

## **THE ARMISTICE DAY BLIZZARD**

### **November 11, 1940**

#### FARM FAMILY HOSTS 20 KIDS 3 DAYS

It was misting that morning when our bus driver, Rollie Flynn, left his mother's farmhouse and walked to his big 42-passenger orange school bus that glistened like a pumpkin.

Rollie was wearing a light jacket, no gloves and high shoes, but no boots. His mind wasn't on that 7 a.m. meandering run from farm to farm into Jordan as much it was on the previous day's events. The banns of his marriage to Betty Martin had been announced in St. Catherine's Church. They had set the date for the end of November.

He started the bus, swung the big machine onto the narrow gravel road and for the next two hours was busy turning, twisting and filling the bus as he picked up his 32 riders. They ranged from little folks to high-schoolers – like the Sheas, the Gradys, Klehrs, Ryans, Wolfs and the Beckius children, Eileen, Larry and Jean. He was going to remember the Alex Beckius farm before the day was ended.

As Rollie downshifted to descend the long hill into Jordan, it started raining heavily and there was the feel of sleet.

As soon as he dropped the children, he drove the bus to Ben Engfert's garage to have the radiator repaired. It had been leaking and Rollie had been babying it the previous wee, but he knew it needed repairing now. "Sure, we can fix it but it might take till noon," said Ben. "OK, go ahead; I'll wait," replied Rollie.

By 10 a.m., the rain had changed to sleet and snow. In another 30 minutes School Superintendent Al Wurst was calling the garage and telling Ben to shake a leg with that radiator job. The weather reports were bad and school was going to be dismissed and Rollie's was the only bus serving the school.

It was noon when Rollie loaded up his passengers and started up that long hill. I was one of those on that bus.

When we got to the top of the hill, *wow*, we couldn't see a thing – just blinding snow and wind. Rollie Ryan and Jim Shea, two of the older boys opened their windows on opposite sides to watch and make sure the bus didn't go into a ditch. We girls were not dressed for a storm. We had on bobby sox but no boots, no gloves, no scarves ... and it was getting colder on the bus. It felt as though the heater had quit working. Rollie managed to make four stops at farms before he

came to our farm road. It was 4 p.m. and he had only gone 4 miles since leaving Jordan. The bus wheels would spin through the ice, hit gravel and inch forward. Then they would spin, and we'd do it all over again. Sometimes the big boys would get out with their shovels, but their efforts were in vain.

Some children were starting to get frightened. The little first-graders started to cry. We were very lucky even to get to our place. My Dad saw the bus coming down the road through the screen of snow and plowed a path to the bus door with his tractor.

"You can't go on Rollie. Night is coming and it's getting worse. The radio says the whole state is halted. People have been lost already, phone lines are out, power is still on – but for how long? Come in and warm up. We've got plenty of room, just butchered two hogs Saturday. Let's get these kids out of the blizzard and into the house where they'll be safe."

My Dad and Rollie carried the little Grady twins through the drifts that were already waist-high. Some children were so anxious to get inside where it was warm that they ran through the snow in their stocking feet. They had taken off their shoes to keep their feet warm by sitting on them.

After all 20-plus kids got in the house, we sat around the kitchen cook stove and warmed up – and thanked God we were safe.

After that front door closed behind us, we didn't go outside again until Wednesday, three days later. In the meantime, the electric wires snapped – so no lights. My Dad got out the kerosene lamps and the gas lanterns. In the evenings my Mother played the piano and we sang songs; we played card games. Dad and Mother sat up all night refueling the wood furnace were there if the younger children needed them. We had a big two-story house with five bedrooms upstairs and one downstairs. Most of the little ones slept in beds while the older boys and girls slept in chairs or on the floor. Dad was very worried about a fire or sickness.

Bathroom facilities were something else. We had a two-holer outhouse but nobody could get to it. The snowdrifts were higher than the house. There was a commode upstairs but, with 20-plus people using it, it filled in no time. So it had to be emptied many times. I cannot remember who had that job.

Much credit goes to my Mother. She kept calm through all three days. I think she and my sister, Angie spent that whole time in the kitchen, making meals. They baked bread, cakes and cookies for all of us every day. My Mother is now 88 years old and is in fairly good health; she remembers this even as if it were yesterday.

By Wednesday, the storm had gone and the sun was shining brightly. The air was noisy with the sounds of plows working. My brother, Virgil arrived, bringing bread, butter and a few goodies. As the day went on, some parents came with horses and sleighs to take their children home. Others weren't able to get home until the next day. Rollie got his buss out of the snowdrift and was on his way home, thankful to be alive.

Many months later, after the snow melted and spring was in the air, my Dad found one of the Grady twins' shoes. He held that shoe while thoughts raced through his mind of those chaotic and exciting days back in November 1940.

Eileen Beckius Wagner  
Apple Valley, Minnesota