

Past winters worse

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So you think the weather has been bad?

Well, you should have been here in the winter of 1948-49, commonly known as the winter of the big snow.

Oldtimers can tell you winters generally have been far milder the last 20 years than was the case during first half of the century.

Yes, it has been cold, with temperatures reaching minus 30 snow depths topping a foot during the past holidays but it was temporary.

The winter of 1948-49 was possibly the worst of this century, not only in Idaho but throughout much of the nation.

Temperatures in Idaho Falls frequently dipped into the minus 20s and 30s. A record of minus 37 established in January is still the coldest temperature on record.

Highs never climbed above 30 degrees for 90 consecutive days, from mid-December to mid-March.

It snowed continuously, reaching depths of three feet and more in Idaho Falls.

Snow was deep as 20 feet at mountain levels, often covering telephone poles. Eight- to 10-foot depths at many points in the Upper Snake River Valley were common.

Railroads were the popular mode of travel those days and

tracks to Island Park and Driggs were blocked for days at a time. Teton Basin was isolated much of the winter. Then, there were no ski resorts.

Along the main streets and highways, snowbanks on each side were piled higher than tops of the cars.

When the winds blew, which they frequently did, roads became clogged. At that time, 17th Street was a two-way arterial on a low roadbed. It was an early casualty when swirling, wind-driven snows hit.

Residents of Iona, Ammon, Osgood and other outlying areas were snowbound for days at a time. In more isolated areas, people were marooned for as long as two weeks. In a number of cases, crews cleared rural roads only when needed for emergency medical and health care.

County road crews only plowed out main school and bus routes. Many schools were closed as much as 20 days during the winter, particularly in the Rexburg, St. Anthony and Ashton areas. At other times, a high percentages of students never made it to class.

Times were different then.

It had just been announced the Idaho National Engineering Laboratory, then known as the National Reactor Testing Station, would be located near Idaho Falls. There were no facilities built then,

and no direct highway between Idaho Falls and Arco.

There were no such contraptions as skimobiles, off-road-vehicles or other such units that make winter travel easier.

Sporting and community events such as basketball games and social meetings were canceled or not even scheduled. The Post-Register was full of canceled meeting notices.

Cities and counties declared emergencies to allocate special snow clearing funds. Private contractors were hired to move the huge white mass of snow from highways, roads and streets. Cities and counties didn't have the snow clearing equipment of today.

People in the outlying areas frequently bought food and other necessary household provisions to last for weeks.

Many people used snowshoes and skis to travel over the towering drifts to and from work. Skiing in those days was not as popular a sport.

Scores of livestock died because of the cold and inability of their owners to bring them feed. In many areas, planes were used to drop hay to starving and freezing livestock.

Game animals often came to the fringes of the cities and towns looking for food.

It was difficult to hold funerals in the bitter cold and to dig graves in the frozen earth.