The Blizzard of 1978

In the country side between the small town of Delphos and the even smaller town of Landeck, is a two- story farm house. As you ride up the stone lane and meet the white house, you will see the east facing large picture window that looks into a small living room strewn with toys and newspapers. What you don’t see are the glass shards that once sat in place of the toys and newspapers. Nor do you see the stump of a forty foot tree that smashed through that long gone window in the early days of the new year- the year of 1978.

It’s Wednesday, January 25th of 1978. The man of the house, Leo Wrasman, a farmer by trade, is getting home from a meeting. He parks his Chevy outside, unable to guide it to the garage due to a buildup of ice and slush, and heads inside. The house is in disorder because of the remodeling in the master bedroom. He greeted his wife, Gloria. His six children Carolyn, 13; Jerry, 12; Janet, 10, Susan, 7, Nancy, 3; and baby Lisa, 10 months; are all asleep. Gloria and Leo have set up their bedroom in the living room. The headboard is directly across from the picture window. The baby’s crib is up against the north wall, away from the window. As they lay in bed, later that night, the rain that had been falling turned to slush, and then to snow. Leo, unable to sleep, sits up late into the night. At 4:15 am, the morning takes a drastic turn.

With a massive crash, the forty foot tree smashes through the picture window, sending shards of glass flying, and the heavy winds that have been steadily increasing throughout the night, come crashing in.

“My God! We gotta get out of here!” Leo yells, grabbing the baby. Gloria finds her slippers and housecoat and stumbles after him.

Up on the second floor, that same tree broke through Jerry’s window. As his sisters
ran downstairs, frightened beyond belief, he lay in his room, covering his head. Leo had to fight against the wind for some time in order to open the door to his room and allow Jerry to make a quick escape.

With winds at 50 mph and temperatures below -50 degrees, the house quickly lost heat and they had no choice but to leave. Throwing on their warmest clothes, the family scrambled for necessities. Gloria packed the baby’s suitcase and the family huddled in the bathroom, the warmest place in the house, at 28 degrees. The family car was stuck, though, in front of the garage, in the slush that had fallen and frozen just a few hours prior. So as little baby Lisa slept bundled in the bathtub, Leo climbed into his 630 John Deere tractor with the front blade.

Leo fought his way to a neighbor’s house, John Hohlbein’s, which was no easy feat with such high winds and growing drifts. On any other day, a nice, leisurely stroll would have taken less than ten minutes. After Leo had explained his predicament, and John came back to the door, keys in hand, Leo looked John up and down and said, “John, you might want to put on more clothes.”

Leo drove his tractor back with John following in his car. They managed to get the car up the lane, close enough that the trapped family could trudge through the snow to the waiting car. And that is where Gloria describes the following events simply as ‘an eternity of hell’. They could not make the walk to the car without the men supporting them, the wind was so fierce. The return trip to the Hohlbein’s was long and daunting. Leo would push the snow forward a few feet, but by that time, the car was stuck. Leo would have to back up, hook a chain to the car, and pull it forward. Then he would unhook the car and push forward once again. He couldn’t see where he was going, visibility was non-existent. He did his best, though, feeling for when the tires started for the ditch. Gloria and the children prayed in the car, fears of freezing to death worked their way through their minds.

“That’s really a funny feeling,” Gloria would later say, “when you’re so close to home and yet have no idea where you are.”

It was a two hour round trip for the men before they managed to get the children and Gloria to the Hohlbein’s house. They faced yet another setback shortly afterwards. The
power went out. While this might have been a crippling moment for any family in the present day, this was a different year and they had different resources. Mrs. Hohlbein cooked on a camping stove until it ran out of fuel, and their hot water radiator managed to keep the house warm enough.

John, Leo, and two of the Hohlbein boys went back to the Wrasman’s house and nailed a canvas across the shattered window. They also had to feed the steers and did so without power or running water. They attempted to clear a path down the Hohlbein’s lane, but it was an impossible task.

The two families were managing, but the situation was becoming bleak. The hot water radiator wasn’t enough anymore and while blankets helped, they were unable to get up and move around. The answer came in the form of a Boy Scout Klondike Derby sled and a neighbor with a wood burning stove.

Dort Hohlbein’s mother, Helen Haunhorst, lived just down the road and had a wood burning stove. The derby sled, a five foot by one and half foot rectangular box set on runners, was pulled by a rope with wooden handles. Gloria, baby Lisa, and Nancy sat in the box, sleeping bags and blankets piled on and around them, blankets also covered the top of the box. The next two youngest, Susan and Janet, stood on the back runners. The rest of the kids, Carolyn, Jerry, Mark, Bonnie, Pete, and Paul, along with the adults, Dort, Leo, and John, pushed or pulled the sled to Helen Haunhorst’s house. They managed to find their way by crossing the bridge and following the creek to Helen’s house.

Helen had been praying for someone to come and save her, or at least keep her company during the storm. Little did she know that 14 people would be coming to answer her prayer.

They crowded around the fireplace she had in the basement. They hung their extra clothes in a circle around the fire, forming makeshift walls in order to keep in the heat. There was food to eat and heat to keep them warm, and everyone found themselves thankful for the basic necessities.

The men managed the trip back and forth between Helen’s house and the Wrasman’s farm in order to feed the steers and gather other needed supplies for the families. They
stayed at Helen’s house. A few days passed, and come Saturday, they got their first break.

A man on a snowmobile came through, telling them that they were finally able to get out and were checking all the houses in the area. At this point the town of Landeck had been evacuated. By Saturday evening, a four wheel truck, a van, and another four wheel truck with flashing lights had come to take them to town. Gloria and her girls went with them, as did Helen, but the rest elected to stay behind and look after the fireplace and steers.

Gloria’s brother, Kenny, and his wife Edith, took the travel weary family in. But first they had to register with the Red Cross, which had set up shop at St. John’s school. Once they arrived at Kenny and Edith’s house, the first thing they did was take showers and baths. None of them had realized while in the cold, just how much they smelled. It had been three days since any of them had taken a shower.

Word spread that there were disaster victims in town, and people brought food over and the phone rang off the hook.

On Monday, after the power had come back, Leo arrived in the 4020 tractor to get Gloria. Some of the drifts along Route 66 were higher than the tractor. Once home, Gloria continued the task of cleaning up the living room. Leo and Jerry had managed to shovel the majority of the snow out the living room, but there was glass everywhere, deep in the carpet, hiding in the corners, and on the shelves. The men had tracked glass shards through the house when they had been clearing out the snow, and Gloria worked to clean up as much glass as she could for the time being. Gloria also gathered the bedding and drapes to be burned.

Another storm was said to be forming, and Gloria went back to Kenny and Edith’s house to stay with the girls while Jerry and Leo stayed behind. The storm, to their relief, never came.

After that, the Wrasmans, along with the rest of the community, went to work clearing the snow and fixing the damage.

The courage and selflessness that was shown by the men and three families astounds me. Today when they talk about their adventure, they laugh and shake their heads, dismissing the notion that anything they did was worth making a fuss. But if you look at
their eyes, you can tell they still remember the uncertainty, the fear that plagued them late that fateful night.

When Leo and John fought to clear their lanes of the mounting drifts, they faced an unnerving task, returning with frozen glasses and icicles on their noses. Gloria was strong for her frightened children. It may seem required, being calm and collected in the face of a disaster, but many would be hard pressed to act so valiantly in the face of such freezing temperatures and billowing winds.

I don’t believe that heroes or heroines were made in the early morning of January 26th, 1978. I believe the storm merely allowed their dedication and perseverance to show through more brightly.