transportation for these supplies. The mere idea, let alone the actual occurrence, of a coal shortage could strike fear in the hearts of Dakotans.¹⁰² In December 1886, during a cold snap, Huron, Dakota Territory, suffered one of its regular coal shortages, with its regular result: “excitement” prevailed.¹⁰³ Likewise, an 1887 coal shortage caused “signs of great anxiety” in eastern Dakota Territory.¹⁰⁴

Driven to desperation by a fuel shortage, Dakotans would even burn their possessions in an attempt to stay warm. Some women who suffered the theft of most of their firewood just before an 1882 blizzard found themselves in just such a predicament. In an effort to stay warm during the storm, they burned furniture and hay that they had been using to protect the house from the cold.¹⁰⁵ The Applebys went to similar lengths during the winter of 1880-1881. “We burned the floor, bedstead, and chairs,” recalled

¹⁰¹ *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., February 28, 1907); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., February 16, 1893); Rhoads, *Recollections of Dakota Territory*, 23-24; Wilder, *The Long Winter*; *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., February 14, 1893).

¹⁰² *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, D.T., December 18, 1887).

¹⁰³ *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, D.T., December 8, 1886).

¹⁰⁴ *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, D.T., November 29, 1887).

¹⁰⁵ *Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, D.T., December 3, 1882).

A.W. Appleby.¹⁰⁶ Another man short on fuel fed his fire with corn and the curb that enhanced his well.¹⁰⁷ A fuel shortage could even contribute to crime. In early 1905, thieves in Fargo commonly made off with blocks, probably of wood, that were supposed to be installed as part of the street railway tracks. “It may be suggested in extenuation,” a newspaper commented on the incident, “that the weather we have been having has been enough to tempt anyone to appropriate anything that would burn.”¹⁰⁸

Limitations on Dakotans’ ability to travel during the winter, led to supply shortages and limited communication. During this most famous winter of limited travel, heavy snow prevented deliveries of food, fuel, and mail.¹⁰⁹ With their transportation system snarled, Dakotans suffered deprivation and had to turn to alternative sources of food and fuel, as described by Doane Robinson. In the country, Dakotans burned hay. In the towns, they turned to lumber, “small buildings,” and even the snow fences that the unreliable, if not inoperable, railroads used to keep the snow off their roads. Stores no longer carried flour, so residents ground grain “into a sort of graham” using coffee mills. Once railroad service halted, kerosene ran out within days, Robinson noted, so that “many families were compelled for several months to sit in darkness.”¹¹⁰ Wilder brought personal color to the problem of interrupted railroad service that winter, when she wrote

¹⁰⁶ A. W. Appleby, “Reminiscences of Pioneer Life in Turner County,” in *Turner County Pioneer History*, by W. H. Stoddard (Sioux Falls, S.D.: Brown & Saenger, 1931), 204-205.

¹⁰⁷ *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., February 5, 1907).

¹⁰⁸ *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., February 10, 1905).

¹⁰⁹ Rhoads, *Recollections of Dakota Territory*, 23-24, 26; Smith, *Pioneering in Dakota*, 41-45.

¹¹⁰ Robinson, *History of South Dakota*, 306-307.

in *The Long Winter* that the Ingalls family celebrated Christmas dinner on May 4, 1881 – two days after the train carrying their Christmas turkey and gifts finally arrived.¹¹¹

Travel restrictions in the Dakotas caused by weather resulted in supply shortages, especially fuel, during the winter of 1906-1907. The winter weather was not the only factor in the crisis. Blame for the crisis also fell on the railroads, the coal sellers, and consumers.¹¹² But heavy snow certainly made it difficult if not impossible to resupply those in need, and intense cold raised the danger entailed in a fuel shortage. A spirit of giving was apparently lacking in the Dakotas, according to the *Aberdeen Daily News*, which reported on Christmas Eve 1906 that coal had become such a precious commodity that “every chunk has become as precious as so much gold,” and “People are guarding their meager supplies with shot guns.”¹¹³ The shortage seems to have hit North Dakota harder than South Dakota. In North Dakota, schools closed in response, and as was typical in a fuel crisis, North Dakotans burned their barns and other buildings, fences, and furniture when they felt the need for fuel deeply enough. On January 3, 1907, average temperatures in North Dakota reached no higher than -20 degrees. Some people kept to their beds to stay warm. In search of warmth, farm families checked into hotels.¹¹⁴ The crisis continued even into February. On February 7, *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* ran a letter from the Commercial Club of Lansford, North Dakota, which described the dire situation in town. “It has been found,” said the message, “that the coal shortage has reached the danger line and unless relief is had within 24 hours suffering will become

¹¹¹ Wilder, *The Long Winter*, 322-334.

¹¹² *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., May 24, 1907); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., October 28, 1909); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 13, 1907).

¹¹³ *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., December 24, 1906).

¹¹⁴ *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 5, 1907).

acute. Many families have had no fuel for some time and are burning straw to keep from freezing.”¹¹⁵

Newspapers reflected the fear that such an event caused with massive headlines. “LIVES OF RESIDENTS OF WESTERN NORTH DAKOTA MENACED BY FUEL FAMINE AND TERRIBLE BLIZZARD” shouted the large-print headline of *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* on December 15, 1906.¹¹⁶

Other supplies, including food, also ran short in North Dakota that winter. Milk, cream, and vegetables ran low in Minot, North Dakota, during January because snow kept farmers from reaching the town. Later in the month, the town expected more dire effects after yet another blizzard struck. “The result to the food supply will be disastrous beyond measure,” said a January 31 report from there. Cut off from mail-bearing trains in late-January, Langdon and Hannah, North Dakota, felt the isolation of a snow blockade and turned to telephones to alleviate it. “Having had no mail for a week,” said a Grand Forks newspaper account, the two towns called that city on January 29 because they were “getting anxious to hear something of what is going on in the outside world.”¹¹⁷

In other places, it can be difficult to determine the reason for the lack of trains: the season’s “car shortage” which slowed coal and other freight shipments, or the winter’s heavy snowfall.¹¹⁸ Nevertheless, given the season’s heavy snow, it seems likely that the weather had a hand in other shortages of trains and the goods they bore. Newburg, North

¹¹⁵ *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., February 7, 1907).

¹¹⁶ *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 15, 1906).

¹¹⁷ *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 20, 1907); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 23, 1907); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., February 1, 1907); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 30, 1907).

¹¹⁸ *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 28, 1906).

Dakota, went a month without a train that bore anything other than coal (or beer). By January 22, coal and other supplies were needed. “There is suffering in the community,” said a message from the town to *The Grand Forks Daily Herald*, “and we must have aid.” Without a train since January 5, Maddock, North Dakota experienced shortages of coal and “many kinds of provisions” by early February.¹¹⁹

Facing government scrutiny, railroads prioritized hauling coal into the Dakotas. Still, some towns in the Upper Midwest went at least two-and-a-half months without coal during early 1907. The shortage carried a death toll. Describing the calamity in the West, the *Aberdeen Daily American* said the following summer, “Many persons were frozen to death in their own homes because of their inability to obtain a supply of fuel.”¹²⁰ The problem of fuel shortages constituted yet another way Dakota winter meant the risk of discomfort at best and a gruesome death at worst.

In western South Dakota, snow blockades caused problems during the winter of 1911-1912. In November, livestock in Faith, South Dakota, and the surrounding countryside almost starved during a two-week snow blockade. Fortunately, the railroad broke through the snow blockade just in time, and a train full of feed – plus 40 sacks of mail, the two weeks’ worth that had piled up while the town went without a train –

¹¹⁹ *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 16, 1907); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 23, 1907); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., February 7, 1907).

¹²⁰ *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., December 18, 1906); *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., December 14, 1906); *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., August 2, 1907); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 18, 1906); *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., December 13, 1906); *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., December 23, 1906); *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., January 8, 1907); Robinson, *History of North Dakota*, 240-241.

reached the town.¹²¹ Deep snow cut off rail service in at least part of western South Dakota for much of January 1912. Without rail service and now without “provisions,” residents of Isabel, South Dakota, journeyed to regional towns for kerosene, food, and coal. The isolated settlers in the western part of the state hoped that improving weather conditions would allow the return of the trains to “replenish the exhausted supply of provisions, food, and fuel.”¹²²

To the north that winter, residents of Grand Forks, North Dakota, endured the lack of some of their finer foods during a brutal stretch of weather in January 1912. Temperatures dropped below zero on Christmas Day 1911 and did not surpass that point again until January 13, plunging to -43 degrees on January 11. January’s average temperature was -9.2 degrees. The frigid weather limited food shipments into Grand Forks by preventing farmers from bringing eggs and butter to town and by making produce sellers reluctant to ship their goods. Vegetables and fruits, always in shorter supply during winter anyway, were even scarcer. Residents struggled to find their customary oranges, bananas, and grapefruits. Finally, late in the month, as the cold moderated, Grand Forks residents saw grocery stocks rise and prices drop. They could once again taste south Florida – even if their climate often ventured far from it.¹²³

Sophie Trupin’s account suggested that winter diet could be bland even without a crisis like the heavy snows of 1880-1881 or 1906-1907. “As the winter stretched

¹²¹ *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., November 27, 1911).

¹²² *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., January 18, 1912).

¹²³ *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 20, 1912); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 13, 1912); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., February 2, 1912); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 27, 1912); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 10, 1912).

endlessly on,” she wrote, “our diet held little variety.”¹²⁴ Dakotans thus could face privation as a result of harsh winters. This might mean feeling cold, going without communication, or even enduring limited diets. Winter weather in turn hindering transportation was another way that the season posed a problem and a source of suffering for Dakotans.

This is not to say, however, that all Dakotans suffered privations during winter. Dakotans could also enjoy meals consisting of an abundant array of food during winter.¹²⁵ For example, Sophie Trupin did not live only sparingly during the winter months. Describing the fare at a winter wedding, she wrote: “Every table, every sideboard and chest was covered with a spotless white tablecloth and laden with every good thing to eat: herrings and homemade relishes; roasted ducks, geese, and chickens, all of which were raised on the farm; huge *challahs* over which blessings were made before they cut into yellow slices; and strudel made from dough as thin as the papers with which the farmers rolled their own Durham tobacco-filled cigarettes.”¹²⁶

Winter could lead to boredom and isolation. Winter may have had something to do with the approximately two-month period that Fannie Draper passed between November 1886 and January 1887 without seeing another woman.¹²⁷ Settler Frances Towne wrote of winters “so bad that one could not get out to exchange sympathies or

¹²⁴ Trupin, *Dakota Diaspora*, 60.

¹²⁵ Hoiland, “Making Money and Dancing the Night Away,” 47-48; George Townsend, “Letters from West of Philadelphia”, October 28, 1905, 135, Small Manuscripts Collection, State Historical Society of North Dakota; Woodward, *The Checkered Years*, 67; Draper, *My Ever Dear Charlie*, 122, 129.

¹²⁶ Trupin, *Dakota Diaspora*, 95-97.

¹²⁷ Jennie Carrough Laughlin, “From County Down to County Foster,” in *The Way It Was; The North Dakota Frontier Experience Book One: The Sod-busters* (Fessenden, N.D.: The Grass Roots Press, 1996), 78-79; Draper, *My Ever Dear Charlie*, 141, 168.

neighborly calls with anyone. Frequently for two or three months at a time I did not see a single person outside our own household.”¹²⁸ With the husband in married couples no doubt making most of the trips to town, which already might be limited during winter, and bad weather keeping them indoors, women likely lacked the opportunity to interact outside their own families during the cold months. They bore the suffering of winter in their lack of peer conversations and friendships.

Of course it was not only women who lacked company or had little to do during winter. Mary Woodward referred to her sons’ “lonely time” during the winter of 1883-1884.¹²⁹ “The loneliness of their isolated locations” troubled settlers of Jerauld County during the winter of 1880-1881. One way the winter weather contributed to that loneliness was by helping to end the local Sunday school temporarily.¹³⁰ “Not even the jackrabbits were about, neighborly intercourse was impossible, and the activities of the settlers limited to the bare necessities of caring for the stock and keeping enough wood for the fires,” recalled Merton Field of one Dakota winter.¹³¹ Winter weather conditions could prove such a hindrance that residents spent their winters alone. They could suffer because they had to endure weeks or months without seeing a person outside their immediate family. The lack of the presence of others during winter was apparently felt deeply enough that it could even lead to insanity. According to settler Robert Crawford,

¹²⁸ Material from Frances Towne's diary was carried in Towne, *Old Prairie Days*, 252.

¹²⁹ Woodward, *The Checkered Years*, 32.

¹³⁰ Dunham, *History of Jerauld County*, 16-17.

¹³¹ “Merton Field Papers,” box 1, folder 1; Field, “By Many Trails,” 32.

“The isolation and drab existence” in Dakota, in which winter had a hand, drove his mother mad for a period during the early 1890s.¹³²

Another way winter could limit social contact during the winter was by preventing school from meeting. This was especially true in areas that had only recently been settled. Regarding the rural areas of the county surrounding Grand Forks, the local *Herald* said in January 1899, “Ten years ago it was a very rare thing for a country school to have a winter session, the districts being so sparsely settled as to make traveling to and from school both difficult and dangerous in the winter time.” Likewise, during the early 1870s, Turner County, Dakota Territory had summer school but not winter school because it was too difficult to keep the schools supplied with fuel for heat, and the drafty schoolhouses could not keep out the cold. Improved roads and an increased population density allowed students around Grand Forks to overcome the weather and led to “an increasing tendency to hold winter terms.” Likewise, improvements must have been made in Turner County because winter school began during the mid-1870s. In Mary Woodward’s area, conditions during the winter of 1883-1884 deterred students from attending school. It may have grown too cold in the schoolhouse, or maybe traveling to school was too difficult or uncomfortable. In mid-November 1884, however, school was cancelled in her area for the coming winter because of the previous season’s poor turnout. Winter weather had a hand in school cancellations during the winter of 1880-1881. Students might also stay home if conditions seemed too daunting to attend that day. All winter days were too daunting for Sophie Trupin to go to school. As a young girl, in the

¹³² Robert David Crawford, “The First Pioneer Years in Dacotah Territory 1881-1882”, 21, Mss 290, box 2, folder 23, NDSU Institute for Regional Studies and NDSU Archives; “Robert D. Crawford Papers”, box 1, folders 11-14, NDSU Institute for Regional Studies and NDSU Archives.

earliest years of elementary school, she was not allowed to attend winter school “because the weather was so severe,” but her brothers could go. Winter could prove a problem both for those seeking an education and those who sought the companionship that was part of attending school.¹³³

The inability to see friends or to travel in search of other entertainment led to boredom during the winter. During the winter, it became too cold for the Woodward family to visit the theater in Fargo. Mary Woodward disliked such seasonal restriction. “Cold weather is bearing down upon us and I dread it,” she wrote in mid-November 1886, “for when winter really comes there is not much chance to do anything indoors or out.”¹³⁴ Fannie Draper referred in February 1887 to “our lives all so monotonous in our little world snowed in from everybody.”¹³⁵ Dakotans had reason, then, to associate winter with times of having little to do. Even if they avoided a terrifying encounter with the weather, they might face the problem of the opposite: a complete lack of excitement for months on end. Either way, Dakotans had reason to dislike winter.

Winter slowed the economy. In early December 1896, the *Grand Forks Daily Herald* reported “quiet times following the recent blizzard and blockade” for some North Dakota merchants. A store that had nothing to sell because no trains could reach the town

¹³³ Woodward, *The Checkered Years*, 54-55; Trupin, *Dakota Diaspora*, 51-52, 115; *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 28, 1899); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, D.T., January 14, 1886); Charles H. Hobart, “Pioneering in North Dakota,” *North Dakota Historical Quarterly* VIII, no. 2 (January 1941): 129; Louis N. Alberty, “Turner County Early School History,” in *Turner County Pioneer History*, by W. H. Stoddard (Sioux Falls, S.D.: Brown & Saenger, 1931), 215-217, 219, 223; Berry, “Homestead Days,” 29; Towne, *Old Prairie Days*, 139; Gerber, *Bachelor Bess*, 245.

¹³⁴ Woodward, *The Checkered Years*, 144, 148.

¹³⁵ *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 26, 1912); Sarah Boley, “Sarah Boley Diaries 1877-1918”, 1918 1877, 89, Mss. A-31, State Historical Society of North Dakota; Draper, *My Ever Dear Charlie*, 168.

to resupply it also had no need for workers. In late January 1907, snow kept trains and the goods they might have carried from reaching Minot. This had bitter consequences for the town's labor market "Business conditions are demoralized from a lack of freight and trade, the stores cutting down their forces," said a January 19, 1907 report from there, "and as a result there are many unemployed people in the city." Spring, by contrast, could invigorate business. Within weeks of the morose report from Minot, North Dakota began to thaw, delighting Grand Forks retailers, who anticipated using the railroads to ship their goods again.¹³⁶

Given the hardship of a Dakota winter, it is not surprising that residents disliked the season. Winter carried with it a host of challenges. It involved discomfort, inconvenience, loneliness, boredom, fear, uncertainty, and a real risk of death. There were probably other Dakotans who shared Mary Woodward's opinion: Winter was the major drawback to life in the region. "Except for the cold winters," she wrote in January 1888, "I should like this place very much indeed."¹³⁷

Winter was unquestionably a challenging experience, but it did not prevent the settlement of the Dakotas. Instead, the population increased dramatically from 1870 to 1914, rather than reaching to a certain point and remaining there or dropping. Dakotans therefore had to have figured out a way to coexist with the cold season every year. The

¹³⁶ *Daily Grand Forks Herald* (Grand Forks, D.T., December 24, 1887); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 20, 1907); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., February 1, 1907); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., February 9, 1907); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 5, 1896); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 11, 1909); *The Dakota Republican* (Vermillion, D.T., February 1, 1872).

¹³⁷ Woodward, *The Checkered Years*, 213.

next chapter examines how Dakotans accommodated to winter to the extent that some even profited from and relied on it.

Chapter Two

Dakotans were not merely helpless pawns of the harsh winters, unable to protect themselves. Dakota culture involved accommodating to the annual problem of a hard winter.¹ Some even benefitted from and desired winter. Dakotans dealt with the reality of winter by becoming accustomed to it as well as by protecting themselves from and capitalizing upon it. Dakotans did not want an overly vigorous winter, of course, but some needed winter weather. Some Dakotans changed jobs during the winter. They thus performed work that the season fostered. Businesses sought to profit during winter by connecting their advertising to the season, and those that sold coal or warm clothing depended on winter's arrival. Another way Dakotans accommodated to winter was by maintaining travel routines centered around the season. Many Dakotans dealt with winter by simply escaping from it and using the season as a time to travel. Dakotans developed an annual routine around preparing for winter. The routine included cultural pressures from neighbors and media to get ready. One should note as well, however, that Dakotans procrastinated or failed to prepare. Complacency as well as readiness were parts of Dakota culture surrounding winter. One can also read certain behaviors of Dakotans as failure to accommodate. Accommodation to winter was part of Dakota culture, but it was not Dakotans' only response to winter.²

¹ The use of the word, "accommodation," again, does not necessarily mean that Dakotans changed their behavior when they arrived in the region. This thesis is a snapshot of Dakota life over a 45-year period, not an argument that immigrants adapted to Dakota life.

