

# The winter of '48 — that was a bad one

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Cold, isn't it? If you think so, you should have been around in the 30s and 40s — winters that make this one look like an early spring stroll along a country lane.

Pioneer residents generally say winters over the past 20 years have been far milder than earlier in the century. Old-timers can best remember the winter of 1948-49 as possibly the worst in this century, not only in Idaho but throughout much of the nation.

Temperatures in Idaho Falls frequently dropped to 20 to 30 below zero, including the record of 37 below, which still stands today in Idaho Falls.

For 90 consecutive days, temperatures never climbed above 30 degrees.

Snow fell continually, reaching heights of three feet or more in Idaho Falls much of the time. It towered to 20 feet at mountain levels, often covering telephone poles.

Eight and 10-foot snow depths in the Upper Snake River Valley were common.

## Nowadays

Compare that with the present weather.

The weather forecast calls for areas of valley fog or low clouds Thursday night and Friday. A few snow flurries will occur with partly cloudy skies, according to the Federal Aviation Administration.

Highs will dip 5 below to 10 below zero with highs in the mid teens.

Temperatures at dawn Thursday dropped to 11 below zero, just a hot breath warmer than this year's record of 12 below Wednesday morning. The chilliest high here so far was 10 above Wednesday.

Snow depths across the Snake River Valley ranged from 4 inches on the ground at Boise to 3 inches at Burley and Idaho Falls to 2 inches at Pocatello.

The extended forecast for Idaho for Saturday through Monday calls for continued cold weather. Skies will be mostly fair. Highs will be in the 20s with lows 10 below 0 to 10 above 0.

## 48 and 49

But back to 1948-49 when Idaho Falls

was announced as the headquarters of the INEL, then known as the National Reactor Testing Station. There was no direct road leading to the site as at present. To reach Arco, it was necessary to go by way of Blackfoot.

Also there were no snowmobiles to help the snowbound traveler, just low-powered cars on narrow roads, no radial or studded tires or four-wheel or two-wheel drives.

Railroads were the popular mode of travel but the railroads to Island Park and Driggs were blocked for days at a time. Teton Basin was isolated much of the winter, with mail and telephone communications often disrupted.

Along arterial streets and highways, snowbanks on each side were piled higher than the tops of cars. When the wind blew — and it did frequently — they were immediately clogged to traffic.

At that time, 17th Street was a narrow two-way arterial on a low roadbed and was usually an early casualty when the frequent swirling wind-driven snows hit.

Highways, roads and snow clearing equipment were comparatively antiquated. Snow clearing crews often worked around the clock, without thought of overtime but to give service to the winter-weary residents.

Iona, Ammon, Osgood and other outlying areas were snowbound for days at a time. In the more isolated areas, people were marooned for as long as two weeks. Families and people were drawn together.

In a number of cases, county crews cleared rural roads only when there were emergency medical cases.

Bonneville County road crews only plowed out the main school bus and mail routes but these were often drifted tight.

Some of the more outlying roads were drifted shut for most of the winter. Many schools were closed as much as 20 days during the frigid winter, particularly in Fremont, Teton and Lemhi counties. At other times, a high percentage of students never made it to classes.

Highway 191 north of Idaho Falls — there was no Highway 20 — and Highway 26 to Swan Valley were frequently closed

for many hours, sometimes a day or two at a time. Beech's Corner northeast of the city was blocked by the swirling snow, choking off traffic to the north and east.

## A real struggle

Crews struggled to clear the roads but they were hampered by heaping mounds of snow on each side of the road, which gave them no place to move out the new snow. There were few rotary plows except those operated on mountain highways by the state.

With most schools closed frequently, sporting events such as basketball games and meetings were canceled or not even scheduled. The Post-Register was filled daily with notices of canceled meetings.

Even outlying streets in the city were drifted shut for days at a time.

Cities and counties declared emergencies in order to appropriate funds for snow-clearing operations. Private contractors with heavy bulldozers were hired to move the huge white mass.

Such areas as Rexburg, St. Anthony and Ashton were frequently shut off from the outside world by the drifted roads. The road to Roberts, now Interstate 15, couldn't even be identified at times. It was covered, much like the outlying three-foot snow high fields on each side.

Many people were confined to their homes for days. People in outlying areas frequently bought food and other household necessities to last for weeks.

It was far worse at outlying points, such as Teton basin, Island Park and Swan Valley, where people were resigned to staying at home most of the winter. Television was comparatively primitive and restricted, and radio was the popular form of entertainment over the air waves.

Skiing was not widespread, so many persons used snowshoes to travel over the towering drifts. It was before the time of ski resorts. In fact, skiing was used mostly for "ski-joring" — horses pulling the skiers.

Scores of livestock died because of the cold and inability of their owners to bring them feed.

In some areas, planes were used to drop hay to starving and freezing livestock.

Yes, it was even difficult to hold funerals, traveling the snow-clogged roads and digging graves in the frozen earth.

Much of the nation experienced the same situation, although not as difficult.

It was a comparatively mild fall, then the bitter winter storms and paralyzing cold struck in mid-December, raging for three months. They abruptly ceased in mid-March.

It turned out to be one of the most pleasant springs in years. Yes, there was plenty of snow in the mountains for the summer irrigation.

However, it took three weeks of sunny weather in late March and early April before the huge snow piles completely melted.



Scenes like this one south of Idaho Falls were a common sight during the winter of 1948-9.