

# THE BLIZZARD OF 1886

Haskell County, Kansas

Written by Maxine Ridge

*Reference: A letter written by Mr. Robert D. Newby of Venice, California, to his sister, Mrs. John Jacob Miller (Ninnie Kate Blanche Newby Miller) of Sublette, Kansas*

*\* Additional information added about certain people mentioned in this story*

The year 1886 was outstanding in the history of Kansas. Most everyone speaks of the great blizzard as just one big blizzard, but there were two different blizzards with almost two days elapsing between them. Mr. Robert D. Newby\*, a pioneer of Kansas in that year, says there are many mistakes in saying “there was only one blizzard.”

On the evening of December 31, 1885, the snow commenced falling, and on New Year’s Day, January 1, 1886, the blizzard was still raging but diminished sometime during the night. Mr. Newby made several trips to feed the stock at the corral and had no great difficulty in finding his way around. The wind subsided, and on January 2, it was a clear, bright day.

The sun was so bright on the snow that it was necessary to blacken around the eyes to keep from going snow-blind. Mr. Newby went to the store for groceries, and before he left, he blackened his eyes. When he and his party went into the store, they were mistaken for bandits. It gave the storekeeper a great fright and caused a large amount of excitement.

The trip to town was challenging. There were large drifts along the way, and to travel, it was necessary to have a wagon pulled by a very large team. They remained in town until January 3, visiting with friends. They returned home the morning of the 4<sup>th</sup>, and Mr. Newby then took a mule team and went to meet his father, who had been in Garden City, Kansas attending a wedding, and to get supplies at the dugout of Samuel Bullard\* which was located on the south side of the Sandhill’s. He had the key to the dugout, and his father was to be there with the supplies. They could not make it to their home with the heavy load, for it was very difficult traveling with the store supplies. Mr. Newby’s father was already at the dugout two or three hours before he arrived with the mule team and the key. There was a small party of cowboys at the dugout with Mr. Newby’s father, and they needed to spend the night there. About sundown, they noticed a wagon and team were struggling in a snowdrift. It was a ten-year-old boy and his mother with their supplies, which they had purchased in Pierceville. Their team was old and tired out, and the drifts were so bad that it did not seem possible for them to go the remaining few miles home after dark. Mr. Newby’s father persuaded them to spend the night at the dugout and go home the next morning.

After seeing the boy and his mother off the next day, the Newby's started the remaining part of their trip home. It was then that their troubles began, for there was nothing in any way to help guide them, only their sense of direction. A very deep mantle of snow covered the trail, as were the landmarks and the entire countryside. The warm sun of the past two days had melted the top of the snow just enough to form an ice crust on top. This made it very difficult to travel with a load, as the wagon would cut through the ice crust, and the horses could hardly pull the wagon. Sometimes the horses would go through the crust into a large drift of snow. The piles were so large and dangerous that the lead team would have to be unhitched and a different hitch added to the back of the wagon. Then the horses were able to pull the wagon out of the drifts. Then a detour was set up to go around the drift area. Sometimes they repeated this four or five times before they could get around piles of snow to solid ground, and the party could proceed on their way.

Around the neighborhood of what is now called Lockport, there were buffalo wallows\* known to hold rainwater (which served as a temporary watering hole for wildlife). The party had to drive around them. This part of the land was broken up, with full crooked drawn creeks that drifted level with the ground. It became necessary to make detours of two and three miles to miss these draws and wallows. Some people lost their way and suffered greatly before they found shelter.

The Newby party was only three miles north of their homes when nighttime came, and the first signs of a storm overtook them. It was the first time all day that they were sure of their location, and they could see smoke from their homes. As the sun went down and the snow began to fall, it was "trust to luck" that they were traveling in the right direction. The wind became more potent, and then the snow became dense. Then it was only a short time before the lead team was entirely out of sight.

The party thought that they were near home but had no way of telling just where they were. They debated what they should do. Mr. Newby got out of the wagon several times and called to those in the homes. They needed to locate someone so they could tell how close they were to their own homes. There was not any way they could tell where they were, so they set up camp right where they were. The team was unhitched, then put on the wagon's sheltering side, and fed the corn they purchased in town. A tarpaulin (*a waterproof tarp*) pulled over the wagon top bows, was to help make a bed on the floor of the wagon. They had enough covers and did not suffer from the cold, but they did not have anything to eat all day. They expected the storm to break the next day, but its fury increased that night and surrounded the little party. The intensity of the storm was beyond description.

The storm subsided the morning of January 7, around five o'clock. It was the third day after Mr. Newby had left home to meet the rest of the party. The seventh was a beautiful, clear day, and they soon discovered that they were less than a fourth of a mile from the house.