² Accommodation to the environment is a recurring theme. For other examples, see Karen Ordahl Kupperman, "Fear of Hot Climates in the Anglo-American Colonial Experience," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 41, no. 2, Third Series (April 1984): 213-240; Karen Ordahl Kupperman, "The Puzzle of the American Climate in the Early Colonial Period," *The American Historical Review* 87, no. 5 (December 1982): 1267-1270, 1286, 1288; Karen Ordahl Kupperman, "Climate and the Mastery of the Wilderness in Seventeenth-Century New England," in *Seventeenth-Century New England*, ed. David Hall and D.G. Allen (Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1984), 14-15, 18-19; Ruth Kirk, *Snow* (New York: William Morrow and

While this thesis does not seek to compare the winter habits of settlers in their former homes with their practices in the Dakotas, it does find that some newcomers had to learn what a Dakota winter was like because they lacked accurate expectations of it. Those who had lived in the Dakotas for some time showed more realistic expectations about winter than newcomers.

Lingering winter unpleasantly surprised some spring settlers in Dakota who thought they would find the same sort of mild weather they had left at home. O.W. Coursey departed from his home in Forreston, Illinois, in late April 1883, apparently thinking winter was over. Coursey was wearing summer clothes when he encountered a May snow in Dakota Territory, and he remembered his teeth chattering from the cold.³ Wintry spring weather also showed George Berry the inadequacy of his clothing. Berry, who settled in Dakota Territory in April 1882, went from going barefoot in Illinois to bundling up as he performed spring planting in Dakota Territory. A cold weather reception could leave settlers wondering what they had done in coming to such a place and even regretting their choice to emigrate. “We boys were rather discouraged,” Berry wrote. “Think of planting corn with overcoat, overshoes and mittens! That was just a little bit more than we could stand.”⁴ Winter that ran on into spring also left John Scott full of regret. In spring 1880, he left behind a snowless Wisconsin that was almost ready for spring planting. Scott knew nothing firsthand of Dakota winter because he had settled in Dakota in fall 1879 and returned to Wisconsin to winter. He therefore encountered a nasty surprise when he found northern Dakota Territory still in winter’s grip with cold temperatures and a layer of snow. “Oh,

Company, 1978), 183-184, 193; Paula M. Nelson, *After the West Was Won: Homesteaders and Town-Builders in Western South Dakota, 1900-1917*, 1st ed. (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1986), 156-159, 166-167, 173-174; Wolfgang Behringer, *A Cultural History of Climate*, trans. Patrick Camiller (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 135-137; Gilbert C. Fite, *The Farmers’ Frontier 1865-1900* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 222-223.

³ Coursey, *Pioneering in Dakota*, 17, 24.

⁴ George C. Berry, “Homestead Days Clark County, Dakota Territory George C. Berry (1870-1944)”, written in 1939, printed in 1998, 6, 9.

dear, did I wish I was back home with Mother!” he wrote. “I thought that if this is North Dakota April weather, how can we raise crops here.”⁵ These newcomers believed that spring meant mild weather because that is what they encountered back home. Their expectations did not prepare them for a place where winter conditions might prevail into April or even May.⁶

Settlers who came to Dakota from Russia noted the harsher, lengthier winters, compared with their former homes. “We had not counted on the hard winters,” remembered Johann Gutschmidt, who moved to Dakota in 1889. “The winters in Russia were comparatively mild; and to me, it hardly seemed possible that a winter could be so severe and last so long. The snow came in October and stayed until April or May.” Max Keller also emigrated to Dakota Territory in 1889, and he remembered the unwelcome sight of snow on the ground when he arrived in March: “‘My garsh!’ I thought, ‘Is this the North Pole?’ When we left Russia the weather was warm, no snow was left on the ground, and the farmers were almost finished with the spring’s work.”⁷ These settlers realized that winter in Dakota had far more power than it did back in Russia.

⁵ John W. Scott, “The Pioneer Farmer,” *North Dakota Quarterly* 63, no. 4 (fall 1996): 52-56.

⁶ For other examples of incorrect expectations of climate by immigrants, see Kupperman, “The Puzzle of the American Climate in the Early Colonial Period,” 1262, 1277; Karen Ordahl Kupperman, “Climate and the Mastery of the Wilderness in Seventeenth-Century New England,” in *Seventeenth-Century New England*, ed. David Hall and D.G. Allen (Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1984), 3, 9, 19.

⁷ Gottlieb Isaak, “From Bessarabia to Northern Dakota: A Family’s Journey,” in *The Way It Was; The North Dakota Frontier Experience Book Four: Germans from Russia Settlers*, ed. D. Jerome Tweton and Everett C. Albers (Fessenden, N.D.: The Grass Roots Press, 1999), 33-35; Max Keller, “Looking for Water: From the Hague Settlement to Buffalo Lake,” in *The Way It Was; The North Dakota Frontier Experience Book Four: Germans from Russia Settlers*, ed. Everett C. Albers and D. Jerome Tweton (Fessenden, N.D.: The Grass Roots Press, 1999), 41-42, 44-45; Johann Gutschmidt, “Searching for Good Land in Logan County,” in *The Way It Was; The North Dakota Frontier Experience Book Four: Germans from Russia Settlers*, ed. Everett C. Albers and D. Jerome Tweton (Fessenden, N.D.: The Grass Roots Press, 1999), 23-25.

For some newcomers, lacking an understanding of the conditions they would encounter put them in danger of being ambushed by dangerous weather. Robert Crawford remembered that as “tenderfeet,” his family members failed to recognize the signs of a blizzard, something they would know after more years in Dakota Territory.⁸ Dakotans defended their winters by blaming its ill effects on newcomers rather than the climate itself.⁹ Still, one can probably take seriously a Grand Forks paper’s reasonable observation that an 1882 blizzard made for “a tough experience to many who had never spent a winter in the Territory, and were wholly unprepared for severe weather so early in the season.”¹⁰ Those who lacked accurate expectations of Dakota winter weather found themselves surprised, chilly, and vulnerable.

Dakota residents saw intense cold and late-season snowfall as normal, in contrast to at least some of the newcomers. Some veterans likely changed their views to adopt such a perspective. Dakotans expected intense cold. “We think it is warm here when it is at zero,” wrote Edwin Johnson, in February 1884 from the Hillsboro area, where the recent average temperature had been “about 10 below.” He implied that such cold was not the norm back in the Northeast. In mid-February 1887, well into his first Dakota winter, settler J.W. McClurg could include a morning with a temperature “not many degrees below 0” among the ranks of mornings that were “nice, beautiful, and moderate for Dakota at this time of year.” The weather might not have had its own merit, but it was fine for Dakota. Ike Blasingame noticed a difference in his expectation of the climate when he returned home to Texas one Christmas. “I’d half forgotten what a mild winter was like,” he wrote, “without deep snow and below-zero temperatures.”

⁸ Crawford, “First Pioneer Years,” 21-22.

⁹ *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., March 10, 1907); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., March 20, 1902).

¹⁰ *Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, D.T., December 9, 1882).

Dakota newcomers were surprised by the late-arriving spring. A story from Jerauld County, South Dakota, suggests that those with more experience in the Dakotas knew better. According to N.J. Dunham, a historian of the county, an April “wind and snow” storm was a “never-failing” occurrence. Other county residents must have seen it that way as well. When an unusually severe blizzard struck in April 1906, the damage remained minimal because “people had learned to guard against this spring storm.”¹¹

Many Dakotans, knowing they would face a stiff test from winter each year, also had an annual routine of preparation. Elizabeth Harris wrote in February 1884 that “everybody expects it is going to be very cold here and fixes up for it before winter.”¹² Settlers stockpiled fuel and food for themselves and their animals and ensured that their houses could withstand the coming harsh conditions. Dakotans no doubt believed preparing for winter played a key part in their survival, and it had a prominent place in their annual routines. Rachel Calof, who emigrated from Russia to North Dakota in the 1890s, put it well, writing: “In the fall the inevitable planning began for the following winter. The winters dominated our lives. It seemed that all our accomplishments during the warm seasons had to be directed to lasting through this one season.” In another place, Calof wrote that thinking about winter began even before fall. “Already,” she wrote, describing the summer of 1895, “the men were planning for the coming second winter.”¹³

¹¹ *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., February 17, 1899); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 3, 1904); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 7, 1910); *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., December 6, 1897); Dunham, *History of Jerauld County*, 312; Draper, *My Ever Dear Charlie*, 161, xii; Blasingame, *Dakota Cowboy*, 15, 277; “Edwin and Clara Johnson Letters,” box 1, folders 1, 3, and 4.

¹² Paula M. Nelson, ed., “‘All well and hard at work’: The Harris Family Letters From Dakota Territory, 1882-1888,” *North Dakota History* 57, no. 2 (spring 1990): 30.

¹³ J. Sanford Rikoon, ed., *Rachel Calof’s Story: Jewish Homesteader on the Northern Plains*, trans. Jacob Calof and Molly Shaw (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 1, 21-22, quoted on pp. 45, 69.

Dakotans constructed or modified their homes and other buildings to prepare them for winter. This work might take place in the original construction or in the months leading up to the onset of winter. Whenever Dakotans undertook this work, it shows that they were thinking about winter and wanted to ensure that their homes would keep them warm. They built structures around the door to protect this vulnerable point for the entry of cold air. “All houses were built with a small entry or storm shed, both front and back, for protection from snow and cold,” Nina Wishek wrote, regarding at least homes in the McIntosh County area of Dakota in the late-nineteenth century.¹⁴

Some, though not all, Dakotans also insulated their buildings heavily. Again, some Dakotans accommodated to winter more than others.¹⁵ Mary Woodward’s home used a variety of building materials to provide a barrier to the cold. “We have the warmest house in this vicinity,” she wrote in January 1886. “It is clapboarded, sheeted, and papered; then studding is put on inside of that, onto which ship-lath, plaster, and inside paper are nailed, making seven thicknesses.”¹⁶ Other Dakotans used more organic materials for insulation. Some packed their homes with sod.¹⁷ Georgie Townsend, a 1905 immigrant to North Dakota, wrote in October 1906 about her plan to use hay and “ashes-of-roses building paper” as additional insulation.¹⁸ Dakotans actively responded to winter by fortifying their homes against the cold.

Dakotans secured their homes against the cold in another way. “Every one seems to be [sic] making preparations for cold wether [sic] banking up their houses,” observed one settler in

¹⁴ Wishek, *Along the Trails of Yesterday*, 118.

¹⁵ Drache, *Challenge of the Prairie*, 38, 141, 148, 154.

¹⁶ Woodward, *The Checkered Years*, 114.

¹⁷ Nelson, “All well and hard at work,” 29.

¹⁸ Townsend, “Letters from West of Philadelphia,” 109.

November 1886.¹⁹ The process was a prominent enough part of life in the Dakotas that *Harper's Weekly* carried an image, titled “‘Banking Up’ For Winter in Dakota” in January 1886.²⁰

Banking involved packing the base of the house with insulating material, such as manure, to keep out the cold.²¹ Charles Hobart used horse manure and straw to bank his house, prior to the winter of 1883-1884, but he banked more aggressively than most, coating even the higher reaches of the walls with a layer of insulation. “I boarded the back-door,” he wrote, “built a small lean-to over the front door, for my coal, and banked the house all around the north side up to and over the eaves, and banked the rest of it, except the windows, up to the chamber window.” Having taken such measures, he stayed “quite comfortable.”²²

Preparing “to combat the coming cold weather,” as the *Bismarck Daily Tribune* put it in September 1893, meant completing routine work beyond insulating buildings. That month in Bismarck, it meant “chinking up the chimneys and making other repairs” to the train station.²³ Installation of “storm porches and windows” employed “an army of carpenters” in Langdon, North Dakota, during the latter part of November 1900.²⁴ After only about half a year of living in North Dakota, Georgie Townsend stepped right into this routine of preparing her home for winter by heeding the warnings she heard about the season in her new state and finishing some shingling on her roof in October 1905.²⁵

¹⁹ Boley, “Sarah Boley Diaries 1877-1918,” 25-26.

²⁰ “Dakota’s Weather Frontier in the News, 1874-1891,” *South Dakota History* 15, no. 1/2 (spring/summer 1985): 58.

²¹ Drache, *Challenge of the Prairie*, 112.

²² Charles H. Hobart, “Pioneering in North Dakota,” *North Dakota Historical Quarterly* VII, no. 4 (July 1933): 191, 210-212, quoted on 210-211.

²³ *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, N.D., September 15, 1893).

²⁴ *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., November 24, 1900).

²⁵ Townsend, “Letters from West of Philadelphia,” 75-78.

Dakotans prepared structures such as their barns or chicken coops for winter as well. They used various methods to keep them warm: banking, packing sod against the walls, putting a layer of straw on the roof, or what one settler called “muding up.” By this, she probably meant applying a layer of mud to the structure or at least using mud to seal cracks. Dakotans took steps to ensure that the shelters for their animals proved effective.²⁶

Dakotans not only attempted to ensure that their homes provided protection against winter but also stocked those homes with the goods they would need to survive the season: food and fuel to heat the house. These goods could be hard to obtain during the winter when transportation became more difficult.

The strength or length of winter surprised some Dakota newcomers, but others came to the region knowing that they would need to prepare for the Dakota winter, or else they learned early on. “Coal and provisions must be stored against the long cold winter which we knew too well would soon be upon us,” recalled Nina Wishek, an 1887 immigrant from Michigan, about her family’s tasks before its first Dakota winter.²⁷ In late August 1909, Elizabeth Corey, who had come to South Dakota earlier in the year from Iowa, wrote, “I am planning my winter living already.” For her winter consumption, she asked her mother to send apples from Iowa and was planning stores of cucumbers, plums, and potatoes.²⁸

At least some residents with longer sojourns in the Dakotas planned their winter consumption as well. In fall 1906, before her second winter there, Georgie Townsend thought about building her winter cache of fuel and food even though she found such planning rather

²⁶ Nelson, “All well and hard at work,” 29; Janet Kinnucan Novak, “W.A. and Carrie Craker Letters From North Dakota 1887-1891”, December 1994, 22, NDSU Institute for Regional Studies and NDSU Archives; Boley, “Sarah Boley Diaries 1877-1918,” 27, 37, 85-86; Drache, *The Challenge of the Prairie: Life and Times of Red River Pioneers*, 112.

²⁷ Wishek, *Along the Trails of Yesterday*, 93, quoted on 96.

²⁸ Gerber, *Bachelor Bess*, xxix, 1-4, 27-28.

difficult. “Don’t know,” she admitted, “how much a person is supposed to eat in six or seven months.”²⁹ As they prepared for the winter of 1895-1896, the Calof family bought “one-half ton of coal, one hundred pounds of flour, twenty-five pounds of sugar, some yeast, and a little coffee.” They, too, wanted to ensure that they had enough supplies to survive.³⁰ The chance to acquire “a winter’s supply” of vegetables drew shoppers to Bismarck in October 1891 to buy local farmers’ produce.³¹ Catering to people who were concerned about storing food, a Grand Forks merchant advertised “winter potatoes.”³²

Animals needed food as well. Some Dakotans cut and collected hay for their animals’ winter feed. One rancher of the 1880s and 1890s estimated that her family cut 400-500 tons per year, most of which went to winter use.³³ Such behavior was far less common – if it happened at all – after the winter of 1886-1887 than before. The winter that year brought terrible conditions for animals, but Dakota ranchers could have prevented some of the destruction by making provisions for their animals’ food. Looking back on the winter of 1886-1887 almost 15 years later, the *Bismarck Daily Tribune* said that in northwestern Dakota Territory before that season started, “There was no thought of dangers from cold, deep snow and shortage of feed.” Instead, ranchers let the animals fend for themselves when it came to nutrition, and cattle starved to death when snow covered the grass, which the *Tribune* said had been grazed “to the ground” anyway. The winter of 1886-1887 spurred ranchers to store up enough hay and even corn to provide for some of their animals’ winter needs. This reform to help them survive winter even helped the

²⁹ Townsend, “Letters from West of Philadelphia,” 106.

³⁰ Rikoon, *Calof’s Story*, 21-22, 24, 30-34.

³¹ *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, N.D., November 25, 1891).

³² *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., October 18, 1906).

³³ “Herding Cows and Waiting Tables,” 28; Harold B. Kildahl, Sr., “‘Westward We Came’: The Kildahl Memoirs, Part Two,” ed. Erling E. Kildahl, *North Dakota History* 61, no. 1 (winter 1994): 11; *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., November 13, 1907); Moran, “Eight-Hundred Square Miles of Range,” 55, 57.

economies of the Dakotas and surrounding states by creating demand for these crops. Reaction to a ghastly winter season thus added a new step to Dakotans' winter preparations.³⁴

In a land where even inhabited houses could freeze indoors, maintaining a fire was essential. "In winter especially," wrote Rachel Calof, "the stove sustained our lives."³⁵ So in addition to stockpiling food, Dakotans stockpiled fuel to prepare for winter and ensure that they would survive. Peter Anderson recalled that it was a necessity to "get our fuel and other supplies home before the snow came."³⁶ Obtaining that fuel required ordering, collecting, or transporting it. It also probably took some financial planning. The *Grand Forks Daily Herald* said in September 1901 that "this is the time of year when people are figuring on their winter's supply. The cost of fuel for the winter in this country makes quite an important item in the expense account of the average householder."³⁷

Coal was not the only fuel Dakotans stockpiled. Frank Bloodgood, an 1881 immigrant, recalled collecting "wagon loads" of cow chips to get ready for winter during the 1880s.³⁸ "Some worked many days in the fall gathering chips for winter use," wrote 1883 settler Earle Hubbard in his memoir of life in South Dakota in the late-nineteenth century. According to Hubbard, one resourceful farmer collected his chips from a 40-acre cattle corral seven miles from his home. Multiple times he filled his wagon with chips and deposited them in his granary and summer kitchen. There may have been other reasons that Dakotans used this fuel source, but one was

³⁴ Milton, *South Dakota*, 108; Schell, *History of South Dakota*, 245; *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, N.D., September 24, 1900); Robinson, *History of North Dakota*, 190 The North Dakota State University Institute for Regional Studies reprinted the book and added a postscript and additional preface. I have used both the original and the reprint. Lee, "Ranching East to West," 269-270.

³⁵ Rikoon, *Calof's Story*, 79.

³⁶ Anderson, "Pre-empting, Tree Claiming and Homesteading," 10.

³⁷ *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., September 15, 1901).

³⁸ Bucklin, "The Memoir of Frank Bloodgood," 114, 137; Hubbard, *Seventeen Years with the Pioneers*, 20.

their inability to afford coal.³⁹ In preparation for winter, Dakotans purchased coal, as well. In a fashion indicating that buying coal was a routine practice, a November 1887 newspaper article spoke of residents in or around Huron, Dakota Territory, collecting a “winter supply” of coal. Rachel Calof, too, recorded her family’s purchases of coal to prepare for winter.⁴⁰ Dakotans showed accommodation to winter through this routine of purchasing fuel in advance.

Dakotans only accommodated to winter to a certain extent, however. They also demonstrated a sense of complacency toward winter, and they did not take every possible precaution as they prepared. Dakotans accommodated to winter, but it is important not to take the argument for accommodation too far, to say that all Dakotans prepared effectively for winter or that Dakotans left absolutely nothing undone in their winter preparations.

