

We are having a good old fashioned Minnesota winter aren't we?

So far, we are getting by ok at our place. The herds are taking the weather just fine and my old gas tractors are starting when I need them. Through some lapse in good management on my part, my cows produced three new calves in late October and early November. Following each birth we were blessed with a few days of moderate weather. They all got started ok. The three look real good at this point

It was 41 below on a recent Friday morning. That reminded me of another time when the temperature got that low. It was a Sunday in January of 1977. I was building a new house for my family at that time. I was also farming 500 acres of corn and working full time at Medtronic. House building was a late night and weekend deal. I was much younger then.

My cousin Gerry was helping me. Gerry worked six days a week at a sawmill. He would drive up from Elk River every Sunday to put in 12 hours working for me.

Gerry was a good and dependable workman but on this particular Sunday he called to say his old Chevy wouldn't start. On my way to the barn, I checked the thermometer on the big box elder. It read 43 below. My vehicles wouldn't have started either, I didn't even try them. That wasn't a problem for me though. The new house was in the woods on the north end of the farm. It was less than half a mile away. I walked there regularly.

My oldest son Joel helped me most days but I don't recall him being along on this particular day. I suppose he got this Sunday off because of the cold. He was only eight.

There was snow but it wasn't too deep. The trail to the new house followed a ridge across a quarter mile of open field. At the north end of the field the path dipped down to cross the Snake River. The building site was on the far side of the river in wooded pasture. Gerry, Joel and I had cleared the site for the house in the summer of 1975.

There was a stiff wind from the northwest. That wind mattered because the trail was in the open and on a ridge. The wind chill was 70 below.

I left the old house about 7 a.m., fed the cattle and headed for the new house. It was still dark. We had a big Labrador retriever at the time. I didn't like him much but I don't recall ever liking any dog. I know that is generally contrary to human nature but I've just never cared for dogs. I did provide him with the elements of a good life and on this day particularly, he did have a nice warm doghouse.

The dog wanted to follow me. I sent him back several times. Believing that I had succeeded, I concentrated on my trek across the open ground. Once I got into the wind I didn't feel like fooling too much with this dog. At 70 below your eyeballs can freeze pretty fast.

I reached the house, which was well closed in. All the windows and doors were on, but the furnace was not yet hooked up. I built a huge fire in the open fireplace and went to work. I was roughing-in the plumbing at the time. The fire didn't exactly heat the house but it took the edge off and it gave me a nice place to warm up.

After I had worked an hour or two I looked out a bay window and noticed the black lab sprawled over the top of a pile of scrap wood. He wasn't moving. The darn dog had snuck out behind me.

I gave some thought to just leaving him on the wood pile. He might have been dead already anyhow.

I didn't though. I carried his rigid carcass into the house and rested him on the heated concrete in front of the fire place.

Most people may not appreciate it, but I consider this particular act to be one of the most tender and magnanimous acts of my life. I can't even stand the smell of a dog.

I went back to work. The dog thawed out and was walking around in less than an hour. The only damage I noticed was to his lower lip. There were three or four links of heavy chain attached to his collar. I had put those chain links on to give him a handicap when he chased chickens. One link had frozen lengthways along his lower lip and when the dog thawed out a chunk of lip about the size of your index finger stayed with the chain. He didn't seem to notice. Dogs are tough.

I know I am guilty of not properly training the dog in the first place. I accept that criticism. I have at times claimed to be good with horses. I have never claimed to be good with dogs.

I have a herd of horses. I don't own a dog. I guess that's an example of trying to live within my limitations.

See you at the Annual Meeting. Tom Barthel