

The Winter of 1880-1881

by William H. Stennett
from the book *Yesterday and Today, A history of the Chicago and North Western Railway system, 1910*

The Dakota extension of the road to the Missouri River at Pierre (Fort Pierre, of the days of Indian warfare, fur-tradin', and the early steamboat days, was on the west bank of the river and opposite to the site of the new town of Pierre) was finished in the early fall of 1880, and it was the intention of the management to be at Pierre on the day when the first through train reached there from the East. The last bridge over the Yellow Medicine River was to be finished and the last rail laid October 16.

In the night of October 15 it began to snow, and that storm scarcely ceased until May 5, 1881. Such a storm was nearly or quite unprecedented in the Northwest. Thousands of settlers had, in the summer and fall of 1880, flocked to Minnesota and Dakota and settled along the lines of this road; and every one of them was dependent on the trains of this company for fuel, and food and light, as all were pioneers and had no accumulated stores to draw from. Hence it seemed absolutely incumbent on the company to open its lines and keep them open. Its snow plows were kept moving day and night and thousands of men were hired to shovel snow.

Literally hundreds of thousands of dollars were spent in paying for shoveling snow in these six months; and when spring came nothing was to be seen as a return for it. The road that was cleared in the day would be covered again in the night, and where it was cleared at night the next day



Above: A few of the many men hired to shovel snow during the harsh winter of 1880-1881 are working on the Winona and St. Peter Division in 1881 at Kelly's Cut about a half-mile west of Sleepy Eye, Minnesota. — C&NWH Archives 1137



Left: This train appears to be literally swimming in snow in Kelly's Cut near Sleepy Eye on March 22, 1881. Apparently the train is boarding, but it's difficult to tell whether one train is "saving" the other or whether they're both just mired in the snow. The upraised arm of one of the individuals of the in the distance would indicate that perhaps this is a scene of a success of some sort. Triumphs never lasted long that winter, however, as the snow seemed to never stop. —C&NWH Archives 1136



Above: This huge snow cut was photographed on March 22, 1881 at Oshawa Station on the C&NW on March 22, 1881. —C&NWHS Archives 1132

Above right: This view is at Bresling's Cut, about one and a half miles west of Oshawa. —C&NWHS Archives 1133

Right: Another view near Oshawa, this photograph is at Goose Lake Cut east of Oshawa, and was also taken on March 22, 1881. —C&NWHS Archives 1134

Below: This view was labeled "east end of 47 mile cut" which one would assume indicates the milepost, not the length of the cut. The trainmen might think the snow was 47 miles deep, but they're busy fighting the snow regardless in another view from March 22, 1881. —C&NWHS Archives 1140

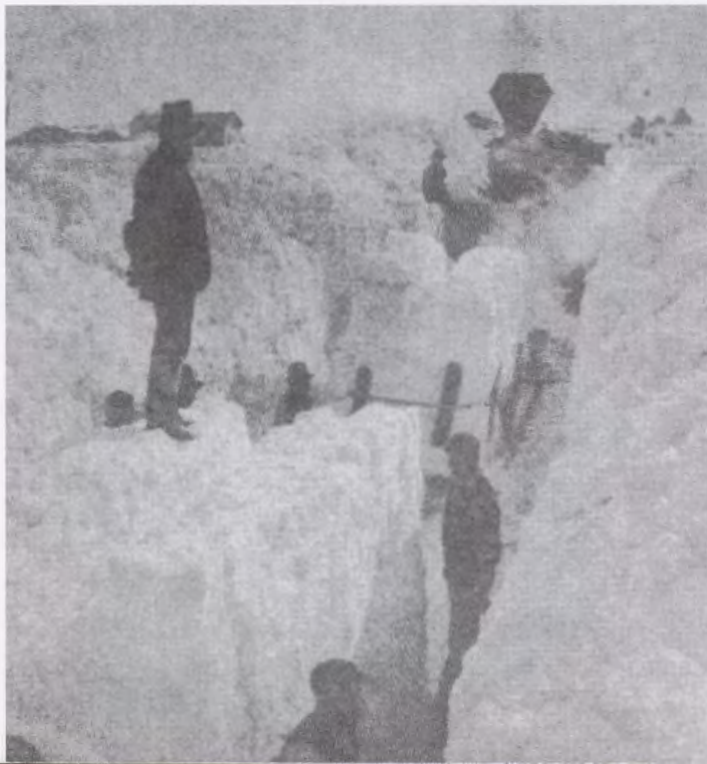
Below right: Kelly's Cut has been opened again, and this photograph was titled "the last shovel full." Since it didn't quit until May, one would guess that the term "last" was overly optimistic! —C&NWHS Archives 1144