As one sign of complacency, a long or total snow cover could mean that livestock owners’ stores of feed would not last. Some did not store feed at all.⁴¹ One household did not take into account that winter could arrive early. Several inches of snow fell in Westport, South Dakota, on October 16, 1905, leaving a newspaper correspondent feeling sheepish. “We wonder if others were as unprepared for snow as we were,” the author wrote. “After faithfully promising friends to have our house prepared with a month’s fuel and provisions before a chance blizzard should come, sure enough, as they say in Texas, we didn’t. It is the unexpected that always happens.” The author indicated a sense that he or she, along with his or her family or

³⁹ Mrs. Albert Green, “My Pioneer Experiences”, 2, SC 55, NDSU Institute for Regional Studies and NDSU Archives; John B. Perkins, *History of Hyde County South Dakota: From its Organization to the Present Time* (No place given: No publisher given, 1908), 25-27; Hubbard, *Seventeen Years with the Pioneers*, 20.

⁴⁰ Rikoon, *Calof’s Story*, 30, 34, 39-40, 45-46; *Daily Grand Forks Herald* (Grand Forks, D.T., November 25, 1887).

⁴¹ *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., January 19, 1907); *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., December 30, 1909); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 5, 1905); Gerber, *Bachelor Bess*, 48, 50, 54-55, 59, 62-63, 67-68, 73.

housemates, had failed to meet the social expectation that they make ready. They knew what they should have done, had failed to do it, and now sought others who shared their guilt. An October snow was possible, if unlikely, in South Dakota, and they had put their stock in the probable, rather than the possible.⁴²

This author may have been alone in being unprepared in his or her locality, but not in the larger context of the Dakotas. Dakotans commonly reacted to cold weather by taking steps to prepare for winter. Although buying coal in mid-October 1909 showed some foresight on the part of Grand Forks residents, it was still a raw, snowing mid-October day, not a forward-thinking desire to be ready, that served as “the signal” for them to stock up on winter coal.⁴³ This sort of purchasing after the arrival of cold weather apparently happened other years as well.⁴⁴ In late November 1900, when the aforementioned winter modifications to many houses in Langdon, North Dakota, were being made, the work was proceeding after the beginning of cold weather, not before, because “no one expected the extreme cold weather to last that has prevailed for the last ten days.”⁴⁵ Wintry weather during the fall was always a possibility in North Dakota, but residents took the risk that in 1900 that it would not affect them. In this case, their risk failed to pay off. Many Dakotans respected winter enough to prepare for it, but some were lax or tardy in getting ready.

A substantial number of Dakotans did not purchase enough coal to last for an entire winter, as evidenced by the problem of winter coal shortages. In *The Long Winter*, with the railroad cut off by snow, the Ingalls family had to turn to hay instead of coal as a fuel source before 1880 closed. Charles Ingalls had not bought sufficient coal for the whole winter – if he

⁴² *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., October 19, 1905).

⁴³ *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., October 12, 1909).

⁴⁴ *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., October 16, 1909).

⁴⁵ *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., November 24, 1900).

bought at all.⁴⁶ As of late November 1899, some residents of Grand Forks had purchased coal and some had not. Little hardwood or coal could be found in the city at that time, but some residents had more reason to fear the situation than others. Those with more reason for calm had “purchased their winter’s supply of fuel” according to the *Grand Forks Daily Herald*, and “are to be congratulated.”⁴⁷

Even stern warnings failed to move Dakotans to buy fuel well before winter. In what one headline called the “ANNUAL WARNING,” early twentieth century Dakota newspapers carried warnings to consumers and local coal dealers from the railroads, the federal government in at least one instance, and the papers themselves to stock up even as early as the summer on coal for the winter, but Dakotans regularly ignored these warnings.⁴⁸ These warnings reminded Dakotans of the shortages of the winter of 1906-1907. Describing the Great Northern railroad’s planned campaign to convince consumers to buy coal before winter that year, the *Aberdeen Daily American* said in May 1907 that “the railroad wants the people to remember the coal shortage of last winter, which was largely due to the fact that coal was not ordered in advance and that when the coal was needed the roads were blocked with snow.” Consumers often ignored this advice. In August 1910, neither local coal dealers nor consumers were listening to railroads’ appeals to them to buy coal, according to *The Grand Forks Daily Herald*. The paper said that “the campaign evidently is having little effect, for the people in the country are as slow placing their orders in the past.” Inability to sway consumers frustrated members of the railroad business. Great Northern chairman James Hill did not think that consumers in North Dakota had bought enough coal for winter by October 1910. “We have killed employes [sic] in past severe winters

⁴⁶ Wilder, *The Long Winter*, 140, 142, 149, 151, 170, 184-185.

⁴⁷ *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., November 28, 1899).

⁴⁸ *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., August 20, 1910).

in an effort to supply this section with coal and I don't propose to do it this year," he snapped. "It will be a case of either get your coal in or freeze."⁴⁹

Dakotans may have disregarded these warnings because they saw them as mere attempts by business to make money. They may have seen them as motivated by business rather than true dangers in the coming winter. They may also have lacked the money to buy enough coal for the whole winter or to buy coal so early.⁵⁰ Dakotans' disregard for them also suggests a limit to their willingness to prepare for winter, though. They would go so far in their preparations. They were not going to take the utmost caution. Perhaps such behavior, which seems to indicate more than simply the folly or ignorance of newcomers, suggests that Dakotans had begun to feel at home in their new land and were accustomed to the threat of winter. They respected it, but time had dulled their fear.

Though some Dakotans exhibited a casual attitude toward winter preparation, public pressure went the opposite route, reminding Dakotans to prepare for the coming season. Another way Dakotans accommodated to winter and attempted to head off problems stemming from the season was to ensure that others were getting ready. In part public pressure was aimed at those whose attitude toward their winter preparation was lax, but warnings also functioned as folksy, if rather nagging, suggestions. Georgie Townsend was warned as a newcomer to prepare herself for winter. Writing to her parents in November 1905, she wrote, that "old timers" warned her to

⁴⁹ *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., May 24, 1907); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., May 19, 1907); *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., June 23, 1907); *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., August 2, 1907); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., August 21, 1909); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., October 20, 1910).

⁵⁰ Thanks to Professor Michael J. Alexander for this observation.

finish preparing for what she called “that dread season” of winter by the end of October because winter conditions could start in November.⁵¹

Dakotans could find warnings to prepare nagging at their consciences in their newspapers. “The cold snap,” said the *Aberdeen Daily News* in early November 1901, “serves to remind householders that it is time to prepare for winter.”⁵² “This is the proper time for people to see to banking their houses for winter,” declared a late October 1899 Grand Forks newspaper blurb. “Don’t wait until after the first blizzard.”⁵³ The *Bismarck Daily Tribune* in November 1891 counseled farmers to prepare warm winter housing for their animals while it was still warm. “Mend all the doors, door latches and floors, and nail strips across the cracks to keep the cold out,” the paper exhorted.⁵⁴ A warning could also combine humor and a hint of sanctimony. The *Grand Forks Daily Herald* carried a story from another North Dakota paper, describing how a man ran out of tobacco during a blizzard. “Reduced [to] the last extremity he finally chewed the pocket in which he carried his tobacco,” reported the story from the *Bottineau Free Lance*. The article drew a lesson out of this. It concluded, “Moral: Lay in a good supply of life’s necessities when winter comes.”⁵⁵

Pressure to prepare for winter sometimes exceeded mere folksiness or friendly advice – at least in the *Bismarck Daily Tribune*, which issued some strident remarks. “You knew this storm was coming, didn’t you?” said the paper in late mid-November 1891, two days after a storm brought wind, rain, and snow. “Of course you did, but you didn’t have your storm windows on,

⁵¹ Townsend, “Letters from West of Philadelphia,” 75.

⁵² *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., November 4, 1901).

⁵³ *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., October 27, 1899).

⁵⁴ *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, N.D., November 10, 1891).

⁵⁵ *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., February 16, 1893).

or your coal bin filled, or the many other preparations for winter ready, did you?”⁵⁶ Two years later, the paper wrote that Bismarck-area residents who failed to get ready for winter conditions “will regret it later on, in mind and purse.”⁵⁷ The paper bluntly put the onus for winter preparation on Dakotans in March 1887, blaming those who froze in their homes or died outdoors in a winter storm for their own fates. They failed to store up enough fuel. They failed to realize that one should not go out in a blizzard. “Dakota,” the paper said, “is in a northern climate, and that the weather should be cold is natural, but with reasonable precautions there would and should be no extreme suffering from cold in the territory.”⁵⁸

These admonitions indicate an expectation that Dakotans should get ready for winter during the mid-to-late fall and should anticipate tough winter conditions. In addition these strident warnings suggest that some Dakotans were not taking every possible step to be ready for winter, at least not every step the local media believed they should take.⁵⁹ Thus not only did many Dakotans individually accommodate the weighty presence of winter by getting ready for it every year, but they also lived in a culture that accommodated to winter by encouraging preparation as the ideal and proper action as the season approached.

Dakotans also received warnings to prepare for winter from advertisers. While winter weather could prove an economic hindrance in the Dakotas, it could also play a role in economic

⁵⁶ *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, N.D., November 11, 1891); *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, N.D., November 12, 1891).

⁵⁷ *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, N.D., October 25, 1893).

⁵⁸ *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, D.T., March 8, 1887).

⁵⁹ For another example of the relationship between Dakotans, newspapers, and the climate, see Nelson, *After the West Was Won*, 123-125. According to Nelson, in western South Dakota, during the drought of 1910, some papers criticized the settlers rather than the climate, though others remained silent, and correspondents wrote in about the poor conditions in the countryside as well. One approach to this criticism of the settlers was to say that hard working settlers achieved results, while lazy ones did not. The pressure was on the settlers to produce, rather than the bad weather. In a similar way, rather than lamenting the harsh winters, this Bismarck newspaper counseled readers to be ready.

success. Businesses that operated in the Dakotas showed their recognition of winter's presence by incorporating winter into their advertisements and capitalizing on it. (It is possible that such businesses may have had owners who lived outside the state, so here the term "Dakotans" includes any out-of-state business owners who wrote their own advertisements.)⁶⁰ Businesses sold goods and services that helped local residents prepare for the looming cold season. The fact that Dakota merchants used such techniques to reach Dakota consumers also suggests that connecting winter and advertising was somewhat effective and that Dakota consumers incorporated winter into their buying choices. The way Dakotans regarded winter's effect on certain businesses provides further evidence of this accommodation to winter on the part of businesses and consumers. Dakotans connected the arrival of winter weather to success for winter clothing and coal dealers. These businesses suffered when winter failed to show up with sufficient potency.⁶¹

One way businesses capitalized on winter was to advertise winter clothing, such as fur coats or boots. In December 1906 a Grand Forks company added urgency to purchasing its wool underwear by referring to it as "Blizzard Protectors." These advertisements also were part of the culture that urged winter preparedness. "A hard winter is upon us and there is no knowing what may happen," warned a Grand Forks shoestore's ad in mid-December 1882. "Prepare for cold weather," said another Grand Forks footwear ad in November 1892. If the winter did not produce typically cold conditions, a clothing store could still use a warning about winter as a way to salvage it. Warm weather limited the sales of winter clothing at an Aberdeen clothing store

60 *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., April 15, 1913); *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., August 21, 1906); *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., January 7, 1907); *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., July 20, 1907).

⁶¹ To consider another environmental force which has proved both threatening and beneficial, see Stephen J. Pyne, *Fire in America: A Cultural History of Wildland and Rural Fire* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982).

during the winter of 1910-1911. But the store still saw calamitous weather on the horizon in February as it informed customers of an upcoming sale, which would include a wide selection of coats and might offer a chance to prepare for the late-season fury. Despite the weather that had come before, it warned that the “Coldest Weather Is Yet to Come.”⁶²

Advertisers also spoke of ways Dakotans could brave the winter inside their homes. Building supply stores talked of ways to keep the cold from slipping in, such as “weather strips” or “STORM SASH and DOORS.” An ad from late-December 1874 appealed to readers in Vermillion, Dakota Territory, whose houses did not keep them warm enough. “Why shiver and shake in bed, these cold, winterish nights,” it asked, “when you can buy nice warm bed quilts at Hansen’s for \$2.75?”⁶³ Businesses sought to use winter to make money by meeting consumers’ demands for warmth.

Other advertisers also connected winter with products that did not concern the warmth of consumers. In September 1911, the *Aberdeen Daily American* carried an ad for Turkish baths. “Now is the time of year,” it said, “to strengthen yourself to endure the long cold winter.”⁶⁴ A 1910 ad to publicize Hot Springs, South Dakota, tried to sell trips there during the cold season, calling it “the great winter resort of the Black H[i]lls.”⁶⁵ Companies used winter as a way to sell laundry service. One January 1906 ad said that doing laundry at home during the winter steamed up the house. Therefore, customers should seek help. “You’ll enjoy our high grade laundry work

⁶² *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., February 10, 1911); *Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, D.T., December 15, 1882); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., November 2, 1892); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 2, 1906).

⁶³ *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., October 4, 1907); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., October 18, 1906); *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., November 22, 1907); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, D.T., November 3, 1885); *The Dakota Republican* (Vermillion, D.T., December 24, 1874).

⁶⁴ *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., September 29, 1911).

⁶⁵ *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., March 5, 1910).

more during cold weather,” said another in November 1909. Other ads sold new sleighs or sleigh maintenance. Even piano tuners used the arrival of winter as grounds to tell customers that they ought to seek their services. “Now is the time,” said a November 1885 ad, “to have your pianos tuned and repaired for the winter.”⁶⁶ Advertisers tapped into and promoted the culture of winter preparedness, and consumers apparently responded at least somewhat positively to encourage businesses to keep running such ads. That advertisers were willing even to use winter as a way to sell laundry service or piano tuning indicates the great extent to which they considered winter useful as a selling point. They accommodated winter into their strategy for reaching customers.

Despite the use of winter in advertising, the season seems to have been a generally quiet time for Dakota business. “Our blacksmiths have practically closed up for the winter,” said a January 1901 report⁶⁷ from Niagara, North Dakota.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, the season helped some businesses, including those that sold winter clothing and coal. Dakotans flocked into clothing stores when faced with the prospect of oncoming winter. All it might take was a shot of cold or snow. When the temperature dropped as cold as seven degrees in Bismarck as part of a mid-November 1914 cold pattern, it generated a response. A report on the city carried in *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* on November 18 said:

The cold weather of the last few days has served to stimulate business. The effects were much in evidence yesterday in Bismarck and reports from all over the northwest indicate that business has had a revival up to the approach of real winter. Up to this time little

⁶⁶ *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 11, 1898); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., November 14, 1906); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., November 17, 1909); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, D.T., November 3, 1885); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 4, 1906); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., March 2, 1904).

⁶⁷ Such a report, which came from a newspaper section called “Correspondence,” probably came from what Paula Nelson calls “[r]ural correspondents.” See Nelson, *After the West Was Won*, 124-125.

⁶⁸ *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 8, 1901); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 2, 1910).

Johnnie has been trotting to school every day in the thin shoes that did service in the summer time, and his sister Mary has found summer dresses sufficient, but the frigid breezes have brought whole families into the city for a complete outfitting.

Winter apparel could sell well as part of seasonal habit, too. It happened in Bismarck during November 1890. “Though the weather is mild and spring-like,” the local paper said, “the people are preparing for winter’s chilly blasts when they do come.”⁶⁹

Winter weather could also spur sales of coal. The same cold spell that limited grocery selection in Grand Forks not surprisingly enriched those who helped the city’s residents warm their homes. “The fuel man isn’t complaining,” said *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* on January 10, 1912, “and says business is by all odds the best in the history of the coal business.”⁷⁰

Dakotans accommodated to winter as consumers, buying goods to ensure their readiness for winter. Businesses also accommodated to winter by selling the goods that consumers wanted to use to help them pass safely through the season. Businesses could thus profit rather than suffer from the presence of winter.

Other businesses benefitted from winter, too.⁷¹ Cold, snow, and ice increased the demand for blacksmiths to install sled runners and give animals winter shoes. With the Grand Forks streets icy in February 1903, the paper predicted that blacksmiths would grow even busier because buyers would want their horses “sharp shod” so they could have some traction on icy

⁶⁹ *Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, D.T., December 20, 1882); *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, N.D., November 14, 1890); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., September 29, 1899); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., September 28, 1899); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 30, 1900); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., November 16, 1909); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., November 18, 1914); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 4, 1914).

⁷⁰ *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 10, 1912); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 19, 1901).

⁷¹ For one example, see *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 11, 1909).

surfaces.⁷² Heavy, long lasting snow drove up demand for sleds, which could prove helpful if not essential for travel when the snow got deep in the rural Dakotas. It contributed to what the *Fargo Forum* in 1907 called a “sled shortage.” The same thing happened in the winter of 1909-1910. Bob sleighs “sold like hot cakes at the first snow,” said the *Aberdeen Daily News* in December. Sleighs sold too well, in fact, and became unobtainable. “The snow has been so abundant and long-lasting in all sections of the coun[t]ry,” said the *Aberdeen Daily American*, “that the supply of the runners has been completely exhausted, not only within this territory, but everywhere.”⁷³

A warmer-than-expected winter surely elated some Dakotans, but it chilled the hearts of merchants who had counted on blizzards and cold waves to drive shivering masses into their stores ready to plunk down money on boots and coats to keep out the vicious wind. Dakotans who did not make a living on warm clothes may have cursed the double-digit-below-zero wind chills as they lowered their shoulders and marched resolutely into icy gusts, but Dakotans who did probably blessed them and fretted over those soft, drippy, sunny days that others loved. *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* noted this phenomenon in January 1914. “Business,” it wrote, “does not like bare ground in winter time in this latitude.” A Bismarck store announced a coming sale on winter wear in February 1890. Above-normal warmth that season had kept stores from selling as many warm clothes as they had hoped. “There will be plenty of raw, chilly days and perhaps some continuous cold snaps yet this spring,” the ad warned. Mild weather reduced North Dakota’s daily coal burning from its estimated “cold weather” level of 5,000 tons to about 2,000

⁷² *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., November 17, 1909); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., February 15, 1903); Les Sellnow, “Winter Traction Devices: Get a Grip Before You Slip!” (theHORSE.com, January 1, 2002), [Http://www.thehorse.com/ViewArticle.aspx?ID=3226](http://www.thehorse.com/ViewArticle.aspx?ID=3226).

⁷³ *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., December 18, 1909); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 17, 1907); *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., January 1, 1910).

tons during late November 1899, according to the *Grand Forks Daily Herald*. The ensuing detrimental effect evidenced in coal sellers' account books, made them "anxious for cold weather." The failure of the winter 1897-1898 to meet expectations had consequences for northern North Dakota merchants, according to a visitor there. "He reports," the *Grand Forks Daily Herald* said, "that a great many of the country merchants anticipating a winter similar to the one last year, bought heavily of woolen goods and warm footwear. The winter being mild, there was no demand for such goods. The bills are due and as there is a scarcity of cash, it leaves some of them in very bad shape."⁷⁴

Some Dakotans other than merchants benefitted from winter. Winter challenged the Dakota transportation system, making travel more difficult or preventing it altogether. But Dakotans found ways to get around those difficulties. Rivers were one area that revealed this dual nature of winter. On the one hand, steamboats could not navigate a frozen river. On the other hand, frozen rivers no longer imposed a barrier against those who wished to cross them. A history of Churchs Ferry, North Dakota, records that ice made it possible to cross a local body of water called "the Mauvaise Coulee" during the late fall, winter and early spring of 1882-1883.⁷⁵

The Missouri River also froze enough for people to cross on the ice. A cowboy named Ike Blasingame recorded that the ice on the river reached four feet thick one winter.⁷⁶ When the frozen Missouri River was "sufficiently tight," as one newspaper report put it, it could hold

⁷⁴ *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, N.D., February 16, 1890); *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, N.D., December 15, 1891); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., March 1, 1898); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 1, 1899); *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., February 10, 1911); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 4, 1914).

