

Important Mail

Hagemeyer Generations - Chapter Thirteen

by Stanley Hagemeyer © 2020

The noon meal (dinner) concluded about 1 P.M., and soon after, both Carlie and little Hank were ready for a nap. Bauwina didn't have to urge them to lie down under some warm covers. The wind was howling, and every window had the same view, a simple white swirl with no other details of the outside world.

Bauwina thought for a few moments. Siebe had mentioned cookies. She would like to please him and the boys with a fresh batch, but at the same time, she felt an unusual weariness. Maybe it was because she had to be especially vigilant to keep the fire well fed with cobs and coal so their kitchen stove could stave off the eager fingers of winter's wind quickly cooling down their living quarters.

"I think I'll get started and make some cookies. We've got to keep the stove hot anyway, so the oven is ready to bake regardless of whether I put anything into it."

"Okay! That's a good idea," Siebe quickly affirmed. "Then you'll have some done by the time the boys wake up."

Bauwina measured out the flour and sugar and began to blend them with other ingredients, and finally mixing them with lard, squishing the mash through her fingers to get a good blend.

Siebe was finishing a pipeful of tobacco a few minutes later, and casually said, "I see the light outside is brighter. Maybe the storm is slowing down. I think I'm going to take a hike over to the highway to get our mail."

Bauwina stopped her cookie dough mixing, and shot him a well focused glance. "Now you are thinkin' of such a thing? I thought you had got that idea out of your head. You don't need to see that mail today!"

"It will be a good hike, and I've done it many times. I want to see how much snow is building up on the road, anyway."

"You'll see it if you pick it up with your hands! You can't see the barn from the back door. How're you going to find your way?"

Siebe was eager to help her settle down and not worry. "Look, *Liebchen*, I've walked that road dozens of times. All I need is to feel it with my feet and I'm in good shape."

Bauwina's fears were stoking an unfamiliar anger, now. "I wish they had never started that RFD back in 1904! Then you wouldn't be tempted to go running off to the mailbox every other day."

Siebe was not going to listen to any more discussion. He was putting on his second layer of wool socks, and the rest of his foul weather garb. He was not happy with her old-fashioned attitude about mail. Either one or both of the *Farmer* and the *Volkszeitung* would be there by now, and he was going to get them.

Bauwina stopped talking. And she was sorry she had started the cookie dough. That stubborn man didn't deserve any fresh treats today.

All bundled up to face the windy 10 degree air and the blinding snow, Siebe left the house, knowing his wife was cold as frost right now, too. He didn't like having her so upset with him, but there were some things he knew better than she did. And one of them was that he knew his way along the half mile walk to the Minnesota highway number 7. Well, it was actually about three quarters of a mile, if he included the distance from their house to the township road at the bottom of the hill.

She is really wound up today, he thought. *She ought to realize I know my way around our own farm!* Siebe made his way eastward fairly well. He couldn't see a thing, but he felt the ground slowly rise as he made his way across last fall's corn field. Now and then he felt one of the broken stalks brush against his leg and he noticed the uneven drifting of snow caused by the stalks. Now he could hear the wind whistling as it beat against the small box elder maples he had planted along both sides of the driveway the first year they were on the farm. It was going to be a nice shaded driveway someday. At this point he could just make out some of their ghostly grey spindly shapes about 8 feet tall, whipped by the wind.

He decided to avoid walking the path between the trees, because the road at that point had been cut into the brow of the hill sloping downward. That made the road drop a couple feet below the surrounding surface so the driveway was not too steep for horses pulling a heavy load uphill. The snow had already drifted that cavity full adding to the depth of the surrounding snow bank. Momentarily he envisioned the new house he planned to build at the peak of the hill a few yards south of where he was now walking.

It isn't going to be so bad, he thought. *I'm feeling the path. I know I am heading down the hill.* As the road leveled out he knew he had to watch for where to turn left for the road. If he didn't turn he would be stepping downward right into the frozen marsh and rushes.

In a few moments he felt the edge dropping, and he promptly turned left. From here on it was simply a matter of endurance.

Here and there the snow had drifted occasional barriers two feet deep across the road as the northwest wind crossed the northward bound road. This was a public road but he felt he owned it because it dead ended at his property. No one else would ever use it. He felt a sense of pride that they had a half-mile of lane that was their own in that sense. The reason it went no farther was the large slough to the south, a shallow lake about a third of a mile wide, extending across the boundary between their farm and the one to the east. The road had been built up just enough to stay above the high water levels that occurred some times. Its south point ended right at the NE corner of their farm land and where their own marshy low land began. Here their farm lane connected, traveling west up the low hill.

After turning onto the township road it seemed to him that it took about twenty minutes to cover the straight half-mile to the highway. Occasionally he could see a few of the taller dried up weeds along the road ditch still standing up in the snow, affirming his confidence. As he came to the last slow rise and then a noticeable slope downward toward the state highway, he breathed a sigh of relief. *I'm doing just fine. I'll be back before tea time at 3:00 O'clock. She'll probably be over her snit by then.*

Yes, as he had hoped, the RFD mail carrier had come by at least once in the last couple days. There was that nice big January issue of the *Farmer*. The bulky tabloid magazine was packed with practical farming news, he knew. There was always one article written by somebody at the University of Minnesota school of agriculture in St. Paul. Besides articles like that, there were dozens of advertisements for farm implements, machines, seed companies and items he might never hear about without the *Farmer* coming to his mailbox, he thought. He was eager to open those pages.

