

# Beef River Blizzard

In March of 1857, a crew of men hunting elk near the Beef River lost their bearings. They almost lost their lives.

A tale by pioneer settler H.A. Towne.

*In the winter of 1856-57, the Towne family moved from the Janesville vicinity, in Rock County, to Wheaton township in Chippewa County. It took three trips by covered wagon, the last in the midst of terrible March blizzards. The first and third loads brought their possessions; the family came with the second load — “my mother, brother F.A., and I nicely tucked in feather beds and blankets,” writes H.A. Towne, “and the cover of the emigrant wagon sheltering us and the goods.”*

*That spring, large snow drifts lasted well into May, and the Townes were still melting snow for drinking water until the first of June. “The old timers,” wrote Towne, “often spoke of a year or two before or after ‘the Winter of the Big Snow’ to designate an uncertain date.”*

*During a brief break in these March blizzards, a half-dozen men set out on an elk hunt. The hunters were wintering at the Old Beef River Station — a small collection of buildings including a lodge, post office, jail house, and stagecoach stop — which was located a mile northeast of Osseo. (Beef River, now known as Buffalo River, runs westward through or near Osseo, Eleva, and Mondovi. It meets the Mississippi north of Alma.)*

*Towne was a boy, and was not in the hunting party, but one of the hunters, John Close, told this story to him.*

On that old pioneer trail was a station or stopping place situated on Beef River, the Old Beef River station. That winter several young adventurous men were wintering there and about the place, among the number my old townsman and friend John Close, now dead. He was a confident, capable man and one likely to lead, not follow in an emergency, as the story I now pen will show. I think he had been in that section three years at the time of my story happening.



One day in March that year the news came that a large drove of elk were near the station drifting down the river I think. A hurry call and six or seven hunters were on their trail. The snow was deep but the elk herd walking nearly in column left a clean deep path.... [The men] soon drew near to the noble game. Taking advantage of the rise and fall of the land they soon had them under fire and poured in their rain of bullets with deadly effect. As the hunters

came to those that fell, they bled them and pushed on. Again and again this was repeated.

The elk at each volley would spread and run but would soon take to the column formation to break the track and push on. Noon came and passed, the day waned, but still the hunters held to the hunt. They had several dead elk to their credit wide scattered along the trail, but they still wanted one more and then they would turn back. They would come later with a team to get the elk.

It had become a dark cloudy afternoon, dreary and forbidding, and at last gusts of wind and scattering snow flakes. Night was nearing when the hunt-

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**On the cover:** A Chippewa Valley logging road in winter.

**This page:** The jail house is all that remains of the Old Beef River Station. It still stands on a farm now owned by Gordon Hong, Sr., along County Road NN. For more on the history of the Old Beef River Station, surf to . . .

<http://www.cesa10.k12.wi.us/cvwm/camp2000/of/kaitlin/>

ers halted and decided to take the track back. They had gone but a very little way when the great storm and blizzard of 1857 broke upon them in all its fury. The clouds and falling snow seemed to bring night almost at once, and the elk path was soon full. They could not face the fury or the storm in the darkness and keep the trail, so they decided to seek a grove and stop till morning light.

The low ground was covered at the time by dense poplar thickets, through which the prairie fire would run every few years killing them but leaving the dead young trees still standing until a new fire should sweep the country, and find the dry timber and consume them.

The hunters chose one of these thickets for their camp and succeeded in starting a fire. They had no axe but could break down the small dry poplar and feed the fire. The little lunch that their pockets had carried had been eaten at noon. So supperless they surrounded the fire. But a new difficulty soon menaced them. The falling snow was continually falling on their clothes and the fire was melting it, so to keep reasonably dry they had to make a path on the windward side of the fire and walk to keep from freezing, and so the night passed — breaking trees to keep the fire burning and walking and walking to keep from chilling to the bone. So the morning found them. A new morning yes. Also a new world.

The snow had fallen to their waists on the level and in the tall grass of swale or brush to arm pits, and with the snow still falling. The idea of directions gone. Without supper or breakfast and all night vigil the hunters were in bad shape for the terrible labor ahead. Close said he told the boys the only hope was to make Beef River. But where was Beef River?

One said this way, another that, but Close insisted that it lay in a certain direction and his strong will made him the leader, so they started that way. One went ahead as long as he could, then another took his place. It was slow work, and heart breaking, but they plodded on. The men grew tired and contrary and insisted Close was wrong and they would follow no longer. Then the little force divided taking different directions.

When the other band was nearly out of site Close stopped his men and said, “If we let those boys leave us we shall never see them again. Let us call them back.”

His chums said, “What shall we tell them?” He looked about him and saw a little draw or ravine.

He said, “Call them and when they come I will tell them that draw leads to Beef River, and I know it. Follow it and we’ll get home. Go any other direction and [be lost] ...

[The group joined up again and staggered on.]



*Detail of a map of Trempealeau County, showing the Buffalo River and County Trunk Highway NN. Note: while most of Osseo lies west of I-94, NN is east of the interstate.*

The men became so tired they begged to be left and nearly had to be carried. But they all saw the draw deepening and even the weak took courage. Close, now tired to the bone was jubilant for he felt he had won and took new courage. They were too tired to talk but with hands and teeth clenched they put the little left in them to the task and looked down at last on old Beef River from its banks. They were still a long distance from the station, but the snow on the river had been swept by wind and was not so deep — in places had become packed ... by drifting so they made far better time.

As the evening closed in, the welcome lights of the station came in sight and our hunters worn from battle, snow, cold and hunger staggered through its welcome doors. They all realized how near they had

been to death and were thankful, though they had won by so small a margin. As an elk hunt it was a failure as all the game they had shot was deep buried under the greatest amount of snow ever seen by a white man in North Wisconsin.

Mr. Close told me this story quite a good many years ago, and though later he became a soldier in the Civil War I could see by the tension of mind and nerves as he told it, he felt it to be the greatest event of an eventful lifetime.

— H.A. Towne

*This tale is part of a collection donated to CVM by Janet Barland. The CVM library's archival collection includes thousands of rare documents and photographs. The library is open Monday through Friday, 1-5 p.m., and by arrangement.*