⁷⁵ G.C. Chambers, *A Complete History of Churchs Ferry* (no place given: The Churchs Ferry Sun, 1894), 1, 3-4, 6-8, 11.

⁷⁶ Blasingame, *Dakota Cowboy*, 76-77.

people, farm animals, or a load of mail.⁷⁷ Dakota chronicler William Rhoads referred to an “ice bridge” between Pierre and Fort Pierre that allowed travel across the Missouri. In this case, the warm season actually made travel more dangerous than winter. “The ice bridge was very strong when really completed, when real freezing set in, but was rather precarious in early winter and in spring when the thaw set in,” Rhoads wrote. He recalled a Ft. Pierre harnessmaker who struggled in the spring to find a willing volunteer to haul his goods across the now-decaying “bridge.”⁷⁸ Sarah Boley used the same term to describe the freezing of a river near Bismarck – probably the Missouri – during the winter of 1881-1882. Her “ice bridge” lasted until March 31, she wrote.⁷⁹ The very term “ice bridge” suggests a belief that winter transformed the nature of a body of water. When the cold weather arrived it became easier, not more difficult, to cross. A hard freeze made a body of water more like the rest of the land for travelling.

Dakotans used elements of winter other than frozen bodies of water to assist transportation as well.⁸⁰ When snow became deep enough, sleds could prove an essential source of transportation for country residents. Because snow thickly blanketed the ground in 1909, the *Aberdeen Daily News* noted that in its hinterland “sleighs are a requisite to travel in the rural districts and to carry on the work of hauling hay and other necessary farm work.”⁸¹ Sleds proved so prevalent that Dakotans saw high quality roads as a result of snowfall. “There has been snow enough to make good sleighing,” said the *Grand Forks Daily Herald* in January 1909, “and fresh snow has fallen enough to keep the roads in perfect condition.” With sledding’s popularity, some

⁷⁷ *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., December 8, 1908); *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., December 3, 1912); *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., November 19, 1896); *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., November 24, 1906).

⁷⁸ Rhoads, *Recollections of Dakota Territory*, 33.

⁷⁹ Boley, “Sarah Boley Diaries 1877-1918,” 5, 54.

⁸⁰ For another discussion of snow's facilitation of travel, see Ruth Kirk, *Snow* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1978), 214-216.

⁸¹ *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., December 18, 1909).

Dakotans perceived the lack of snow, rather than its presence, as the real transportation nuisance. “The general complaint among the farmers: No snow to make sleighing so they can haul their winter wood,” stated a January 1895 report from Thompson, North Dakota.⁸²

Dakotans also turned to other varieties of transportation to use the winter environment. In an outlandish example, one Dakotan combined a warm-weather vehicle and a sled into a contraption that could navigate winter terrain. During the winter of 1896-1897, this Grand Forks barber pedaled about on his “ice bicycle,” which was apparently an ordinary bicycle except that the front wheel had been exchanged for a runner. A local paper called the vehicle “a big success.”⁸³ Dakotans, such as residents of Ryder, North Dakota, also used skis for winter travel. “Many Ryder young men find it necessary to use skees in going back and forth to their claims,” reported *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* in January 1907, “as in many instances the claims are located several miles from any trail. and [sic] a horse could not get through the deep snow.” With the encouragement of a Norwegian blacksmith, John Stanley, a teenager near Gary, Dakota Territory, also took up skiing during the winter of 1880-1881. This case of ethnic exchange paid off for the Wisconsin-born Stanley, who found skiing “an enjoyable sport” which allowed him to glide “swiftly” across the frozen terrain.⁸⁴ Dakotans made the best of snow-covered terrain. While winter conditions could also pose a substantial barrier to travel, Dakotans had ways of using those conditions when traveling, to the point that some actually wanted snowfall to make

⁸² *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, N.D., February 24, 1896); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 17, 1895); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., November 25, 1906); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 7, 1909); Nelson, “All well and hard at work,” 36.

⁸³ *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 9, 1897).

⁸⁴ Hobart, “Pioneering in North Dakota,” 206; Anderson, “Pre-empting, Tree Claiming and Homesteading,” 10; Stanley, *From Then Until Now*, 3, 12, 23; *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 30, 1907).

getting around easier. Instead of throwing up their hands and surrendering to the challenge winter posed to travel, they accommodated the presence of winter into their travel goals.

Dakotans accommodated to winter in the jobs they chose to fill in that season. Some found different jobs. As *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* put it on November 16, 1909, two days after a major blizzard hit the city, “The storm will hasten the closing up of a good deal of work” in cities of North Dakota. “But,” it continued, “the storm will bring other work to a good many people.”⁸⁵ For farmers, the routine continued to a degree during the winter, although activity slowed without crops to grow. No doubt this slowdown happened even in agricultural communities that did not experience winters as potent as those in the Dakotas, but this quieter environment on farms was still a part, even if not a unique one, of Dakota winters. “Have nothing to do but write letters now,” wrote farmer Edwin Johnson on November 26, 1883.⁸⁶ In an observation made by Sophie Trupin regarding Jewish farmers, but which was probably true of other ethnic groups, farmers had less work now that they had completed gathering hay and harvesting their crops, but other tasks remained in the winter. “The only necessary tasks,” she wrote, “were caring for the animals, mending harnesses, chopping wood, milking cows, and other similar chores.”⁸⁷ Mary Woodward agreed that the amount of farm work declined but by no means disappeared during the winter. “There is nothing much for men to do in Dakota in winter,” she wrote in October 1885, but tending stock still remained a task. That work kept her sons “busy a good share of the time,” she wrote in January 1887. As the amount of farm work diminished, so did the size of the hired staff of the Woodward farm. The family employed workers in the spring, summer, and fall, but the staff dropped to few if any during the winter. “It

⁸⁵ *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., November 16, 1909).

⁸⁶ “Edwin and Clara Johnson Letters,” box 1, folders 1 and 3.

⁸⁷ Rikoon, *Calof's Story*, 92.

is quite a change from eighteen or twenty in the family to four,” Mary Woodward remarked on November 26, 1886, the day after the family’s final worker departed.⁸⁸

But if the amount of farm labor dipped during the winter, the amount required in some other jobs increased. Dakotans accommodated to winter by finding work in other fields that directly involved winter. One of these jobs was the “ice harvest” on the region’s frozen waters. This Ice harvested in the Dakotas by Dakotans or in some cases, perhaps, migrant workers, went to butchers, fruit merchants, hotels, farms, railroads, and beer warehouses. Cutting ice provided work to Dakotans. “The harvest, teaming, housing, etc., have furnished employment to a good many different men,” said the *Aberdeen Daily News* on January 27, 1898. This was not a year-round pursuit, but it could provide employment to men, including Mary Woodward’s sons during December 1886, who were willing to accept a different job than usual during the winter.

A 1910 article in the *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* described an ice harvest at an unidentified location, but likely on Maple Lake in Minnesota. In this procedure, which was probably also used in the Dakotas, horses first pulled scraping tools across the ice. Then horses would pull a sharp implement across the ice to score it into 30-by-32-inch rectangles. Horses next drew saws which cut those blocks about two-thirds of the way apart. Workers then removed several hundred barely connected blocks to the shore as one mass, where a large, powerful man wielding a crowbar split them apart. Here again, Dakotans needed a vigorous winter. The winter of 1907-1908, in which January temperatures were warm enough to allow the playing of a baseball game in Frederick, South Dakota, on January 19, proved a tough one for the ice harvest. “Ice men at this city are becoming anxious for enough cold weather to allow them to begin gathering their ‘crop’ for next year,” said a January 6 report from Pierre. Temperatures there had

⁸⁸ Woodward, *The Checkered Years*, 22, 98, 149, 157.

not spent enough time below zero. The ice was thick enough for livestock to walk across but still not thick enough for harvest. Once again, rather than seeing winter only as a problem, Dakotans took advantage of it by harvesting the ice it created.⁸⁹

Dakotans found winter employment in other fields as well. Some dug the railroads out of the snow. While between farming jobs during the first two months of 1888, Simon Hille earned \$1.50 per day at this work.⁹⁰ Some North Dakotans migrated east during the winter to work in logging. They headed to Minnesota or Wisconsin in November and returned in March. This line of work attracted farmers and hired farm laborers. Dakota farms had a fluctuating demand for labor throughout the year. In the early twentieth century they needed 5,000 hired workers during spring planting, 15,000 during harvest, 20,000 during threshing, and 5,000 during fall plowing. Then, during the winter, the demand for them dwindled to almost nothing. Some of these migrant workers wintered in logging camps. Men not only sought work for themselves; they also rented their horses to the logging companies. The animals earned money while someone else paid for

⁸⁹ For the preceding two paragraphs, see *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., March 8, 1907); *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., January 27, 1898); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., February 6, 1901); *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, N.D., January 22, 1899); *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, N.D., January 24, 1900); *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., January 7, 1908); *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., January 24, 1908); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 2, 1910); Gerber, *Bachelor Bess*, 175, 422; Woodward, *The Checkered Years*, 151; *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., February 3, 1904); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 30, 1902); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., August 16, 1904); *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., January 17, 1895); *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., December 15, 1898); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 12, 1906); *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., January 19, 1908); *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., December 29, 1909); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., February 7, 1914); *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., January 10, 1911); *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, N.D., February 3, 1898).

⁹⁰ Woodward, *The Checkered Years*, 164; Simon Hille, "Homesteading, Pre-empting, and Tree Claiming in Dickey County," in *The Way It Was; The North Dakota Frontier Experience Book Four: Germans from Russia Settlers*, ed. Everett C. Albers and D. Jerome Tweton (Fessenden, N.D.: The Grass Roots Press, 1999), 29; *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 16, 1907); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 11, 1909).

their feed. Logging was another profession that welcomed winter – except that it took place one or two states to the east. “The cold weather of the past week,” said the *Grand Forks Daily Herald* in January 1903, “has been very satisfactory to the men in the lumber woods, as it makes it easy to keep well iced roads.”⁹¹

These Dakotans who sought alternative employment accommodated to winter by taking advantage of the season’s demand for snow shovelers and loggers. Dakotans thus dealt with winter by taking their labor where it was wanted – or sending their horses’ labor where it was wanted. For late-nineteenth century farmers, among whom money was scarce but necessary to buy goods or repairs to farm equipment, winter jobs could prove valuable sources of cash.⁹²

Some rural Dakota women used winter to complete indoor tasks. This may have been an accommodation to the way foul weather kept them indoors or to a reduction in the amount of labor needed on the farm during the winter. Writing after Christmas 1906, Georgie Townsend referred to winter as a productive time for her to finish uncompleted tasks.⁹³ Other women used winter as a time to sew. “There is always plenty of work and we get no time to sew except a little in winter,” Mary Woodward wrote in December 1884.⁹⁴ Woodward also in January 1885 recorded churning butter during the winter and making plans to sell some. As with sewing, she

⁹¹ *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., November 24, 1900); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., March 9, 1901); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., February 26, 1905); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., March 20, 1902); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., November 18, 1900); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., November 11, 1908); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 1, 1903); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., February 6, 1908); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 1, 1912); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., April 6, 1904); Hubbard, *Seventeen Years with the Pioneers*, 24.

⁹² Fite, *The Farmers’ Frontier*, 218.

⁹³ Townsend, “Letters from West of Philadelphia,” 135.

⁹⁴ Woodward, *The Checkered Years*, 57; Thal, “Early Days,” 83-84; “Edwin and Clara Johnson Letters,” box 1 folder 8.

found winter a good time to churn.⁹⁵ The case of Martha Thal indicates that women might have also accommodated to winter by performing men's tasks for the first time. While her husband was on a trip to Lakota in 1888, a three-day blizzard struck. Without him there to do the work, Martha Thal had her first experience with chopping wood to warm the house.⁹⁶ It is likely that other women underwent the same experience. Women thus accommodated to winter by using the time the season made available to them to accomplish other tasks. They turned the limitations of the season to productive use.

Winter could constrain the social lives of Dakotans. Winter conditions could prevent them from venturing out, and winter could be a time of loneliness and boredom. Dakotans spent time together even in winter, though. Newspapers remained full of accounts of social events, showing that urban social life remained active. In Bismarck, locals felt great excitement about the oncoming winter because they associated it with fun events. "The young people of Bismarck are planning for winter amusement," said the local *Tribune* in fall 1887, "and there is every reason to believe that the season will be the most brilliant and enjoyable in social circles in the history of the city. There is no end to the variety of amusements and entertainments being discussed."⁹⁷ In rural areas, contact continued as well. Gottlieb Isaak recalled "visiting neighbors and having talkfests with them" during the winter of 1886-1887.⁹⁸ The Berry family spent significant time with their neighbors during the winter of 1882-1883. "There was no place to go

⁹⁵ Woodward, *The Checkered Years*, 64; for an example of less churning during the winter, by a person who probably lived in a rural area, see Drache, *Challenge of the Prairie*, 94; for pages that establish the person as rural, see 109, 116, 157, 169, 195, 298-299, 328-329.

⁹⁶ Thal, "Early Days," 82.

⁹⁷ *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, D.T., October 22, 1887).

⁹⁸ Isaak, "From Bessarabia to Northern Dakota," 33-35.

to, nothing to go to, except visiting around with the neighbors and I'll say we did a great deal of that – that first winter,” recalled George Berry.⁹⁹

Not only did socializing continue in winter, but some Dakotans made positive connections between winter and socializing. This had to do at least in part with the time winter made available for spending time with others. Farmers did not face the cares of growing or harvesting crops. A slower business period in the urban areas likely helped to facilitate socialization there as well.

Some farmers used winter as the wedding season. “People held weddings in the winter because only then was there time for celebrations,” Sophie Trupin recalled. “In spring there was planting; in summer, haying and gardening; in autumn, harvesting; and in winter, courting and marriage.” Though Trupin likely was referring only to local Jews, it is reasonable to think that her comment would have been true for other Dakota farmers.¹⁰⁰ Romance and the community’s sanctioning of it could take place when agriculture consumed less time. If rural people used extra time in winter to hold weddings, they likely used the extra time for additional other social events as well.

Evidence from the *Grand Forks Daily Herald* suggests that residents of urban areas also saw winter as a particularly social time. “Social events and cold weather go hand in hand,” said the *Grand Forks Daily Herald* in November 1892. “As long as the weather is fine parties and receptions are the last things thought of, but let the snow fall and the wind blow and mail carriers find themselves laden with invitations sent out to some social event.” The *Herald* portrayed summer as the less socially lively season in Grand Forks in an October 1905 article, but it predicted more social activities once residents completed “the canning and pickling and

⁹⁹ Berry, “Homestead Days,” 20.

¹⁰⁰ Trupin, *Dakota Diaspora*, 95; Wishek, *Along the Trails of Yesterday*, 243.

preserving season.” This certainly meant the latter part of the fall, but it probably meant at least part of the winter, too.¹⁰¹ This view of winter as a social time may have been the result of additional winter free time, perhaps as a result of a slower winter economy or the end of winter preparation, which was perhaps being described in the article from fall 1905. If this increase in socialization were due, at least in part, to a greater amount of free time during the winter, it would be a case of Dakotans accommodating to the added free time provided by winter. Winter weather could still serve as an enemy of socializing, too, though. “Zero weather is not conducive to hospitality,” said an article from Aberdeen in February 1909, “and the blizzard and extreme cold during the greater part of last month chilled many plans for entertaining.”¹⁰²

Socializing was a part of life beyond the winter season on the late-nineteenth century Plains, and Dakotans kept it up despite winter weather.¹⁰³ In assembling during the winter, whether to socialize or to attend school, Dakotans demonstrated resilience by gathering even when the conditions stood completely against it. One could make the case that such actions showed Dakotans refusing to accommodate winter because they took unnecessary action which put them in the path of an environmental threat. On the other hand such behavior shows accommodation to winter in that Dakotans pursued the human connections they sought while implicitly accepting winter as part of their activities, rather than allowing the season only to hem them in at home, which would have represented accommodation to the point of capitulation. One can thus consider this behavior as evidence both for and against Dakotans accommodating to winter. Apparently going to school and socializing mattered more to Dakotans than a more

¹⁰¹ *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., November 6, 1892); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., November 20, 1900); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., October 1, 1905).

¹⁰² *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., February 7, 1909).

¹⁰³ Robert V. Hine, *Community on the American Frontier: Separate but Not Alone* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 111-116.

certain chance of survival. They participated in such activities despite the danger or discomfort even though they entailed winter as their companion. Dakotans accommodated to winter by refusing to let it completely limit their lives.

Dakotans manifested resilience by enduring harsh conditions when they socialized. Della Wehe's family traveled "six miles over the unbroken snowdrifts" through -40 degree temperatures to reach a New Year's Day party in 1883. Even though the idea of making such a trip made them uneasy, the prospect of company made it worthwhile. Others likely thought so too because 75 people attended the event.¹⁰⁴ Kate Glaspell, a resident of Jamestown, North Dakota, recalled walking six blocks to a dance through -52-degree temperatures during the winter of 1889-1890. "However," she wrote, "trifles like that did not interfere with our pleasure in those early days."¹⁰⁵ Partygoers could even enjoy a storm. "The fact that the night was a cold one, that a howling blizzard was raging and that most of the crowd were spilled in the snow going and coming only added zest to the function," said *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* about a January 1907 party in Traill County, North Dakota.¹⁰⁶ Winter weather did not defeat or dispirit Dakotans when it came to socializing. Yes, it sometimes resulted in isolation when conditions became so intense that they prevented travel. On the other hand, when the weather was uncomfortable but not an insurmountable obstacle, Dakotans simply chose to overcome it.

Sharing houses was another social connection Dakotans made during the winter. This behavior is not surprising, given historian Robert Hine's statement that settlers worked together to combat environmental challenges on the late-nineteenth century Plains. The environment even

¹⁰⁴ Boley, "Sarah Boley Diaries 1877-1918," 16, 76-77; Wehe, "Reminiscences of the Early Eighties in Dakota," 3.

¹⁰⁵ Kate Eldridge Glaspell, "Incidents in the Life of a Pioneer," *North Dakota Historical Quarterly* VIII, no. 3 (April 1941): 184, 189-190.

¹⁰⁶ *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 27, 1907).

helped to build community. On the Plains, wrote Hine, “the environment bred cooperative action.”¹⁰⁷ Evidence of this cooperative action appears in the way Dakotans worked together to make it through winter by living together for the whole winter or by hosting visitors during winter emergencies. Weather sometimes forced a large social gathering to stay together for longer than guests had originally anticipated. In mid-March 1903, 100 guests came together for a wedding in a house near McCanna, North Dakota. A blizzard stranded them all together overnight, and some had to spend two nights there. “There was a good deal of hilarity among the guests during the night,” wrote the *Grand Forks Daily Herald*, “and many expressed themselves as having had the best time of their lives.”¹⁰⁸

Dakotans also moved in together for longer periods during the winter. A desire to reduce fuel consumption and deep snow’s hindrance of travel provided motivation to do this. For several winters, Rachel Calof and members of her husband’s family, including at least his parents, and in Calof’s early years in North Dakota also her husband’s brother, lived with her and her family during the winter for this purpose. During the winter of 1894-1895, they were also joined in the house by a calf and 24 chickens, which they housed under a bed. Calof remembered the horrible smell during those winters and despised the arrangement. “In those precarious winters of the first years when so many people, and animals as well, huddled together in a tiny

¹⁰⁷ Hine, *Community on the American Frontier*, 100, 104, 126.