With the magazine and a couple other small pieces of mail tucked under his arm, he turned to head home. Now walking was easier. Here and there he could feel his own tracks and followed those footsteps back. In some areas they were already filled and dissolved in the blinding swirl of snow driven by persistent vicious winds. As he walked along, he began to imagine the day when their new house and buildings would appear on the peak of that hill overlooking the slough's blue water. It was like being completely blind, he thought to himself. Sight, time, and distance meshed into a form of space one could not measure. Everything was white.

He walked with confident step. Here and there he had to plow through more resistance, so his progress slowed, but he recognized the road beneath his feet. The half mile seemed to stretch out longer than before, and the cold was beginning to burn through the place where his mittens met his coat, in spite of their wool lining. His nose was protected by the wool scarf, but it too was beginning to feel cold.

Just about the time he was thinking, *I'll be home soon*, he noticed something he did not like. The surface he was stepping on seemed very uneven. On his next step he stomped his foot down especially hard. It went down too far through the hard drifted snow. *That didn't feel like a road surface*, he realized. He stomped again. Now he could feel some encrusted reeds and frozen rushes around his feet. Where was he? How did he get off the road?

Siebe stomped around briefly. Then he stopped. He considered that the best thing to do was to walk directly back north in his own footsteps. At least, he hoped it was north. Had he stepped off the side of the road? *Wouldn't I notice it drop off at the edge of the road?*

As he walked hesitantly back north the bitter wind bit into his cheeks and eyelids. He began to feel a chill that penetrated his confidence and rattled through his bones in a way he had not experienced before. He stumbled forward, desperately trying to find the tracks now already drifting shut. He wondered how far he could have come beyond the end of the road. Minutes passed slowly. The wind driven snow bit into his face. He stopped again to check his sense of direction. Yes, he was facing into the wind, and it felt a little off to the left, as it should since he knew it had been coming from the northwest. *I'll keep going 'till I find the road again. It can't be far.*

He moved forward more carefully than before, wanting to sense any difference in the ground under his feet. His eyes desperately tried to pierce the solid white world to no avail. Then he began to feel something very hard, a more level surface below the drifted snow. Again he stepped forward. Yes, this was the road. But where was he? He stopped to think, but not for long. The cold was taking charge of him. He knew he had to make his way as soon as possible. He took a sharp left turn, as best he could calculate to be about a right angle. Soon he felt he was going down again, down the edge of the road ditch. *That means I'm already north of the turning point where our*

lane comes off the road. If I go back south to the right spot, the turn will be level, instead of dropping off.

He turned quickly around and retraced his steps going southward again. Now he stepped forward like a detective, feeling every step carefully. After what seemed again like an elastic space of time, he felt the road slope down. *I must be a little too far again.* Then backing up a few steps he turned right, hoping that this was their lane which would take him up the hill. He moved forward slowly and carefully. The path seemed solid and steady, as it should. But the wind driven snow swirled around him like a heavy white curtain revealing no clues. There were no signs to interpret except his own footsteps. Soon he felt he was going up the incline as he had hoped. A few moments later he saw briefly on his right one of the small trees along the stretch where the lane cut into the hill. Now he walked forward with greater confidence.

After passing along the fifty yards of the lane where he had planted trees, he stopped once again, hoping to grasp some clear sense of the angle he would have to take to follow the path to their house, perhaps another two hundred yards to the southwest. The lane was really only a path through the field. He knew he had to get this right. Otherwise he would be wandering into the wide acreage of farm land. Moving forward and staring ahead like a man hungry for sight, he made slow progress. Snow crystals hit his eyes with biting fury as he tried to keep them open.

Now, suddenly, he thought he saw a shape. Yes, it was the dark, unpainted shape of their barn. So he knew he was close, and he turned to look left the angle where their house should be. It was white, and did not appear, at first. But he went forward and soon he knew he had made it. But he was desperately cold.

“Where have you been so long?” Bauwina’s greeting burnt through his chill. He silently struggled to get his coat and wraps off, stamping his boots into the corner of the warm kitchen. It felt really hot to him. He knew that meant he was really cold.

“It took me a little longer than I expected,” he said, trying to make it sound ordinary.

“A little longer? You have been gone now for nearly two hours. I was scared you would never get back!”

“I’m sorry. It was a little worse than” He wondered if he dared to tell her the truth.

Now in tears, Bauwina came closer, and stared at his cold red face. “I am so relieved to see you! I thought your foolishness was going to already make me a widow. And I am so mad at you, you crazy man! How could I manage without you. How would I even make it through the winter without you?”

“I’m sorry. I got mixed up when I got to the end of the township road. I went too far. I had to turn around and find my way back to the corner. That took extra time. I was . . . lost.”

“Oh Siebe, you can never do this again! The mail is not so important, especially not important enough to die for.”

Now she came closer to him. He dared to reach out and she did for him. They embraced with a kind of fierceness that was blending their love, their fear, and the pain of failure forgiven.

“Ja,” Siebe said, weakly, “I guess the mail isn’t that important.”

END OF CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Addenda

1. RFD (rural free delivery) started at Clara City 09/15/1904 .
2. The *Farmer* was one of the most widely read farm magazines from 1885 to about 1962, having 150,000 readers at its peak.