While the storm was at its worst, the Newby family stayed in the wagon bed to keep warm. Knocked out of the bed, were Mr. Newby's boots. They froze so badly he could not get them on when they were starting on their way to the house. Mr. Newby made a run for the house in his stocking feet. He had to turn the horses loose and had great difficulty in making them leave the wagon.

It was bitter cold after the storm broke, but no one suffered until reaching shelter. Mr. Newby's feet were frozen and he had to keep them in a tub of water all night.

Mr. Newby's father was very ill with trouble similar to pneumonia and was bedfast for a long while. They could not reach a doctor, but the family put forth a great effort.

The second part of the blizzard started on the evening of the fourth and lasted until the morning of the seventh. The last blizzard was more severe than the first one, but both were blizzards, not experienced since then, by man or beast.

There is one good example of the heavy loss caused by these blizzards. The Bullard Ranch had about twenty thousand head of cattle before the blizzard, and after the storm, there were less than five hundred left. Sadly, the blizzard of 1886 also took the lives of people who lived in Southwest Kansas.

*\* Since Southwest Kansas did not have the needed trees for the buffalo to rub up against when shedding its coat, it would lay on the ground and roll back and forth to remove the unwanted hair. This created a large round shallow hole in the ground, called Buffalo Wallows.*

#### Additional Information ROBERT D. NEWBY

*See Story: MRS. NINNIE B. (NEWBY) MILLER  
(Sister of Robert D. Newby)*

ROBERT D. NEWBY, son of Robert Green Newby (1830-1908) and Martha Elizabeth Patrick (1829-1908), was born on 20 Aug 1865 in Jackson County, Indiana. His parents moved to Kansas sometime after 1880.

In 1895, Robert D. Newby was still single and living in Pratt, Kansas. On 11 Sep 1896, he married CLARA LOUISE LUCAS, daughter of James Alexander Lucas (1842-1923) and Louisa Maria Keifer (1838-1932). Clara was born on 17 Jun 1871 in St. Clair County, Illinois.

In the year 1900, the census records reveal that Robert had moved to Los Angeles, California. He was staying there as a lodger. His wife, Clara, was staying with her sister and brother-in-law in Omaha, Nebraska. By 1910, Clara had joined Robert in California. They did not have children. Census records reveal Robert worked for the United States Post Office. He passed away on 8 May 1942 in Los Angeles County, California. Clara died there on 1 Jul 1960. The burial for

Robert was at the Haskell County Cemetery in Sublette, Kansas.

**Additional Information  
SAMUEL BULLARD**

**SAMUEL AUGUSTUS BULLARD**, son of Samuel M. Bullard (1818-1882) and Harriet A. Warfield (1819-1892), was born on 21 Jun 1847 in Suffolk County, Massachusetts. He was married to **HARRIET "HALLIE" CALDWELL GIBBS**, daughter of James B. Gibbs (1812-1884) and Elizabeth Boyd Wright (1831-1864) on 25 Sept 1881, in Dodge City, Ford County, Kansas. Harriet was born on 6 Aug 1858, in the District of Columbia.

They had two children, **ANNA CALDWELL BULLARD** (1882-1949) and **BENJAMIN BULLARD** (1885-1961).

Samuel died on 13 Nov 1913, in Garden City, Kansas, at the age of 66. Between 1920 and 1927, Harriet moved to Mount Vernon, New York. She died there on 26 Mar 1932. Burial for both Samuel and Harriet, at the Valley View Cemetery in Garden City.

**NEWSPAPER OBITUARY**

*The Garden City (Kansas) Telegram – Friday, 14 Nov 1913*

HERDED CATTLE IN THE BLIZZARD OF 1886

SAMUEL BULLARD DIED LAST NIGHT AFTER LONG CAREER IN FINNEY COUNTY

HE HAD SUFFERED THREE YEARS

WAS ONE OF THE LEADING CATTLE DEALERS OF THE WEST – OWNED LARGE TRACTS OF LAND IN THIS COUNTY.

Samuel Bullard, 66 years old, died at his home in Garden City last night after a long and eventful life in Western Kansas.

Coming to Kansas in 1878, Mr. Bullard settled at Dodge City and took charge of a cattle syndicate. In 1884, he came to Garden City and was a member of the firm Bullard & O'Neil, cattle dealers for several years. He was here during the winter of 1886 when many of the cattle on the plains froze to death in one of the worst blizzards on record.

Mr. Bullard has been a successful businessman and one of Garden City's most prominent citizens. For almost three years, his health has been in bad condition, and his death was "not unexpected".