¹⁰⁸ *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., March 22, 1903); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 16, 1907); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 20, 1906); Dunham, *History of Jerauld County*, 184-185; D. Jerome Tweton and Everett C. Albers, eds., “On a Tree Claim Near Guelph,” in *The Way It Was; The North Dakota Frontier Experience Book One: The Sod-busters* (Fessenden, N.D.: The Grass Roots Press, 1996), 7; Mrs. C.F. Hackett, Sr., “Pioneer Days at Old Finlay,” in *Turner County Pioneer History*, by W.H. Stoddard (Sioux Falls, S.D.: Brown & Saenger, 1931), 421-422; Gerber, *Bachelor Bess*, 119, 249, 251.

space, my yearning was not for a larger shack but rather for the dignity of privacy,” she wrote.¹⁰⁹ Dakotans adjusted their usual living arrangements to the presence of winter in order to increase their chances of surviving. They dealt with winter by accepting the presence of temporarily crowded homes.

Dakotans also accommodated to winter by incorporating it into their entertainment. Given that they received plenty of snowfall and cold temperatures, they turned to winter sports to stay busy. Dakotans enjoyed ice skating, tobogganing, sleigh rides, and skiing. Both Grand Forks and Devils Lake organized ski clubs, and Bismarck boasted “the longest toboggan slide in the world” – at least according to the local paper – during the winter of 1886-1887. Winter assumed a much more benign tone when viewed as an opportunity for athletics, especially compared with its potential to kill and inconvenience. “Yesterday’s fall of the beautiful brought out a number of sleighs and the bells were jingling merrily during the afternoon,” said *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* in November 1906 – snow hardly seemed so benign if it was ushered in by a terrible blizzard.¹¹⁰ Rather than simply fighting back against winter as a threat, Dakotans used it to provide entertainment. They accepted winter into their culture and found a way to make it useful.

Dakotans accommodated to winter, in terms of using the time it made available, and demonstrated resilience against its challenges when it came to education. In an example of

¹⁰⁹ Rikoon, *Calof’s Story*, 39-40, 58-60, 70, 89-90; Hubbard, *Seventeen Years with the Pioneers*, 6; Gerber, *Bachelor Bess*, 66-67, 76.

¹¹⁰ *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., December 24, 1913); *Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, D.T., January 21, 1883); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 2, 1913); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 2, 1896); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., November 14, 1906); *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, D.T., October 22, 1887); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 8, 1910); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., February 7, 1895); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., October 22, 1901); *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, D.T., January 23, 1887); *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., March 23, 1899); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., February 14, 1893); Coursey, *Pioneering in Dakota*, 145-146; Glaspell, “Incidents in the Life of a Pioneer,” 189; Berry, “Homestead Days,” 19-20, 31.

resilience and accommodation to winter in order to hold school, George Berry and some other boys buried rutabagas and potatoes in the dirt floor “When it commenced to get cold and stormy” so that during the winter of 1883-1884, students would have a source of supplies in case a storm trapped them in the building.¹¹¹

Winter could cancel classes, but Dakotans attended school during winter and even endured harsh weather to reach class. “Although the school house is in an out of the way situation, and the weather has been very severe,” said a December 1882 report from Grafton, Dakota Territory, “the school is well attended.” Winter’s presence did not prevent the school in Thompson, North Dakota, from running “full blast” in January 1895. This practice of continuing school into winter played a role in the famous January 12 blizzard. Children went to school when the day started with fair weather, little knowing that a blizzard was brewing, and many died trying to reach home in the storm. Reacting to the news that “scores of children” had perished that day, Mary Woodward wrote that “There should be no school here in winter.”¹¹² By holding school in the winter, Dakotans accepted discomfort and danger when they went to class, thus showing an ability to coexist with winter. On the other hand, they failed to accommodate to winter, in a sense, by venturing out into a dangerous or at least uncomfortable environment. One might say that when Dakotans did not attend school during the winter, they showed more accommodation to the season.

¹¹¹ Berry, “Homestead Days,” 29.

¹¹² Woodward, *The Checkered Years*, 110; *Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, D.T., December 20, 1882); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 17, 1895); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, D.T., January 14, 1886); Nels Arntzen, “Trouble with an Irishman,” in *The Way It Was; The North Dakota Frontier Experience Book Two: Norwegian Homesteaders*, ed. Everett C. Albers and D. Jerome Tweton, 2nd ed. (Fessenden, N.D.: The Grass Roots Press, 2001), 13-14; Berry, “Homestead Days,” 29, 61-62; Coursey, *Pioneering in Dakota*, 151; Drache, *Challenge of the Prairie*, 296-298.

In addition, Dakotans took advantage of the time available during the winter for education. Farming or other labor made fewer demands on Dakotans' attention at that time of the year. Regarding postsecondary education, *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* may have been referring to this trait of winter when in January 1910 it remarked, "The cold period of mid-winter is the ideal time for school work in North Dakota and all of the various 'knowledge mills' of the state will be working up to full capacity from now until the time when the 'roses bloom again.'" Sophie Trupin recalled that the "big boys," including her brothers, assisted on the farm during summer but attended school in winter. The State Agricultural College in Fargo tailored curriculum to those who had time to devote to study during the winter. "This course was instituted in the interests of farmers and young people of the state who find it impossible to pursue the more lengthy regular course of the college, but who are able to give the three winter months to the acquiring of a practical education," said the *Grand Forks Daily Herald* as part of its announcement of the January 1893 opening of the school's 12-week session. Apparently referring to a successful term of this program, the *Herald* said in late-March 1905, "Never have its students manifested so much interest in their work and never have they stayed so well to the end of the term to finish their work and establish credits in this school, despite the early appearance of spring like conditions this season." The Grand Forks Y.M.C.A. offered night classes year round, but it expected extra attendance at its winter sessions, which in 1910 were slated to include courses in French, German, first-aid, and "Business English for Scandinavians." Describing the organization's upcoming semester, *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* said in January 1910, "Now that stores are closed and there is not necessity to work evenings, this term should see a great increase in enrollment." Apparently, even in the city, the pace of life slowed

enough during the winter that it was more convenient to attend classes.¹¹³ Dakotans accommodated to winter's restraint on their work by putting the extra time to use on education. If winter weather limited their activities in one aspect of life, they used that limitation to pursue growth in another area.

Dakotans' migration habits demonstrate yet another way Dakotans accommodated to winter. Farmers flocked from their land into urban areas for the winter. In *The Long Winter*, spurred by his expectation that the coming winter would be severe and concern that the family's house on the prairie was far too drafty to handle a hard Dakota winter, Charles Ingalls moved his family to town for the winter of 1880-1881. The family occupied a store and had a barn, where they could house their horses, cow, and calf. The novel suggests that possessing animals without access to a town or city barn to house them may have deterred farmers from migrating to town, however. "We've got too much stock cattle and horses and chickens," a friend of the Ingalls said, describing his reasoning not to move to town for the winter. "There's no place in town to keep them even if I could afford to pay rent."¹¹⁴

Urban areas offered advantageous places to live during the winter. In the urban areas, children could attend higher quality schools – or attend school at all – during the winter. In

¹¹³ Robinson, *History of North Dakota*, 251-252, 306-308; *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., November 23, 1892); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., July 6, 1895); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 2, 1910); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 5, 1896); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 21, 1907); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., March 19, 1910); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., April 4, 1906); Daniel Kurtz, "Working the Land and Working for God," in *The Way It Was; The North Dakota Frontier Experience Book Four: Germans from Russia Settlers*, ed. Everett C. Albers and D. Jerome Tweton (Fessenden, N.D.: The Grass Roots Press, 1999), 52-53, 55-56; *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 8, 1910); Trupin, *Dakota Diaspora*, 51-52; *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 4, 1910); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., March 22, 1905).

¹¹⁴ Wilder, *The Long Winter*, 59-74.

addition, farmers who wintered in urban areas could more easily find entertainment. The chance “to relieve the monotony of farm life by a winter in the city” helped to attract farmers to Bismarck in fall 1896, the paper there reported. Grand Forks grew so packed with winter resident farmers during late fall 1906 that, according to a local newspaper report, “In some cases two or three families are being crowded into one house.”¹¹⁵ By moving to urban areas, farmers responded to the way winter ended their farm work for the season. As winter limited the work farmers could do on their land, they turned that constraint into an opportunity. They could take advantage of the unique opportunities of urban over rural life until the weather warmed again.

Other Dakotans’ accommodation to winter also meant migration. They totally avoided the season by traveling to other states during winter “The state of North Dakota probably sends more people to winter resorts in proportion to population than any other,” remarked *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* in January 1905.¹¹⁶ Whether that meant short-term trips or vacations that consumed the entire winter, travel during winter was common. Newspapers would carry word of Dakotans’ return, departure, or travel plans. One example of an announcement said in early December 1906 that a local resident “left last evening for a winter sojourn in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark.”¹¹⁷ Another example noted in October 1894 that two people from the Rudolph, South Dakota, area, “took the train this morning for Erie, Pa., where they will remain during the winter, returning to their western home in the spring.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., November 16, 1900); *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, N.D., March 31, 1894); *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, N.D., September 4, 1896); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., November 14, 1906); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., April 4, 1906).

¹¹⁶ *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 27, 1905).

¹¹⁷ *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 2, 1906).

¹¹⁸ *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., October 23, 1894).

Dakotans traveled for various reasons. Motivations for trips included seeing friends and family or visiting a former place of residence. This explains why Dakotans traveled even to places where they also faced cold winter weather, such as Minnesota, Canada, the East, or elsewhere in the Midwest. Travelers to other destinations, including Europe, California, or the American South, more likely wanted to go sightseeing or seek a more hospitable climate. Dakotans made winter travel south – or even to New Jersey in one case – in search of better weather. “I will winter here after this for even your paper was cold when it arrived from South Dakota,” wrote one South Dakota winterer from Lake Worth, Florida, to the *Aberdeen Daily American*. The paper printed his letter in March 1914. Dakotans also ventured south during the winter in search of improved health. Of these southern points, California was probably the favorite Dakota destination. “It is believed that before the winter is over there will be a colony of 100 Grand Forks people in Los Angeles,” predicted the *Daily Herald* in January 1905. That colony might have included farmers because winter allowed them the time to take a vacation. “It is worthy of note,” added *The Grand Forks Daily Herald*’s January 1905 article, “that the winter travelers are not by any means all of the classes usually considered wealthy. Hundreds of farmers are able, after rounding up the work of the year, to take a month or so off and enjoy the balmy air of the south.”¹¹⁹ Dakotans who traveled south were accommodating to the winter weather by

¹¹⁹ “Prairie Croquet: Diary of Julia Gage Carpenter,” in Elizabeth Hampsten, compiler, *To All Inquiring Friends: Letters, Diaries and Essays in North Dakota 1880-1910*, 2nd ed. (Grand Forks, N.D.: Department of English, University of North Dakota, 1980), 206-207, 229, 234-236; *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., September 24, 1905); *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, D.T., September 14, 1886); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 25, 1901); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., February 10, 1904); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., October 15, 1903); *Aberdeen Weekly American* (Aberdeen, S.D., February 26, 1914); *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., January 26, 1912); *Aberdeen Weekly American* (Aberdeen, S.D., December 18, 1913); *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., October 31, 1909); *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, N.D., November 2, 1899); *Aberdeen Weekly News* (Aberdeen, S.D., March 18, 1909); *Aberdeen*

avoiding it. They would live in the Dakotas during the warmer months, but they were unwilling to endure the long winters. Other Dakotans, especially farmers, showed accommodation of the leisure available in winter by using that extra time to take a vacation. In either case, they based an aspect of their annual routines around the presence of winter.

A common reaction by Dakotans to winter was accommodation. Residents of the Dakotas not only took steps to survive winter, but they also took steps to use the winter for profit. Accommodation to winter was important in the Dakotas, but it did not matter equally to all Dakotans. Dakotans did not all prepare to the same extent. Some may not have prepared at all. One can view venturing out for school or socializing during the winter as an example of accommodating or not accommodating to the season. Some went to school, and some did not, so whether one looks at the existence of winter school as an example of accommodation or not, Dakotans were approaching it in different ways. Accommodation to winter was important but not universal.

Weekly News (Aberdeen, S.D., September 30, 1909); *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., April 25, 1909); *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., March 8, 1907); *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., March 4, 1914); *The Dakota Republican* (Vermillion, D.T., October 31, 1872); *The Dakota Republican* (Vermillion, D.T., November 21, 1872); *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., October 23, 1894); *The Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., March 1, 1890); *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., November 4, 1903); *Aberdeen Daily News* (Jan. 7, 1895, January 7, 1895); *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., November 16, 1897); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 2, 1906); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., March 31, 1904); *The Dakota Republican* (Vermillion, D.T., January 9, 1873); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 15, 1899); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 27, 1905); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 9, 1908); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 17, 1909); Scott, "The Pioneer Farmer," 54, 59-60.

Chapter Three

Winter posed an annual threat to Dakotans. Heavy snows could isolate towns by cutting them off from supply-bearing trains, and blizzards could disorient settlers, preventing them from reaching shelter before subzero temperatures killed them. Dakotans often took steps to endure this season, however, not only by taking steps to survive its deadly elements but also by finding ways to use the benefits that a cold, snowy environment provided. Such accommodations to winter allowed Dakotans to survive and even thrive during the season, but before Dakotans could take those steps of accommodation, they had to decide to come to the region in the first place, and winter had the potential to deter immigrants from settling there. Meeting this threat was part of the reason Dakotans described the winter in positive ways.

Dakotans accommodated to winter by finding positive ways to talk about it, despite its destructive nature. On the other hand, in newspapers to a degree, but especially in writings beyond the newspapers, Dakotans complained about winter and expressed dislike for their homeland because of it. Rhetoric was one way Dakotans accommodated to winter, but accommodation was an important but not universal response to winter. This chapter will use the term “Dakotans” broadly. Mostly, it refers to people who lived in the Dakotas. Because those who advertised the Dakotas may have represented railroads or other interests outside the Dakotas and it is impossible to know for certain the ultimate source of an advertisement, the term also may refer to Dakota outsiders with interests in the region. Dakotans could have allowed winter to destroy their self-regard as a people or to make them completely cynical about it. Instead, they often worked the season into their lives. They did this by issuing positive rhetoric about the region, taking pride in it, and using the season to express a high opinion of themselves as people. These positive winter descriptions arose at least in part from Dakotans’ fierce resentment of their

winters' depictions in the newspapers to their east. Dakotans believed that these outside papers exaggerated the intensity of Dakota winters, and they resented the way they were portrayed and viewed negative depictions as dangerous to the economic success of their states by discouraging immigration. Their concern was not unfounded because Dakota winter did acquire a bad reputation in the eyes of many Americans. Thus the threat of winter to the reputation of the Dakotas was one more problem posed by this challenging season.

If Dakotans were going to keep settlers coming to a region with such harsh winters and prevent it from becoming a laughingstock, they needed ways to improve winter's reputation. As they pursued that goal, they did make some exaggerated or dishonest claims. But winter was a season about which Dakotans felt some pride, and some of their statements seem to represent genuine expressions of that pride. In either case, Dakotans accommodated to winter by explaining it positively. Dakotans tried to diminish or even reverse the worst aspects of the season's image, and they expressed pride in winter. They lacked a consistent approach to this, however. Sometimes they praised the warmth of their winters or elements of their winters that mitigated the cold. When they drew attention to the healthiness of their winters or to their own ability to endure the harshness of winter, on the other hand, they emphasized the cold. But sometimes when they defended winter, Dakotans described it as no different from any other places in the United States. In other cases, however, Dakotans gloated over their winters' superior weather, often contrasting fair local conditions to foul weather elsewhere. Dakotans dwelled on the benefits of their dry, rather than humid winters, as well. This dryness made low temperatures feel warmer, Dakotans claimed. Dakotans turned around the challenge winter posed to their states' reputation by using rhetoric that showed off themselves or their winters.

When considering Dakotans' writings about winter, it is important to consider the authors and their goals. Some Dakotans, when writing about winter, were clearly boosters. In the last decades of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth century, boosters tried to entice settlers to the American West. They included real estate sellers, railroads, chambers of commerce, and newspapers which used cartoons, newspaper articles, maps, posters, or books to preach the message that the West was a place of opportunity without the hardships Americans associated with the frontier. But boosters tended to promise more than their parts of the West could deliver. "The boosters' descriptions of fertile, Edenic lands with mild climates," wrote David Wrobel, in his analysis of turn-of-the-century Western booster and settler accounts, which helped to shape this chapter, "certainly did not approximate the grim realities of the early decades of farming in much of the semiarid West."¹ Advertisers tried to sell settlers on the Dakotas, just as they did on the rest of the West.² Dakota boosters were by no means alone in promoting their climate, either. Western boosters tried to convince settlers of their locales' healthiness, abundance of rainfall (or ability to deal with its scarcity), and freedom from intense heat and, as in the Dakotas, severe winters.³

On the surface, Dakotans seemed genuinely proud of their winters. Based on Wrobel's analysis of Western boosterism, one can see that Dakotans were not just proud of their winters

¹ David M. Wrobel, *Promised Lands: Promotion, Memory, and the Creation of the American West* (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 2, 6, 8, 22, 24-45, 48-49, 57-63, 65-69, 73-74; for a discussion of advertising the Plains to immigrants, see David B Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 145, 147.

² Olson, "Yankee and European Settlement," 117; Hammer, "Promotional Efforts in Dakota Territory"; Schell, *History of South Dakota*, 117-118, 160; Nelson, *After the West Was Won*, 124; Robinson, *History of North Dakota*, 129, 131-132, 144-145, 242 In addition to this publication, the book was reprinted by the North Dakota State University Institute for Regional Studies, with a postscript and additional preface. I have used both versions. .

³ Wrobel, *Promised Lands*, 23-24, 42-45, 54-56, 63-65.

but were also trying to advertise them. Newspaper advertisements for Dakota land were clearly a form of boosterism. Newspaper articles represent either boosterism or genuine pride in winter. The newspapers were not entirely slanted in their coverage. They covered Dakota's winter mayhem although they also published pieces vigorously defending the region's weather. That they were willing to print bad news suggests that they were more than simply advertisers; so they may have been honestly pleased with their winter weather, though they may nonetheless have merely been advertising. Dakotans also wrote in to or were cited by their newspapers praising the winter weather. Some of these sources, filtered as they were by the newspapers as to what responses got in to the paper and how they were paraphrased or edited, probably represented boosterism on the part of the papers, if not the authors. Again, though, they may also have represented genuine pride in the Dakota weather.

