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Memorandum

To: Trialists

Fr: Curtis Meinert

Re: Life in a barrel

On a prairie the lines of the landscape are clean. No trees clutter the horizon. Nothing blocks the view extending forever. Ripples run through the grasses so they seem to advance in front of the wind. These are the waves that early settlers saw as an ocean, a sea of grass and unbroken soil stretching as far as the eye could see.

<https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/biomes/prairie.html>

I grew up before TV and weather maps and years before we got electricity. Our father was the weather man. Our temperature gauge was white frost on the inside of the kitchen window. When the lower panes were covered you knew there was a pair of sun dogs following the sun across the sky.

White outs on the prairie come out of the blue. They occur when snow falls without wind and then later, out of the blue, the wind comes up producing “white outs”.

Blizzards are different. They come with wind. The blizzard indelibly etched in my memory, even though only 6 at the time, is the Armistice Day snowstorm of November 11th 1940. (Now Veterans Day.) The storm started on Monday and lasted three days. When it was over we had to use horses to get around until roads were cleared.

The weather system leading to the storm was spawned in the Pacific Northwest, resulting in the collapse of Galloping Gertie across the Tacoma Narrows in Puget Sound four days earlier, less than six months after it opened.

By November 10th the storm had moved across the Rockies and regrouped as it headed to the Midwest.

The morning of the 11th dawned unseasonably warm. By midday temperatures were in the 60s.

It was duck season. On the Mississippi hunters were dumbfounded by the number of ducks funneling into the river valley. What they did not realize was that the ducks were seeking shelter from the coming storm.

Before long temperatures dropped, winds reached gale force velocities, and hunters were in peril.

The biggest danger in blizzards are white outs causing people to lose their way and freeze to death. The blizzard accounted for dozens of deaths in Minnesota.

The blizzard lasted three days. When it ended there were drifts 20 feet high, no school for a week, and roads closed for days.

Our chickens roosted in trees in the summer. The drill was to round them up in the fall for housing until spring.

The storm came before the “round up”. Hence, lots of dead chickens in the spring.

The nice thing about a 360 degree view of surroundings is that you can see what is brewing. Greenish clouds; indicative of hail or tornados. At night you are left guessing. Generally it does not hail at night but tornados can come any time.

When I grew up skies were dark at night. (Not now; too much ambient light from farm yard lights.) Excellent for star gazing and seeing the Milky Way stretching across the fall sky from north east to south west.

In the winter there were Northern Lights: better than any fireworks display.

The greatest uplifts were rainbows arching across the sky after summer rains, family picnics in the garage, and people showing up unannounced.

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In 1960 we gave up the prairie for Baltimore. Before the move we had a 360 degree view of surroundings, now the only thing I can see is what is above me; like living in a barrel.

No star gazing. No rainbows stretching across the sky. No way to tell what is coming except by radar.

Woe is me!