

Fearsome ‘Sudden Change’ threatened pioneer life and limb

A cataclysmic meteorological event swept across much of Central Illinois the afternoon of Dec. 20, 1836. The “Sudden Change,” as it became known, was a cold front of unprecedented violence, and it so scarred the early settlers who lived to tell the tale that it became one of the defining moments of the pioneer era.

Sometime around 2 o’clock on that mild, late-December afternoon more than 180 years ago, McLean County settlers pricked up their ears and took heed of a “raging, roaring, bellowing sound... shaking and pervading the firmament.” This elemental clamor, akin to “distant, heavy cannonading,” heralded the arrival of wrathful cold front worthy of the Old Testament.

The front, appearing as a pitch-black (“dark even to blackness,” it was said) bank of roiling, raging clouds, traveled in a south-southeasterly direction at anywhere from 20 to 35 miles per hour. Samuel B. Mead of the western Illinois community of Augusta reported a sunrise temperature of 40 degrees Fahrenheit. By 2:00 p.m., the temperature had plummeted to 0 degrees. Mead’s observations are similar to those recorded by the U.S. Army at Fort Des Moines, Ia., and elsewhere. Yet some Central Illinois settlers claimed, somewhat dubiously, the temperature dropped a full 60 degrees in a mere 15 minutes.

In the days preceding the Sudden Change, much of Central Illinois had been blanketed by a snowfall. By the morning of Dec. 19, though warm weather had turned the snow to slush, and then a steady rain began transforming the countryside into a soggy, soupy mess.

Also known as the “Sudden Freeze,” this unprecedented Dec. 20, 1830 cold front swept through the state’s midsection, wreaking havoc from Ottawa on the north to Paris, Ill. and Terre Haute, Ind. on the south. “The wind in its fury and power blew the water into little sharply defined waves, which froze as they stood, leaving ponds, creeks and rivers crusted with a heavy coat of ice,” read one representative account.

“The sudden freeze of ’36 came with a vengeance,” one aged pioneer related in 1885 to a reporter for *The Leader*, a long-gone Bloomington newspaper. “It was like a wild prairie fire, which nipped everything in its way, and woe to him who was far away from human habitation, for its bite was ferocious. I was in the country at the time, and I tell you, young man, you will never see such weather if you live a thousand years.” Occurring nearly a half-century after the fact, this account illustrates the pull this event had on the memories (and fervid imaginations) of older settlers.

The muddy slush congealed into a sticky mass that weighed down man beast and like. More than one settler relayed the story of encountering the Sudden Change on horseback, and after making the perilous journey to shelter, they found themselves frozen to the saddle, and had to be forcibly wrenched off their steeds with great difficulty.

The Sudden Change came six years after the “Winter of Deep Snow,” so-called when a series of storms beginning in mid-December 1830 left snow three to four feet deep until late into the spring of 1831.

“The stories and incidents related to this sudden change are never ending, and are more curious and strange even than those of the deep snow,” noted Etzard Duis in his collection of pioneer biographies and sketches, published in 1874 as *Good Old Times in McLean County*. This mother lode of pioneer lore includes a wealth of Sudden Change anecdotes—some entirely credible; others much less so.

As Randolph’s Grove settler Hiram Buck headed home, goes one typical story, the wind “blew out his overcoat and froze it immediately in the shape it took when extended.” Upon reaching his residence, Buck had difficulty pulling himself inside, as his billowed-out, frozen coat couldn’t make it through the door!

“Like many stories and incidents connected with the winter of the deep snow,” noted a Pantagraph reporter of the Sudden Change in 1881, “there is a certain degree of exaggeration, which the more sophisticated would call a little ‘fishy,’ and somewhat hard to swallow.”

“Cattle froze in their tracks and the terrible change seemed to frighten all the animals and take away their original natures, for they all huddled together, their fear of each other being overcome by their greater fear of the elements around them,” noted one such “fishy” account.

“The snapping of forest trees could be heard for nearly three miles,” related one pioneer in a colorful and increasingly fantastical account from 1885. “The bark of dogs froze in solid chunks and fell to the ground, while the lowing of cattle, the grunting of hogs and the distressing cry of fowls filled the air full of icicles.”

One unverified story involves a farmer named Williams from eastern McLean County, “frozen so badly that he had to have both of his legs amputated.” He was said to have died several weeks later. Benjamin Wheeler of Hudson Township, along with other settlers, also spoke of a different though equally suspect story involving a father and daughter who succumbed to the cold a few miles from their home. No one, though, seemed to know their names, where they lived, or where they were buried.

During the Sudden Change, Henry Welch’s hogs huddled together in their pen, though unbeknownst to their owner, “some half-dozen of them carelessly allowed their tails to droop into the slush and were frozen fast.” The following morning, “he heard discordant sounds coming from the sty, and on going there found it exciting and distressing to see the pigs wriggling to loosen their tails, and squealing most fearfully.”

Welch “loosened them by cutting their tails with his knife,” the story concludes, “and they afterwards looked so pretty that he has ever since kept the tails of his pigs clipped short.”

Some Sudden Change stories, no matter how far-fetched, deserve repeating. According to one local tall tale, two men were some six miles southeast of Lexington—on their way to buy hogs, it

was said—when caught by the deadly cold front. “They saw death before them,” the story goes, “and rather than perish upon the bleak and lonesome prairies they cut for the timber where they soon found two large hollow trees, into which they crawled.”

And sure enough, this story doesn't end well for our travelers. Three years later, a woodsman cutting timber in the area happened upon the two forgotten skeletons in the decayed tree trunks. The shelter they so desperately sought had become their tomb.