In a second sort of source, Dakotans spoke for themselves when pronouncing judgment on the winters. This included Dakotans' own writings or, as mentioned, their comments that were featured in the newspapers. Western settlers wanted to represent themselves well to those who came after. They wanted to portray themselves to their descendants as people who had endured terrible hardships, so they emphasized this aspect of their life stories. This gave them a reason to draw attention to their hardships. On the other hand, settlers also had reason to speak well of a place. Those who settled in a particular place also may have felt defensive towards it because they had made a personal investment in it, not because they personally identified themselves with a place, such as the Dakotas.⁴

This sort of thinking also comes through in Dakotans' comments about winter. Even as they wrote winter accounts in the present, some Dakotans emphasized the unique harshness of

⁴ Ibid., 71, 99, 103-119, 121-145.

their winters. This may have been a form of what Wrobel observed when it came to pioneers' characterizations of their pasts. In both cases, writers seem to have wanted to emphasize their endurance and toughness. On the other hand, Wrobel's statement that Western settlers got defensive when their homelands were criticized also sheds light on the force and energy with which Dakotans responded to criticism of their winters, even when it came to the boosters. Dakotans had reason to play down and play up the unpleasantness of their winters, and they did both.

We also see in the Dakotas the contradiction that Wrobel identified between the boosters and pioneer reminiscers. Boosters emphasized how wondrous the West was. The pioneers looked back at those same times and emphasized the hard times and challenges they had endured.⁵ This contradiction between boosters emphasizing a place's virtues and other writers emphasizing their personal ordeal was also present in the Dakotas. Some writers drew attention to the harsh environment they endured, while advertisers and other newspaper writers praised the Dakota climate. Those who wrote positive accounts of Dakota winter were not all proclaiming the same message. They were alike in that they accommodated to winter by taking control of the way they described it for their own benefit, not in the ways they described it.

Profit from immigration was probably not the only reason Dakotans praised their winters. They likely felt some genuine local pride as well. Wrobel suggested that settlers' defense of a place may have increased identification with it, but the defensiveness itself sprang more out of a sense of attachment to their investment rather than the place itself.⁶ It seems likely, however, that those Dakotans who wrote about braving the winter or mastery of it were showing local or personal pride. When it came to praising the winter climate, some newspaper writers no

⁵ Ibid., 115-119, 126, 142.

⁶ Ibid., 71.

doubt were disingenuous, praising weather that they detested deep down, but not all were. They continued to praise the season even though their papers also published the ugly details of winter, so they were not working for publications that forced them to share only the positive aspects of winter. It is likely that some residents who went to the trouble of writing to the newspapers genuinely identified with the Dakotas and did not just care about advertising them for profit and that all of those newspaper articles about the climate must have involved something more than advertising, too.

Eastern newspapers helped to ignite the ire of Dakotans by emphasizing the region's cold-weather image. Springfield, Massachusetts' *Daily Republican* depicted Dakota Territory as a far-off, icy place by noting an October 1882 snowfall in Dakota Territory, Montana, and Manitoba under the heading "Messengers from the North Pole." While Dakota Territory had its disastrous winter 1888 storm in January, the Eastern seaboard of the United States had its own two months later. *The New York Times* nevertheless tried to ensure that readers viewed Dakota Territory as the true winter dystopia. It headlined an account of the March storm in New England "Dakota in the Naugatuck," thus turning the territory's name into a slang term for winter. Elsewhere, the paper said New Yorkers could take comfort that their winters were not as bad as Dakota's, where one would encounter "lower temperatures, higher gales, and deeper snows."⁷

Dakotans clearly knew of these Eastern criticisms of their winters because they reprinted them in their own papers. The *Grand Forks Daily Herald* in 1894 carried a description of North Dakota from a Portsmouth, Ohio, paper. "Scores of people are frozen to death there every winter," claimed the *Blade*. The only hope for those looking to brave the state's winters was that

⁷ *The Springfield Daily Republican* (Springfield, Mass., October 31, 1882); *The New York Times* (New York, February 26, 1888); *The New York Times* (New York, March 18, 1888); *The New York Times* (New York, March 17, 1888).

“with the heaviest clothing, a fur overcoat, with, perhaps, cloth overcoat under it, long fur lined boots, huge fur gauntlets that reach to the elbow, a fur cap and a face mask that leaves only the eyes and nostrils exposed, a strong, robust, warm-blooded man may safely venture out between blizzards.” In short, this paper was saying, winter in North Dakota was all but insurmountable force.⁸ In an article reprinted in Grand Forks in February 1889, the *Chicago News* said the Dakotas and their “northwest” neighbors “made a mighty show of repentance and reformation” long enough for the federal government to take another step toward admitting them as states. Now, however, they would return to their previous stormy ways. “At the very moment,” the article said, “that President Cleveland signed the bill admitting four new northwestern states to the union a gigantic blizzard was speeding down from the twin Dakotas to play havoc with the tempers of sober-minded people in the lower latitudes.”⁹ Such descriptions made the Dakotas out to be foreign and forbidding lands that would tax the ability of almost any resident to survive.

Such outsider depictions of Dakota winter also grabbed the attention of Dakotans. Not only did they put them in their own newspapers for all to see, but Dakotans themselves contested their depictions in Eastern periodicals. While visiting New York, a North Dakotan wrote a letter to the *Grand Forks Daily Herald*, which the paper published in March 1900. The Dakotan criticized his state’s portrayal in the *Mail and Express*, an Eastern newspaper, for describing only North Dakota’s harsh blizzards without corresponding mention of the possibility of bad weather in the East.¹⁰ Another, who had since moved to New York but still identified with his former state, wrote to the *Herald* in 1888 that “eastern newspapers always use a little exaggeration when

⁸ *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., February 14, 1894).

⁹ *The Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, D.T., February 25, 1889); Robinson, *History of North Dakota*, 203.

¹⁰ E. Southard, *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., March 24, 1900).

speaking of a western blizzard or storm.”¹¹ Dakotans were not alone in becoming angry at those who criticized their state. When a Philadelphia paper published a negative account of western Kansas in the 1870s, David Wrobel wrote that “Kansans responded angrily – in the form of letters to their local newspapers – to such written assaults on their new Eden.”¹² Probably this was a regionwide response in the West to criticism.

Image mattered to Dakotans. Concern about it motivated a Yankton, Dakota Territory, telegraph operator in 1873. When a blizzard struck the town early that year, the operator refused to send George Armstrong Custer’s report of the storm back to Washington for fear it would injure the territory’s reputation. The operator only gave in to Custer’s demand when threatened by Custer with dismissal.¹³

One reason Dakotans took seriously bad publicity from the outside is their desire for immigration to increase the success of their town, county, or state. Late nineteenth and early twentieth century Westerners were not content with a population plateau. “An increase in population,” writes David Wrobel, “would ensure the development of more economic and cultural infrastructure, which in turn would raise property values and sustain the cycle of growth.” One can imagine, then, not only financial gain but a more refined society with more opportunities for entertainment stemming from growth. Westerners thought a positive image would help to attract these beneficial settlers.¹⁴ Thus some Dakotans believed Eastern accounts did them injury and that they faced actual financial loss when their winters were portrayed in negative ways. One North Dakotan’s March 1900 letter to the *Grand Forks Daily Herald’s* editor said that exaggerated accounts of North Dakota winter “prejudice the minds of the people

¹¹ D.M.J., *Daily Grand Forks Herald* (Grand Forks, D.T., February 24, 1888).

¹² Wrobel, *Promised Lands*, 46.

¹³ Milton, *South Dakota*, 5.

¹⁴ Wrobel, *Promised Lands*, 71.

and undoubtedly interfere with what would otherwise be the natural flow of immigration to our state.”¹⁵ “The results of this storm will probably affect immigration during the coming season to a great extent,” said a January 1888 report from Yankton, Dakota Territory, in the wake of the great January 12 blizzard; “although,” it added bitterly, “the like may never occur again.” The writer felt that word of the storm would frighten away South Dakota immigrants even though it was by no means a regular occurrence.¹⁶

Some Dakotans also believed that bad reports about their winter could reduce the consumers’ or investors’ participation in their business, as evidenced by a story in the January 27, 1907, *Grand Forks Daily Herald*. The story discussed a report that had originated in Minnesota and circulated in the East, claiming that snowdrifts in North Dakota had reached 75 feet deep and that commerce and rail transport in the state had shut down. North Dakotans feared the damage this highly negative report could do. “It is a drawback to the business interests of this state,” the *Herald* said, “and it is likely that some action will be taken by the business men of the state to have the false report denied throughout the east, as many business houses will suffer irreparable losses by the circulation of the report that the entire state is isolated.”¹⁷

Dakotans had some justification for this concern about the effect of their winter image. They knew from personal experience that people living outside the Dakotas saw the territory as a winter wasteland.¹⁸ Robert Lee had to overcome frightening rumors before settling in Dakota Territory. His friends, as he put it in 1883, had called his future home “a land of terrible

¹⁵ E. Southard, *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., March 24, 1900).

¹⁶ *Daily Grand Forks Herald* (Grand Forks, D.T., January 30, 1888); see also Robert P. Wilkins and Wynona H. Wilkins, *North Dakota: A Bicentennial History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977), 198.

¹⁷ E. Southard, *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., March 24, 1900); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 27, 1907).

¹⁸ For this image’s persistence well into the twentieth century, see Milton, *South Dakota*, 3; and Wilkins and Wilkins, *North Dakota*, 198-200.

blizzards.” Dakotans who attended church while vacationing in Florida in 1899 knew that their home was regarded as alien and cold, when they heard the minister pray for “those who have come to us from the far-off, frozen north.” The *De Smet News* in 1909 found humor in the way South Dakota’s winter reputation extended into the rest of the year. Under the headline “JOKE ON EASTERNERS,” the paper reported on an Illinois couple who came to South Dakota in September bundled up in warm clothing because they were concerned about the cold. Instead, they encountered 90-degree summer heat. By beginning with the line “Here is a joke that our people will be sure to appreciate,” the article suggests that there was a sense of unity and togetherness among Dakotans about the notion that ignorant Easterners did not understand the reality of their weather: that the North Pole was not located in the Dakotas.¹⁹ The word had gotten around the country that the Dakotas had harsh winter weather. No doubt this caused some to question whether they wanted to live there.

Dakotans showed how important they considered the depictions of their winters by voicing strong resentment of those who criticized them. “Any one wishing to irritate a resident of Dakota will only have to insinuate that the weather is cold here in the winter,” said a Grand Forks paper in December 1882. That issue of the paper carried a biblical denunciation from the *Jamestown Alert*, which said that all of the newspaper editors “east of the Mississippi river” would be dead “if lying about Dakota snow and cold winter should ever be visited with the punishment that befell Ananias and Saphira.” Even in the wake of the Thanksgiving storm of 1896, the *Grand Forks Daily Herald* had no stomach for criticism, instead writing that “the man

¹⁹ *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., February 24, 1899); Blasingame, *Dakota Cowboy*, 114; Robert Lee, *The Enterprise* (Leelanau County, Mich., March 1, 1883); *The Grand Forks Herald* (Grand Forks, D.T., January 29, 1880); *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, D.T., February 4, 1888); *Aberdeen Weekly News* (Aberdeen, S.D., September 23, 1909).

who would refer to this as a blizzard town would be lynched, and he really ought to be.”²⁰ Winter was enough of a sensitive issue that Dakotans took notice, but they also cared strongly enough about winter that they would seek to redefine it.

With this negative word circulating about their winters – which not only stereotyped their land as a frozen wilderness but also was perhaps injuring their economy – Dakotans wanted a way to stand up for their winter climate. They did so by justifying, explaining away, or even taking pride in their winter climate. An examination of the specific Dakota evidence and Wrobel’s study on boosterism suggests that in making these explanations, Dakotans were advertising their region, defending their choice of a home, expressing pride in themselves as Dakotans through their environment and in the Dakota region itself, or some combination of these purposes.

Dakotans did not merely accept descriptions of winter as an uncontrolled, deadly season. Instead, they refashioned it in one of two ways. Some Dakotans praised the land itself. In this case the goal of advertising the region was a significant motivator. A description of this sort might portray winter as a benevolent, easy-to-withstand season, with far better conditions than one could find even in the South. On the other hand, some Dakotans also tried to enhance their reputations as people. These people drew attention to the harsh aspects of their winter and thus attempted to increase their stature as people who knew how to properly anticipate and prepare for such harsh winter conditions. One can imagine the boosters and the toughness-emphasizing settlers glowering at one another. Each side was undermining the other’s narrative about the Dakotas. Either way, however, they were accommodating to life in a harsh winter environment.

²⁰ *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 2, 1896); *Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, D.T., December 8, 1882).

When it came to winter, Dakotans advertised, expressed pride in, or dealt with the threat that it posed to their reputations by contrasting their fine winter weather with the miserable conditions in other places. They delighted in the winter suffering of others. When bad weather affected lands outside the Dakotas while Dakotans enjoyed favorable conditions, Dakota papers gloated and drew attention to the contrast.

This happened often but never more colorfully, perhaps, than on the front page of the *Bismarck Daily Tribune* after a terrible blizzard struck the East Coast in March 1888. The paper organized a series of wire stories into a rhetorical cudgel against New York and an ode to Dakota Territory. “COME TO DAKOTA,” read the headline on the story, and it ran like a refrain throughout the piece. It reported that a foot of snow had fallen in New York in the first eight hours of March 12 and how the snow hampered the goings of the city. “COME TO DAKOTA” said another headline. A report said that a woman had frozen to death “at the corner of Broadway and Fulton streets, popularly supposed to be the busiest four corners on earth” later that day. “COME TO DAKOTA,” said another header, before a March 13 report that horses had grown too exhausted to haul ambulances to rescue New York’s many injured. The article took shots at other cities on the East coast as well. “COME TO DAKOTA,” it beckoned, over a description of the storm damage to rail travel and telegraph communication. “COME TO DAKOTA,” it said over and over as it described the storm’s assault on Troy, Albany, Rome, Newburgh, and Canajoharie, New York; New Haven, Connecticut; and, not to leave out the Midwest, Negaunee, Michigan, repeating the line over each city’s report. But the article did not stop at gloating over the East’s pain. “After reading the above,” a Bismarck insertion to the article said, “the following official report from Northern Dakota and Montana points and the indication for today will be recognized as a striking contrast in favor of Dakota.” At 9 p.m. on January 12, the Signal Service

reported a temperature of 20 degrees, light winds, and clear skies. Its March 13 forecast “for southwestern Dakota” indicated a mild day with minor snow accumulation or rainfall later on – but nothing to compare with a devastating blizzard, which was surely the contrast the *Tribune* wished to paint.²¹

It was not only the *Tribune* that had fun with the Eastern storm. At least partly in jest Dakotans offered help to New York. *The New York Times* printed some offers which Dakotans had telegraphed to the city’s mayor. The paper interpreted some of the messages as “seriously intended” but labeled others “questionable attempts to poke fun at the New York blizzard.” A message that poked fun said, “Huron, Dakota, under a mild Spring sun, sends her sympathy to blizzard-stricken New York.”²²

The 1888 Eastern blizzard was a notable occasion for Dakotans to participate in such gloating, but there were others as well. For example, in January 1898, Grand Forks friends of a Galesburg, Illinois, man responded to word of a winter storm there by sending him copies of the telegraph that informed them of the calamity along with descriptions of the fair weather they had been enjoying. In this case, the friends do not seem to have been boosting Dakota so much as enjoying what they saw as their weather’s at least temporary superiority – not to mention teasing their friend.²³ Such instances showed Dakotans accommodating to the reality of their own harsh winter conditions by pointing attention back to what others were enduring. Some Dakotans who used this technique, such as the *Tribune* staff who put together the story of the 1888 Eastern blizzard, must have believed that they could improve the reputation of their own winters if they

²¹ *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, D.T., March 13, 1888).

²² *Daily Grand Forks Herald* (Grand Forks, D.T., March 14, 1888); *The New York Times* (New York, March 15, 1888); *Daily Grand Forks Herald* (Grand Forks, D.T., March 15, 1888).

²³ *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 28, 1898).

could bring to light the bad weather in other places and compare it with an example of their own positive weather.

At other times, Dakotans dealt with the challenge of giving their winters a positive image by drawing parallels between their winters and others around the country. They tried to argue that their winter weather was not unique at all. One way to do this was to argue that Dakota temperatures were not much different from those of other places. An article printed in the *Bismarck Daily Tribune* in 1895 went into excruciating detail to make the point for the benefit of “outside critics” that Dakota temperatures were not so outlandishly cold. The average temperature of 40 degrees in North Dakota equaled Colorado, and was “only 3 degrees colder than Montana, Maine and Wyoming; only 5 degrees colder than New Hampshire, 8 degrees colder than Massachusetts, Michigan, Nebraska, Nevada and New York, and only 20 degrees colder than Iowa, New Mexico, Rhode Island and Washington,” and to bring in some of Europe’s great cities for comparison that temperature averaged “only 11 degrees colder than far-famed Paris, Rotterdam, Vienna and Budapesth [sic].”²⁴

Some Dakota defenders also sought to suck all of the frightening mystique out of the word “blizzard,” by depicting it as a national, not just Dakota weather phenomenon. “A Dakota ‘blizzard,’” claimed the *Daily Grand Forks Herald* in February 1888, “is nothing more nor less than a severe storm such as sometimes prevail in all sections of the country. A high wind with the air filled with light snow makes a blizzard and the article is the same in Dakota as in New Hampshire.” The paper took a similar approach in 1891, citing a region with a more storied blizzard history than its own. “The New England blizzard,” it claimed, “was established as a

²⁴ *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, N.D., September 13, 1895); *The Dakota Republican* (Vermillion, D.T., March 20, 1869); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., March 10, 1907).

precedent in December, 1620, and has been faithfully observed with every recurring winter for the last 270 years.”²⁵ Dakotans who argued this way were willing to sacrifice the perception that their region was unique for the sake of proving that their weather was not overly hostile and destructive. They took their reputation for outlandish storminess and cold and tried to reduce it by connecting their weather conditions to those of places that would have seemed less threatening because of their age or southern location.

Storms or hard winters opened opportunities for outsiders to criticize Dakota weather, but Dakotans dealt with this potential for a weakness in its image by arguing that such conditions were anomalous. The *Aberdeen Daily News* argued that the warm weather in fall 1897, including a 72-degree high on November 19, proved that the hard winter of the year before “was an exception.” The *Grand Forks Daily Herald* in 1901 protested North Dakota’s “reputation as the ‘home of the blizzard,’” arguing that “North Dakota is not a blizzard-stricken state, and it is about time that dwellers in the effete east were learning to cease associating the name of this state with destructive storms.” The *Grand Forks Daily Herald* in 1902 argued for a new conception of a “normal” North Dakota winter, terming it “one of light snow fall and high temperature, while the really remarkable weather is that which is unpleasantly cold and stormy.”²⁶ Harsh winter conditions threatened the reputation of the Dakotas. Residents met that challenge by dismissing such conditions as unrepresentative of typical winters.

Dakotans not only tried to explain away cold weather in the winter, but they also brought attention to warm weather in their winters in order to break the stereotype that Dakota was

²⁵ *Daily Grand Forks Herald* (Grand Forks, D.T., February 25, 1888); *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, D.T., February 7, 1886); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 5, 1891).

²⁶ *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., November 19, 1897); *The Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 19, 1890); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., April 3, 1901); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 9, 1902).

always snowbound or to express pride in their fine conditions. The *Aberdeen Daily News* saw the temperature of 50 degrees on November 24, 1899, as yet more evidence “of the superb winter resort weather for which South Dakota is making a great reputation.”²⁷ The *Grand Forks Daily Herald* praised the mild winter of 1899-1900. Temperatures got so warm that they coaxed out caterpillars. Learning of that fact, the paper speculated, would stun “The easterner who has read of the horrors of a Dakota winter.”²⁸ In January 1908, *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* described a photograph it had received showing men without coats playing baseball in Fairdale, North Dakota, earlier in the month. Nearby was an automobile and motorcycle, which the papers claimed spoke for the condition of the roads. The paper said the photo “may help some to correct the impression many people have that North Dakota is somewhere in the polar regions.”²⁹ Dakotans accommodated to the challenge of living where the winters had a poor reputation by drawing attention to their positive features. They were telling a new story about their winters, one in which they countered outside portrayals and expressed excitement over their own good weather.

