

A happy blizzard surprise

by Martin Fredricks

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Something unexpected blew in with last week's 24-hour blast of wind and snow – a little extra warmth.



Warmth and blizzard. The two words just don't seem to go together. And yet, that's exactly the connection that came to mind as I sat at the dinner table playing "Battleship" with my 7-year-old daughter on Monday afternoon.

The snow swirled and the wind howled outside the sliding glass door leading to our deck, and I realized I felt sorry for anyone who had never experienced a good ol' North Dakota blizzard.

Bah, you say. Pitying people who don't have to endure sub-sub-freezing temperatures, skin-peeling wind chills, lost work days, digging out of snow up to the eaves? You're a nutter.

Of course you're right. It's an absurd thought. But here's the thing ...

"E-Seven," my daughter called out, looking at me expectantly. Next to me at the table my son was engrossed in his coloring, my wife and our 17-month-old snuggled in our bed for a nap, and the Christmas tree sparkled in the living room.

"Miss," I said. "F-Two."

A huge gust shook the windows, taking me back to a winter in Medora, N.D., when I was about 7. My dad, who was the Billings County emergency manager, was on the telephone coordinating air drops of hay for local cattle herds trapped in the draws of the Badlands. He was a busy man that winter, and many of those winters in the early and mid-'70s.

It wasn't Jack London, frozen-spit cold that day, but it felt like it. Even so, our little cocker spaniel, Boss, couldn't be coaxed into the house. She rushed up the back stairs, put on the brakes and skidded toward the door. But she was well-trained; no way was she coming in. Instead, she turned around and jumped headlong into the snowbank next to her doghouse, backed out and joyfully shook snow every which way.

I went back downstairs to put an addition onto the blanket fort I was building in the family room, jumped on the couch when Mom wasn't looking and, later, sat in Dad's lap to watch a hockey game in front of the crackling fireplace.

"Miss," said my daughter. "A-Six."

Those winters were a wonderland. When the blizzards died down, the drifts were so tall that my friends and I dug out two-story snow forts. One Christmas at my grandparents' house in Zeeland, N.D., they were high enough to completely cover the backyard swing set, and so wind hardened that we could walk right over it. A 7-year-old's simple winter thrill.

Blizzards meant playtime and hot cocoa back then, the soothing aroma of homemade soup and extra time with the erector set.

"Miss. F-Five."

Our Sunday-Monday storm was ugly, mean, dangerous. With the kids home and businesses closed, time was a-wastin' by our normal standards. But sitting there, warm, safe and happy, I realized it was really time stolen from the forces that keep us rushing through the here and there of every day. It was time I would never regain, in work terms, but also time with my family I never would have had otherwise.

"Miss. C-Three."

Mother Nature is cruel, to be sure. Blizzards are not to be trifled with, and over the years they've cut lives short. But last weekend I learned she can be a giver, too. What a surprise for this 40-year-old that a weekday blizzard means as much now as it did when I was 7, and even more.

"Hit," I said. And for me, it really was.

Blizzard and warmth. Absolutely, and what a gift.

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