

The History Corner  
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### **Mild Winter Temperatures**

It got down to zero last night. Not one or two below, but just exactly zero. That leaves unchanged at three the number of days this winter that my thermometer has showed temperatures in the minus range. Only three days below zero and with the coldest months of the year all ready behind us. It truly has been a strange winter. For more than twenty years now I have been recording the daily highs and lows at my property. In looking over those old records it is impossible to find any winter with fewer than at least a dozen days below zero and those winters were rare. The winter of '82-'83 was warm as was '97-'98. But those years were unusually mild and very out of the ordinary. Most winters in fact average at least 25-30 days below zero with several showing more than 40 days in the minus range, such as the brutal winter of '95-'96. According to my records that was the winter that I had ten days of -20 or more in a span of a little over two weeks. It was also the winter of five straight days of -30 or more between January 31 and February 4. Brrrrr! That sounds cold even reading about it.

Compared to that, the last five years have been unusually warm ones, but still nothing like this winter. I wonder what the early homesteaders would have thought had they experienced such temperatures. I am not a farmer or a fisherman but I would have to believe that they would have felt fortunate. An ice-free lake to set nets all winter and a mild and relatively snow free winter for the animals would seem to be an advantageous thing. I know, as I get older the moderate winters become more appealing. But I also know that such an unusual winter makes me pause about what will come in the months ahead. And I am sure those early homesteaders would have had the same thoughts, worrying about adequate moisture for the crops, the imminent threat of early spring fires, and the fear of wells going dry.

I hope I am not having pangs of guilt for not suffering enough this winter. After all I have lived in Minnesota for over fifty years so I feel I have shared in enough of its wintry blasts to not feel uninitiated. More than guilt it is probably a feeling of disappointment that is beginning to creep over me. Disappointment in the fact that this winter will slide unnoticed into spring and that there may be no clear end to mark its passing. To many people spring is the first robin, the first bud, the first flower to show along the south wall. But to me it is also marked by the last of things. The last day the snow packed gravel road is mud free, the last day snow still clings to the pile at the end of the drive, the last day I can snowshoe up the river before breakup. It is that transition marking the change in seasons that gives me reason to break out of my winter hibernation and to once again begin thinking of planting gardens, finishing my fourteen year long project of siding the house, and throwing the baseball once again.

Sometimes though, it is just the simple act of sitting by the river as the remnants of winter shed off the land and float by me in a torrent of cleansing that tells me spring is here -- the rite of passage in a life of seasonal change. Who knows, maybe March will bring snow and cold like nothing we have yet seen this winter. If it does then I can celebrate that first day of spring properly, listening to the snow melt off the roof and waiting for the first sign of mud.