As they focused on its warm characteristics, Dakotan newspapers did more than just defend their winters. They noted them as praiseworthy and even called them the best. Based on the mostly mild winter of 1907-1908 in North Dakota, *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* said in February 1908 that in the Northwest, “we have the finest winter climate on the continent.”³⁰ South Dakota was often mild during the winter of 1892-1893, and experiences of winter elsewhere in America confirmed “that South Dakota winter weather is the most agreeable and

²⁷ *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., November 24, 1899).

²⁸ *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, N.D., January 24, 1900).

²⁹ *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 23, 1908).

³⁰ *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., February 21, 1908).

healthful to be found on the continent” said the *Aberdeen Daily News* in March 1893.³¹ A “balmy and springlike” day on the heels of a morning snow was another example of “The marvelous winter weather of which South Dakota has been bragging all the season” said the *Daily News* in January 1899.³² Dakotans turned their warm days into material to boast about. They enjoyed balmy winter days not just as strange anomalies, but they also used them as reasons to claim that they enjoyed the best winters. They accommodated to winter by identifying and rallying around its best features.

Some Dakotans were so intent upon portraying their winters as warm that they spoke of their land as a place where one could grow tropical fruit. Sources differ as to whether the phrase “Jay Cooke’s banana belt” was a derisive term or an advertising slogan – it was probably both – for Dakota land along the Northern Pacific railroad, for which Cooke was a key official.³³ In other places, references to tropical fruit growing in the Dakotas seem to have been a way that Dakotans brought good-humored bravado into their positive descriptions of winter. They were expressions of pride. The editor of the *Bismarck Daily Tribune* in October 1887 described banana picking as part of the routine around his city. The *Aberdeen Daily News* referred to “South Dakota’s banana preserves” contrasted with “the vile weather in the south” when describing the winter of 1897-1898. “Our orange crop is just about ripe now,” said a report from Willow City, North Dakota, in December 1899.³⁴ Surely such comments were not meant to be believed. Dakotans could not have believed them, and most outsiders would hardly have taken

³¹ *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., March 16, 1893).

³² *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., January 25, 1899).

³³ Wilkins and Wilkins, *North Dakota*, 76; Hammer, “Promotional Efforts in Dakota Territory,” 302; Lamar, *Dakota Territory*, 191.

³⁴ *Daily Grand Forks Herald* (Grand Forks, D.T., October 29, 1887); *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., February 3, 1898); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 21, 1899).

them seriously either. These examples, however, were not pieces of bitter, sarcastic humor, either. They were a way Dakotans spoke well of winter in a less serious fashion.

A few residents' practice of bicycling to work even in the dead of winter gave the *Aberdeen Daily News* another opportunity to compliment South Dakota's winter conditions. The paper carried the saga of "Postmaster Jumper" of Aberdeen, who rode his bicycle to work for almost every day of the winter of 1898-1899. On January 26, 1899, the paper reported that Jumper had made the trip on his bicycle every single day so far that winter, but it did not state the exact date on which winter began, by its reckoning. It was certain that in the paper's eyes the Dakota winter had a hand in Jumper's success. "The unrivaled Dakota winter weather," it crowed, "has enabled him to make this record without a single break on account of snow, cold or rough roads." Actually, it was more Jumper's persistence than the weather's beneficence that allowed the streak to continue into early February, when Jumper kept pedaling even after a cold wave swept through, according to the paper. Jumper had almost reached the spring equinox with his commute streak when the season finally got the best of him. "He made an effort to ride his wheel from home to the postoffice in the morning," said the *Daily News* of his March 14 commute, "but the snow was so deep he could not make a go of it." Jumper's streak ended with the finish line of spring in sight. The incident did not dampen the *Daily News*' spirits, however. When a Bath, South Dakota, resident produced a faint echo of Jumper's riding record by biking from there to Aberdeen and back "two or three times per week during the winter" of 1900-1901, the paper reported on it in late January, saying, "No state in the union has finer winter roads than South Dakota."³⁵ This South Dakota newspaper even used road conditions as material with

³⁵ *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., January 26, 1899); *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., February 11, 1899); *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., March 15, 1899); *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., January 21, 1901).

which to praise the winters as it brought to light people who, for the most part, were not being restrained from their transportation mode of choice by bad weather.

One way of describing the practical benefits of such superior winters was the claim that animals could remain outdoors with little food provided by their owners during winter in the Dakotas. Dakotans described their winters as so tame that animals survived them even with such minimal assistance. As one South Dakota promoter put it in 1914, South Dakota winters “are dry and invigorating and mild enough to allow live stock to feed in the abundant pastures throughout all the year protected only by natural shelter.” Such a minimal provision of care did not mean producing animals that only barely survived the season, either. The *Dakota Republican* said in 1869 that in “the damp winters” outside the Dakotas, sheep, cattle and horses needed shelter to stay healthy during the winters, but outdoors they would “thrive in Dakota” with its “dry winter’s air.”³⁶ Writers who adopted this perspective tried to portray the Dakota climate as an asset. Animals need not be cared for much during the winter because the season was not a threat to them. Dakotans once again demonstrated an effort to present a more positive message about winter than the one trumpeted by the Eastern media.

While most boasts by Dakotans about their fine winter weather concerned Dakotans comparing themselves with other parts of the country, Dakotans would even attack each other in an attempt to prove that their state or part of a state had the best winters. Just as Western boosters did not promote The West as a single place,³⁷ Dakotans did not always band together to speak on behalf of The Dakota Winter as a single entity. They would attack one other’s winter conditions,

³⁶ L.E. Burr, *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, D.T., December 14, 1886); Charles McCaffree, *The Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., November 6, 1914); *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., July 25, 1913); I.J. Foster, *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 15, 1901); *The Dakota Republican* (Vermillion, D.T., March 20, 1869).

³⁷ Wrobel, *Promised Lands*, 35-38, 65.

sounding like Eastern papers about weather in some areas of the Dakotas – just not their own. North Dakota portrayed the blizzard of 1888 as much worse in South Dakota. “Only four persons perished in North Dakota to 107 in the South,” said *The Daily Herald* of Grand Forks, North Dakota, in 1889. South Dakota was not only a recipient of criticism. While North Dakotans and Minnesotans dealt with “snow storms, sleet and ice” in late November 1912, in Pierre, South Dakota, golfers kept playing, and furnaces went unused, a report printed in Aberdeen said. Aberdeen took on its southern neighbors in the state in December 1897. “The great storms of the season have passed south of us, and Mitchell, Sioux Falls, Yankton, Sioux City and many points east and also south have had heavier storms and much more disagreeable weather than has Aberdeen,” the *Aberdeen Daily News* claimed. Within North Dakota, the western section of North Dakota, the Missouri Slope, portrayed itself as a warmer location than the eastern part. “Come west,” the *Bismarck Daily Tribune* counseled a man who, according to a *Grand Forks Plaindealer* story, had nearly frozen to death when, drunk, he fell asleep outdoors one cold October 1893 night in Grand Forks. Bismarck and Minot, in the central and western parts of the state, respectively, actually do experience warmer winters than Grand Forks, so in this case the ad spoke the truth.³⁸ Dakotans’ accommodation of winter involved depicting winter in a way that appealed to potential settlers and that Dakotans could take pride in. As these instances show, Dakotans were willing even to criticize the climate in other areas of their region if their comparisons would accomplish those purposes.

³⁸ *The Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, D.T., April 3, 1889); *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, N.D., October 25, 1893); *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, N.D., December 4, 1894); *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., November 27, 1912); *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., December 6, 1897); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 13, 1898); Robinson, *History of North Dakota*, 4.

Another argument that Dakotans used to defend their winters relied on portraying the region as a place of dry air rather than warm temperatures. The dryness of the Dakotas was a key distinction that residents drew between their winters and others. “Clear skies overhead, dry footing underneath and a bracing atmosphere,” said the *Aberdeen Daily News* in 1893, “compare favorably with snow waist deep or mud, slush and an atmosphere so muggy and dense that one is compelled to wear a mustard plaster on the back of his neck to help draw it in.”³⁹ For C.O. Dill, who settled in Dakota Territory in 1882, South Dakota’s dry winters, which lacked “slush, rain and fogs,” were part of the reason for his love of “the Sunshine State of South Dakota,” which he called “the best state in the Union.”⁴⁰

Instead, Dakotans admitted that their winters were cold, but they drew a distinction between their cold and the cold of regions outside the Dakotas. Settlers noticed this difference in their accounts. In a February 1884 letter, Elizabeth Harris said her son and husband rarely wore an overcoat outdoors, despite cold weather that winter. She explained their choice by remarking that “they don’t seem to feel the cold as they did in Iowa.” Another former Iowan, Kate Glaspell, who lived in North Dakota in the 1880s, wrote, “In Iowa the damp cold penetrates into one’s marrow, but in Dakota it only sharply nips the surface.”⁴¹ These settlers give credibility to statements in newspapers that also discussed the feeling of Dakota cold, although the newspaper descriptions were more clearly made in defense of the Dakotas.

Like Glaspell, other writers pointed out that within the Dakotas, one encountered a dry cold. In other regions, on the other hand, the conditions were humid and moist. This made them

³⁹ *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., March 16, 1893).

⁴⁰ Smith, *Pioneering in Dakota*, 88-90.

⁴¹ Nelson, “All well and hard at work,” 25, 30; Glaspell, “Incidents in the Life of a Pioneer,” 188.

feel colder.⁴² Dakotans accommodated to the presence of their cold winters by explaining it away or even turning it to positive use. Moist air, *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* pointed out in 1914, conducted heat from the body more effectively than dry air, making North Dakota or other Northwestern states feel warmer because of their dry climates.⁴³ “An actual inspection of the thermometer is necessary to convince one that it is really so cold,” said same paper in 1890 of Dakota temperatures. “The winter atmosphere, almost absolutely devoid of humidity, never penetrates and chills with that cold one feels in the damp saturated air of the Atlantic and Lake states.”⁴⁴

This dryness allowed Dakotans to explain that what to a potential Eastern immigrant might seem an alarmingly low temperature did not feel that bad on the skin. “We have some cold weather in this section,” admitted a 1902 article praising western Grand Forks County, North Dakota, “but our coldest weather is not so disagreeable as a temperature 20 or 30 degrees higher in sections where the atmosphere is not so dry as it is here.”⁴⁵ A temperature of -40 degrees Fahrenheit in Pembina County, North Dakota, said a 1901 ad for the area, felt warmer than a higher temperature in a more humid climate.⁴⁶ Dakotans accommodated to the presence of extreme cold by claiming that its dryness cancelled out its cold temperatures. They could explain away the cold this way or even argue that they enjoyed winters that felt superior.

Dakotans who traveled during the winter complained about the mixture of cold and moisture. The *Bismarck Daily Tribune* carried a recent letter from a Dakotan in Baldwinville, Massachusetts, in January 1893. Eager to be home, he wrote, “The mercury was 12 degrees

⁴² Describing the West’s lack of humidity went beyond Dakota promotion. Dakotans just applied it to winter. See Wrobel, *Promised Lands*, 42.

⁴³ *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 29, 1914).

⁴⁴ *The Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 19, 1890).

⁴⁵ *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., September 14, 1902).

⁴⁶ I.J. Foster, *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 15, 1901).

below zero, which, in this damp climate, means about 80 below in our own country.” In the dry Dakotas, it would take an astronomically cold day to equal the feeling of a very cold day in the damp East. Even two visitors to Tampa, Florida, complained of the climate, writing home in February 1900, in the words of the *Aberdeen Daily News*, that they found “the weather too raw and chilling to be comfortable to people accustomed to the dry atmosphere of the Dakotas.”⁴⁷

The newspaper acted as a filter for these statements, so it is possible that it twisted them to boost the local reputation or at least to express pride in the winter weather, but real people initiated these statements, so they probably had some sentiments of this sort, even if their words were shaped a bit.

Dakotans may genuinely have felt greater discomfort in humid winter climates. They had also, however, found a reason for pride in their winters. Even if they were colder, they were also superior because one did not have to put up with clammy cold. Dakotans accommodated to their winters by finding a way to explain and praise them despite their low temperatures.

Dakotans not only praised the feel of their winters, but some also claimed that winter was good for them.⁴⁸ This argument was yet another example of boosterism. In writing this way, Dakotans applied to their winters a Western technique of describing the healthy climate.⁴⁹ An 1884 advertisement for Dakota Territory, for example, admitted that the region’s climate was cold, but also called it “dry and bright and healthful.”⁵⁰ The supposed healthfulness of Dakota

⁴⁷ *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., March 27, 1900); *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., February 28, 1900); *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, N.D., January 21, 1893); Oxford English Dictionary, “raw” (Oxford University Press, June 2011), <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/158694?rskey=zV2jLi&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid>.

⁴⁸ For an account of a connection between place and health in the nineteenth century, see Conevery Bolton Valencius, *The Health of the Country: How American Settlers Understood Themselves and Their Land* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

⁴⁹ Wrobel, *Promised Lands*, 42-45.

⁵⁰ *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, D.T., December 13, 1884).

winter ranged from actual benefits to the body to more intangible personal characteristics bestowed by winter. In either case, by touting the healthiness of winter, Dakotans turned even the harshest aspects of their climate to positive statements and demonstrated a belief that winter helped to make them better people. Dakotans thus not only showed pride in winter itself, but they took personal pride in themselves because of the winter. In either case, Dakotans were accommodating to the harsh winter by turning them from a source of criticism outside the Dakotas to a source of pride from within the Dakotas.

Winter, said Dakotans, made them act and feel livelier. In this depiction, cold was not an enemy that made things hard and numb. Rather, it energized their bodies. Stepping outside into subzero weather was not cringe-inducing, but pleasurable and exciting, according to *The Daily Herald* of Grand Forks. “When it is the coldest the sky is cloudless and the sun shines with a midsummer splendor,” said the paper in 1890, “the atmosphere is at perfect rest, and the cracking of the frost, the crunching of the trodden snow, together with the intoxicating effect of each breath of dry, frozen air, create an exhilaration almost indescribable.”⁵¹ One could not find this sort of benefit back East, pointed out the *Herald* in 1884. The paper contrasted the almost medicinal benefits of Dakota winter air with the debilitating effects of Eastern winter air. In Dakota Territory, “every breath of the bright frosty air inhaled means health and vigor,” while in the East one choked on “damp, heavy atmosphere that oppresses the lungs.”⁵² Even for the elderly, the winter offered benefits, the *Herald* claimed. Winter winds “put vigor in the steps of the aged,” said the paper in 1889.⁵³

⁵¹ *The Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., December 19, 1890).

⁵² *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, D.T., January 9, 1884).

⁵³ *The Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, D.T., June 12, 1889).

With such fine air to inhale, some Dakotans also claimed that winter could serve as a season of renewal or strengthening. *The Dakota Republican* in 1869 called it “the season of hearty digestion, of rapid secretion of fat and muscular development in men and animals” because winter cold made the air so dry, and dry air was healthy to the body.⁵⁴ “We usually have about three months of dry, clear, cold, healthy winter weather,” claimed an 1886 advertisement for McLean County, Dakota Territory, “in which all the effete and worn out matter in the body is burned away and you feel in the spring like a new man, in fact somewhat like a ball of India rubber.”⁵⁵ Winter helped a person to get rid of waste in the body while positively building the body, these sources argued. It was a beneficial rather than a deadly season.

Recognizing the health value in winter could be an emblem of state and personal pride, as well, not just a way of boosting the region. Experience in rugged winter weather would leave a person not shivering and weak but hearty and strong, according to the superintendent of Minnehaha County, South Dakota’s, public schools. He visited some of his rural schools on foot, despite cold and “more than knee-deep” snow during December 1909 and loved the experience. “It required great endurance and strength to face the zero wind that swept across the prairies and fields,” he wrote in the *Aberdeen Daily American*, “but it made the blood circulate rapidly, and the flesh glow with vigor and health.” He even hinted at a belief in winter’s ability to return man to some sort of primal state, saying that “a ten-mile walk in winter” weather transformed his appetite from that “of a civilized man” to that “of a savage.”⁵⁶ He not only thought well of the winter weather but also himself for braving it, but he does not seem to have been attempting to lure settlers in making such statements.

⁵⁴ *The Dakota Republican* (Vermillion, D.T., March 20, 1869).

⁵⁵ L.E. Burr, *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, D.T., December 14, 1886).

⁵⁶ *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., December 29, 1909).

Winter had more intangible benefits, as well. Some Dakotans claimed that it made them superior people. The *Bismarck Tribune* claimed that winter imparted a superior culture and personality to Dakotans. Republished in a Grand Forks paper in March 1883, its article mentioned health, but went even further in transforming blizzards from natural disasters to great forces of vitalization. “He sweepeth grandly across the Dakota prairie,” the article thundered, “carrying in his giant arms tons of snow and ice. He is suggestive of unlimited and illimitable fresh air – and fresh air means rich blood, good health, vigor, enterprise, wealth and fame. Dakots ought to be proud of her blizzard. It represents a fresher, purer and higher civilization.” It painted a contrast with weak Mexico, which lacked the blizzard and had only the “sirocco” for its storm and symbol of its civilization. “Its breath is hot, enervating, deadly,” said the *Tribune* of the blizzard’s counterpart, but “one of our ambition-generating blizzards” could perhaps save a country that had energy for little more than revolution. After all, concluded the *Tribune*, “The blizzard is the breath of life.” When examined this way, blizzards could be not only defended but praised.⁵⁷ Like the English of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who connected their moderate climate with their national personality and thought that moving south to a latitude similar to Spain’s would make them like the “choleric and untrustworthy” Spaniards, Dakotans also looked with concern on a warmer climate and connected their state personality and climate.⁵⁸

The *Aberdeen Daily News* in 1912 gave “the fine, bracing, health-giving, germ-killing winter weather” at least some of the credit for, making its men “stronger, more vigorous

⁵⁷ *Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, D.T., March 11, 1883).

⁵⁸ Karen Ordahl Kupperman, “Fear of Hot Climates in the Anglo-American Colonial Experience,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 41, no. 2, Third Series (April 1984): 215-216.

specimens of sturdy manhood” and its women “fairer” than residents of other lands.⁵⁹ In all these cases, Dakotans were re-envisioning the winter. If they were to live in a land in which temperatures dropped to extreme lows, rather than leaving it to the outside press to depict them as residents of a barren wasteland, Dakotans would turn cold into an energizing medicine. Dakotans who saw winters as healthy accommodated the cold and blizzards, targets of outside criticism, by turning them into reasons to think well of their winters. They lived with harsh conditions by writing about them in a way that turned them into forces of life, not death.