was sure to overwhelm it again; and so the fight was kept up day and night for practically six months.

Though many had to live on wheat or corn ground in coffee mills or pounded in a mortar, none was allowed to starve, and when May came all were ready for the work that should have begun in February or March. It is said, and probably truly, that over 14 feet of snow fell that winter "on a level" in central Minnesota and in what now is South Dakota. The snowstorms were accompanied with so much wind that the storms were really "blizzards."

When the wind was not blowing the weather was intensely cold and the snow was so granular



Top: In October 1880 the yard at St. James, Minnesota looked like this—completely piled with snow. The first blizzard of 1880 arrived in force on October 15 and raged for three days. Undoubtedly this photograph was taken shortly after the snow settled. —*Joe Follmar collection*

Above left: A large group of workers are poised in the huge cut of snow at Kelly's Cut west of Sleepy Eye on March 22, 1881. The photograph was titled "how are we going to get out?" —*C&NWHHS Archives* 1138

Above: A seemingly tiny locomotive is dwarfed by the immensity of the snowpack and the cut at Kelly's Cut in this view titled "open once more." Unfortunately, this was just one of many times the railroad drifted closed, cutting off communities from much-needed supplies. —*C&NWHHS Archives* 1139

Left: This is probably one of the best views for showing the difficulty the snow fighters faced during the long and tenacious winter of 1880–1881. —*C&NWHHS Archives* 1195

that it rolled on the surface like shot might on a level floor, and this helped to fill the cuts that the snow plows and shovelers made in clearing the track. In many places the cuts made by snowplows and shovelers were 20 to 40 feet deep, so that there often had to be six or seven ranks of shovelers, one above the other, on the slope of the bank to move the snow above the track and far enough back to keep it from rolling down into the cut as fast as it was shoveled out.

In March 1881, one snowstorm brought a full four feet of snow on the level. The last snowstorm and snow blockade did not occur until May 5, 1881.

[Ed. note: The winter of 1880–1881 was written about in Laura Ingalls Wilder's book *The Long*

Winter, in which she chronicled the difficult winter in *De Smet* in what is now eastern South Dakota on the North Western between Huron and Brookings. She wrote:

"...the blizzard winds had blown earth from the fields where the sod was broken, and had mixed it with snow packed so tightly in the railroad cuts that snowplows could not move it. The icy snow could not melt because of the earth mixed with it, and men with picks were digging it out inch by inch. It was slow work because in many big cuts they must dig down twenty feet to the steel rails.

"April went slowly by. There was no food in the town except for the little wheat left from the sixty bushels that young Mr. Wilder and Cap had

brought in the last week of February. Every day Ma made a smaller loaf and still the train did not come." —*The Long Winter*, p. 316]

Below: Back in the 1880s if the snow was not more than 12 feet deep a wedge plow pushed with as much speed as possible could buck snow effectively, according to Thomas M. Lell, in *Plowing Through History*, in *Locomotive & Railway Preservation*, July–August 1992. Although there is no data available for this photo, it was possibly taken about 1880, as the first two engines are apparently woodburners, and the third engine has a stack which was new at that time. — C&NWHs Archives



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