In addition to drawing attention to the way their winters benefitted them as people, some Dakotans gloried in their winters’ uniqueness or in themselves for enduring worse hardships than anyone else. Even though they took a different view of Dakota winters than some peers, they still accommodated to winter by taking pride in an aspect of it rather than consenting to its use as an insult. They may have been demonstrating a similar mindset to the one referred to by David Wrobel, when he talked about Western pioneers’ memories of their experiences. “You folks *think* you know something about cold weather but you dont [sic],” wrote Elizabeth Corey to her family in Iowa in December 1909, as her first winter in South Dakota began. Already that year she had experienced water freezing in her house and waking up covered in frost. Corey seemed to emphasize the cold of Dakota winter to make clear that she endured suffering that they did not in Iowa. Leeds, North Dakota, residents bragged about a -60-degree low in 1893, according to a newspaper report. In this case the residents seem to have been more proud of having such a rare temperature occur in their town than of their suffering.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, S.D., January 8, 1912).

⁶⁰ Gerber, *Bachelor Bess*, xxix, 42, 55; *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., February 8, 1893).

Mary Woodward often emphasized the differences between winter weather in Dakota Territory and her former homes of Vermont and Wisconsin. She took seriously the idea that Dakota winter must be distinctive from others. "I never saw such a storm in Vermont nor Wisconsin," she wrote in March 1884, in reaction to a blinding blizzard. Woodward even questioned whether those snowstorms they heard of back home could be called blizzards. "I doubt if real blizzards exist anywhere except on the broad, open prairie," Woodward wrote in March 1885. She scoffed at a writer's description of snowflakes "eddying by" in Wisconsin. "That gave them dead away," Woodward wrote. "Flakes don't wait to eddy here. They whistle and go straight by as though shot from a cannon." In a December 1885 entry, after reading another claim that Wisconsin had experienced a blizzard, she wrote: "I know that is not true. Let them see one of ours and they will know what a blizzard means." Writing a week after the January 1888 blizzard, she expressed skepticism that Easterners in general experienced blizzards. The new climate did not leave everyone noting how much harsher Dakota winters were than other places. Elizabeth Harris, who emigrated to the Dakotas in 1882, saw little distinction from her native Iowa. "Weather about like in Iowa I guess," she wrote in late December 1883. Winter temperatures were at that point "only one or two times down thirty below zero."⁶¹ Still, some Dakotans were finding something unique in their winter climate, whether in conditions that no other places shared or in challenges that no one else endured. They accommodated to winter by dwelling on the weather's uniqueness, even for the cold and blizzards, which attracted so much criticism, rather than only complaining about it as unpleasant. This gave Dakotans a way to take some pride in their winter experiences.

⁶¹ Woodward, *The Checkered Years*, 7, 9, 29, 73-74, 108, 118, 162, 211; Nelson, "All well and hard at work," 25, 28-29.

It is not surprising that some Dakotans would try to draw attention to their bad winter weather in this way. As we have seen, emphasizing their suffering was a trait of Western settlers of the turn-of-the-century. It was also a mark of the identity formed by settlers in western South Dakota in the early twentieth century who endured the drought years of 1910-1911. They saw themselves as people who took care of themselves and emphasized the hardships they endured, contrasting themselves favorably with those who either left the region or who never came at all and remained in the East.⁶² This response to winter, then, fit into a context of Dakota and Western emphasis of suffering.

In addition to drawing attention to even the healthiness, life-giving qualities, and even challenges of the cold weather, Some Dakotans also used the cold to enhance their prestige for their handling of such conditions. They drew attention to the way they prepared for winter or absorbed cold weather. Rather than panicking because of it, they bore it stoically and showed prudence and toughness in their behavior. They, too, were using winter weather for a purpose: to enhance their personal reputation.

The *Grand Forks Daily Herald* used cold weather to express North Dakota pride by portraying North Dakotans as winter experts and outsiders as uninformed and unprepared when it came to winter. Harsh winter weather did not surprise North Dakotans, and they took the right steps to deal with it. “The North Dakotan expects cold weather in the winter, and prepares himself for it, and a drop to 40 degrees below zero means as a rule merely the burning of a little extra feul [sic] and less out door work,” claimed the paper in 1899. Steps to prepare for winter mentioned by the *Herald* and taken by wise Dakotans included dressing warmly, keeping a warm enough house, and maintaining a strong enough heating system.

⁶² Nelson, *After the West Was Won*, 153-154, 170, 173, 175, 177.

By contrast, others could not match the North Dakotans' preparation or consequent calmness in the face of winter weather. Midwestern states to the south of North Dakota struggled more with winter weather because they failed to take steps to meet it. "Less preparation is made for cold, and it is accordingly more keenly felt," the paper claimed in 1899. "A cold wave which brings to this state a little inconvenience and a little discomfort, brings to states farther south positive suffering and death." While a 1912 cold snap put a heavy load on Eastern charities and caused problems for rail travel, "in the northwestern states," which may have included South Dakota, too, despite deeper cold, residents "have been going about their ordinary affairs just as usual and performing their work in comfort," the paper said. The *Herald* put winter to positive use by pointing to the way residents of the Dakota region handled winter weather. They were prudent about it, while outsiders did not manifest as much wisdom and consequently suffered more even if they experienced tamer winters.⁶³

Winter could also serve as a stage for Dakotans to display character. In *The Long Winter*, Laura Ingalls' "Pa," Charles Ingalls, suggested that Westerners, which included Dakotans, knew how to deal with their region's challenges, one of which was winter. Pa expressed his sentiments in a story he told during the winter of 1880-1881. An arrogant Eastern railroad official came west, thinking he knew what it took to clear the track which ran between Tracy, in western Minnesota, and the Ingalls' town in the southern half of Dakota Territory. "What those men need," the superintendent said of his Western colleagues, "is someone to show them how we do things in the east." A series of blizzards stymied his efforts to get the tracks clear. Finally, the superintendent got into a locomotive and drove it hard into the snowdrift his crew was working

⁶³ For the preceding two paragraphs, see *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., February 10, 1899); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 14, 1912); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., February 18, 1903); *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., February 3, 1909).

to clear. Rather than breaking the drift, the locomotive merely entered it partway and then became frozen solid inside it. Once extricated, the engineer ordered the crew to give up the Sisyphean fight against the snow until spring. “Just because he couldn’t get through with shovels or snowplows,” Pa said, “he figured he couldn’t get through at all and he quit trying. Well, he’s an easterner. It takes patience and perseverance to contend with things out here in the west.”⁶⁴

The story offers a sense of how Charles Ingalls or at least people at the time felt about themselves. It suggests the presence of a belief in the Dakotas that a Western winter was one of the challenges in which Westerners, including Dakotans, showed character to survive.

When temperatures dropped far below zero or the weather grew fierce, Dakotans could point out how they withstood such intense cold. The *Globe*, of Milton, North Dakota, in late January 1906 described the scene of a boy contentedly piping away on his mouth organ – despite a temperature around -30 degrees. “It is such stock,” proclaimed the paper, “that produces sturdy men, capable of grappling with the battles of life.” The paper used the boy to draw a larger contrast between the calm reaction of North Dakotans to winter and the frenzy and chaos of the East. The boy was unflappable despite the intense cold, but “in the eastern states humanity drops dead on the streets and all traffic is tied up” in such conditions. In another cold-weather incident, the outdoor newspaper sellers of Grand Forks caught the eyes of local residents when the boys continued to show up for work during an early February 1914 cold surge that dropped temperatures as low as -28 degrees. “CARRIER BOYS NOT AFRAID OF COLD,” said the triumphant headline over the account of this feat in *The Grand Forks Daily Herald*. “These rugged and determined specimens of Young America in North Dakota,” exulted the *Herald*, “braved the elements without flinching and the number on the street did not drop off

⁶⁴ Wilder, *The Long Winter*, 213-223.

materially.”⁶⁵ The paper was not directly praising North Dakota and was expressing more national than state pride, but it did make use of winter as a reason to praise these young men.

Even far from home, Dakotans bragged about their status as the people who braved winter. When a “miniature blizzard” began one late-November 1891 night in Butte, Montana, Dakotans in town took the opportunity to show off their lack of concern for harsh winter weather by going outside without heavy winter clothing and crowing “that at last the dod blasted country was getting some decent weather,” as the local newspaper in Butte put it. They sought to add to the image that they could go into the cold without being bothered.⁶⁶ Dakotans found another way to accommodate to harsh winter weather by turning attention from its terrifying depths of temperature to how they withstood such conditions. They again transformed winter from simply a problem to something useful for themselves as they proudly displayed their resilience in the face of cold weather. They used winter to create an image of unflappability.

Of course none of this is meant to argue that all Dakotans experienced some conversion to loving temperatures in the double digits below zero. Dakotans often did not enjoy winter, but they accommodated to their harsh winters by finding ways to portray them in more positive ways and even take pride in them. It is unlikely that Dakotans believed all the rhetoric issuing from their newspapers. Mary Woodward was skeptical of her local paper’s coverage of the 1888 blizzard. She claimed that they “suppress” blizzard stories to avoid frightening away potential settlers.⁶⁷

Even in the papers, one could find criticism of winter. For one thing, the Dakota papers carried the bad news of winter as well in addition to promoting it. They told terrible stories of the

⁶⁵ *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 27, 1906); *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., February 8, 1914).

⁶⁶ *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., November 27, 1891).

⁶⁷ Woodward, *The Checkered Years*, 211; Nelson, “All well and hard at work,” 36.

consequences of blizzards or described all the railroad delays and blockages in the wake of a storm. They did not carry only positive comments, either. “This is no banana belt,” admitted *The Grand Forks Daily Herald* during the hard winter of 1896-1897, “and we might as well ring off on any further attempts to prove that it is.”⁶⁸ The *Aberdeen Daily American* in 1909 reported on a local family’s plan to move to “a warmer climate.”⁶⁹

Not only was dislike for winter common, but dislike for winter drove some Dakotans to reject their states. Influenced by winter weather, Mary Woodward expressed cynicism about the Dakotas. “I guess a blizzard would knock all the poetry out of a man,” she wrote on the day of the great blizzard of 1888. “There is no romance about this country. It is just plain business, and No. 1 hard at that.” The danger of Dakota winter could also turn a settler against Dakota Territory. A woman whose children were injured in the January 12 blizzard “wanted to go back east as soon as possible,” according to her husband. Although news of the ensuing Eastern blizzard eventually “reconciled her again” to accepting Dakota life, she still found the winter incident unnerving enough that she sought to leave. Eliza Jane Crawford, who kept a diary during the hard winter of 1906-1907, remained unreconciled to North Dakota, expressing her displeasure at winter with colorful energy. “If it does not warm up soon I’ll be so vexed that I’ll get warm because of that,” she wrote on April 20. Eight days later, she wrote poetically: “The day is cold and dark and dreary. It blizzards and the wind is never weary.” But she wrote more than just a complaint about the weather. That late-April day, as she waited for a spring that seemed as if it might never come, she also rejected life in the Dakotas altogether, writing, “If the Lord will ever forgive me for taking the claim, I’ll never take another... I am tired of it, tired of everything connected with it. I sometimes wish I had never seen it.” The misery of enduring the

⁶⁸ *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 24, 1897).

⁶⁹ *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, S.D., October 31, 1909).

seemingly permanent winter helped to make her regret her move to North Dakota. Stronger still was the comment of Julia Carpenter from Casselton, Dakota Territory, in January 1884. Early in the month, because of temperatures that often ranged from -20 to -50 outdoors, the temperature in her cellar dropped to the freezing point. Consequently, food was kept in the sitting room, where the temperature barely remained above freezing. “This is an awful country,” she wrote in response, “and I want to live East.” The winter conditions made her miserable enough to despise and seek to abandon the Dakotas. Lingering bitterness with the Dakotas because of winter’s role in a devastating personal loss showed in the writing of Sarah Thal. She lost a son to sickness in spring 1884 when a Dakota blizzard kept her husband from being able to reach a doctor. “I never forgave the prairies for that,” she wrote. Her view of the Dakotas would always be tainted because it had prevented someone she loved from being saved.⁷⁰

As Dakotans endured the discomfort, danger, or unattractiveness of their winters, they not only complained of the winters but also turned this dislike for the nature of winter into a broader contempt or hatred for the Dakotas themselves. The experiences of three to five months of winter helped to turn them against all of life in the Dakotas. Winter provided Dakotans with a rhetorical rallying point, but that does not mean they believed all the rhetoric and found winter warm, desirable, or pleasant.

⁷⁰ Eliza Jane Crawford, “Beanville on Flat Creek,” *North Dakota Quarterly* 63, no. 4 (fall 1996): 26, 28, 36-38 ; Woodward, *The Checkered Years*, 208; N. J. Dunham, *A History of Jerauld County South Dakota: From the Earliest Settlement to January 1st, 1909* (Wessington Springs, S.D.: None given, 1910), 169-170; “Prairie Croquet: Diary of Julia Gage Carpenter,” in Elizabeth Hampsten, compiler, *To All Inquiring Friends: Letters, Diaries and Essays in North Dakota 1880-1910*, 2nd ed. (Grand Forks, N.D.: Department of English, University of North Dakota, 1980), 218-223; Sarah Thal, “Early Days: The Story of Sarah Thal, Wife of a Jewish Pioneer Farmer, Nelson County, North Dakota 1880-1900,” ed. Martha Thal, *Western States Jewish History* 39, no. 1 (2006): 79.

One can see the Dakotans' own sense of accommodation to winter in the way they looked at history. Dakotans believed that they were experiencing greater safety from blizzards in the present. Wrobel might argue that this was just pioneers reminiscing on the difficult past compared with the pristine present.⁷¹ These accounts may have emphasized the hardships of the past compared with the present, and perhaps one could read them as boosterism, as well, but they also seem to be reasonable observations of a developing country, and there might not have been development to observe had Dakotans not been accommodating to the winter.

Dakotans believed that they were safer outdoors as they considered their past. N.E. Williams a veteran of the 1888 storm in Jerauld County, Dakota Territory, wrote later that "the thicker settlement of the county and the presence of groves and fences to serve as guides to the bewildered" would keep a storm even of the same intensity as the 1888 cataclysm from proving "nearly so calamitous." Arthur Towne, an 1881 settler, agreed that as people settled in the Dakotas in greater numbers and developed the land, they became safer. "The dangers which faced a sparse population when that country was new," wrote Towne, defending the Dakotas in a memoir published in 1941, "are now overcome."⁷²

This belief suggests Dakotans' success in living through winter. They were not looking back at the season as some inexorable foe. Instead, they believed that they were actually safer than they once were. That settlers could inhabit the Dakotas in great enough numbers that Dakotans felt safer during the winter because of the burgeoning settlement suggests yet again that they had figured out a way to live with winter so that they could survive the season. It also

⁷¹ Wrobel, *Promised Lands*, 104-107, 122-123, 126, 133-141.

⁷² Negus, "Turner and Swan Lake Townships," 138, 142; Towne, *Old Prairie Days*, 14, 256; Dunham, *History of Jerauld County*, 176; for a sense of change over time that was probably an example of boosterism, especially given Wrobel's analysis, see *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, N.D., January 17, 1893).

suggests that Dakotans' messages about the region may have had some effect. Settlers were not scared away from the Dakotas to the extent that the population could not grow. Rather, the population increased from 14,000 in 1870 to 1.16 million in 1910, to the point that Dakotas looked at their settlement as a key point keeping them safe from winter.⁷³ Winter was no doubt a problem for Dakotans, but over the course of a half-century of settlement, they maintained a culture that allowed them to live alongside it.

⁷³ *Thirteenth Census*, 30.

Conclusion

This thesis takes a place in two areas of historical investigation. First, it adds to the literature cited in the introduction on the history of the Dakotas. As this thesis shows, winter was an important consideration in the minds and behaviors of Dakotans. To understand the place of winter in the lives of early Dakotans is to better understand the history of the early Dakotas.

This thesis also adds to the environmental history of the American Plains, generally. Here, historically, Americans have encountered environmental challenges in the form of grasshoppers, fire, winter weather, and especially, aridity. This thesis builds on the discussions of the problems of the Plains environment by addressing more deeply the problem of winter. In doing so, it adds to a conversation about environment and the history of the Plains outlined by William Cronon. Cronon wrote about two dueling interpretations of Great Plains history: one stressing the progress made in settling the Plains, one which culminates in the Dust Bowl and emphasizes the environmental destruction involved in settlement. This thesis incorporates elements of both. On the one hand, the progressive view, the population of the Dakotas expanded dramatically in the period examined by this thesis. Dakotans coexisted with and benefitted from the winter. On the other hand, this thesis also shows the downside of settlement. Although it does not describe Dakotans destroying their environments, like the latter view of Plains history, it shows people failing to coexist well with their environment as Dakotans suffered the loss of life and property from their winters.¹

¹ Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*, First Edition. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987), 127-128; Theodore Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 130; Donald Worster, "Climate and History: Lessons from the Great Plains," in *Earth, Air, Fire, Water: Humanistic Studies of the Environment*, ed. Jill Ker Conway, Kenneth Keniston, and Leo Marx (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 65-66; Laskin, *The Children's Blizzard*, 267-268, 270-271; William Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and

In taking its place in those areas, though, this thesis also leaves unanswered questions for other historians to address. For future study relating to this study of winter in the early Dakotas, historians could make more use of space and time than does this thesis. Regarding space, they could consider how moving to a new climate affects immigrants of different backgrounds. For example, how did New Englanders, Norwegians, and Russians deal with winter or other aspects of climate in their home countries? How did they deal with it in the Dakotas? How did their behavior change, or did their behavior remain the same?

Furthermore, historians could bring time into the study of the relationship between Dakotans and winter or, more generally, the climate. How has Dakotans' relationship with climate changed over the years? How have technological changes in areas such as communication, transportation, and housing, affected Dakotans' relationship to climate? How have Dakotans reacted to changes in the climate? How have changes in national culture affected the way Dakotans viewed or reacted to the climate?

Regarding the example of the Dakotas, this thesis has argued that early Dakotans encountered winter as a threat to their lives, their convenience, and their emotions. It could disrupt their transportation system, provide grounds for negative press coverage of their region, kill their livestock, and, worst of all, kill them, too. Accommodation was an important response by Dakotans to winter, however. It involved both their deeds and their words. They prepared for it and even profited from it. They even spoke proudly about it. Dakotans did not, however, universally accommodate to winter. They took risks by not preparing as extensively or early as

Narrative," *The Journal of American History* 78, no. 4 (March 1992): 1347-1376; Dick, *The Sod-House Frontier*, 202-231; Bartlett, *The New Country*, 212-213; Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (Boston: Ginn and company, 1931).

they possibly could have and by venturing outdoors in the winter, even when they did not have to. Many Dakotans harbored negative views toward winter.

The example of these turn-of-the-century Dakotans suggests the importance of climate in culture. The writings and reminiscences of Dakotans were full of mentions of their reactions to the harsh winter climate. But the Dakota example also suggests that climate is not determinative, resulting in a one-dimensional focus on survival in response to a threat. Dakotans' accommodation to climate involved taking some steps but not others to ensure survival. Not everyone prepared to the same extent. Some may not have prepared at all. Dakotans continued to go outside for school or socializing in the winter. In addition to protecting themselves against winter, Dakotans used it, whether in the sense of enjoying additional free time or using the cold weather for profit. They thus negotiated their winter response by living in a way that protected themselves from the dangers and included winter in their educational and business pursuits but also involved some risks to ensure companionship, educational opportunity, and perhaps convenience. The threat of the season did not force them into a purely defensive stance. Many included winter in their behavior, but they also perhaps wanted to avoid too many limitations on their lives. The example of early Dakotans suggests that people are ingenious and also that they negotiate convenience and survival in responding to threats.

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