

# Hildegard Center for the Arts “Heroes Among Us” “Heroes of the Children’s Blizzard of 1888”

## A Class Quilt Project (With Additional Activities)

*For Grades 4-8 who are studying Nebraska History, Literature and/or Art  
This lesson can be adapted to other age groups as well*

**Purpose:** To promote an understanding of the conditions and heroism displayed during the Blizzard of 1888 in the Plains States through the creation of a class quilt

### **Objectives:**

- Students will write questions and observations about the stories, heroism and experiences arising from the Blizzard of 1888.
- Students will listen for the purposes of curiosity, pleasure, getting directions, performing tasks, solving problems and following rules.
- Students will understand that history tells the story of people and events of other times and places.
- Student will use two-dimensional and three-dimensional media, techniques, tools, and processes to depict works of art from personal experiences, observation or imagination.

### **National Standards that may be met:**

- Students describe how different materials, techniques and processes cause different responses.
- Students use different media, techniques and processes to communicate ideas, experiences and stories.
- Students use art materials and tools in a safe and responsible manner.
- Students describe how different expressive features and organizational principles cause different responses.
- Students explore and understand prospective content for works of art.
- Students select and use subject matter, symbols and ideas to communicate meaning.
- Students demonstrate how history, culture and the visual arts can influence each other in making and studying works of art.
- Students understand there are various purposes for creating works of visual art.
- Students describe how people’s experiences influence the development of specific artworks.
- Students understand there are different responses to specific artworks.
- Students read to build an understanding of the many dimensions of human experience.
- Students adjust their use of spoken, written and visual language to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.

- Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
- Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions, media techniques, figurative language and genre to create, critique and discuss print and non-print texts.
- Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.
- Students use spoken, written and visual language to accomplish their own purposes.

### **Materials:**

- Resource materials (History) about the Blizzard of 1888
- Eight inch squares of white paper (one for each student)
- Nine inch squares of construction paper in several colors (one for each student)
- Tape
- Crayons or markers
- Pencil and paper
- Glue
- Model quilt square
- Ribbon, glitter and other embellishments the students may wish to use

**Note:** It would be helpful if the teacher shows an actual quilt that tells a story to the class. Individual quilt squares could also be shown to explain how many parts come together to make a whole.

### **Procedures:**

- 1) After teaching a unit about the Blizzard of 1888 to the students, the teacher will hold up a sample quilt in front of the class and share with the students that quilts can tell stories through their patterns, fabrics and designs.
- 2) Explain to the students that they will participate in making a class quilt with the Blizzard of 1888 as its theme. Ask each students to think about one of the stories told or situations that arose during the Blizzard of 1888 that was particularly striking to them.
- 3) Hand out the supplies for making the quilt squares (one eight-inch square, one nine-inch square, crayons or markers and glue for each student. Ask the students to follow these instructions:
  - a) Draw and decorate a scene depicting the setting, characters and events that arose from the Blizzard of 1888, using the art materials at their disposal
  - b) Ask students to carefully center their eight-inch squares on the nine-inch squares of colored paper and attach with glue.

- c) Ask the student to write their names on the back of the squares.
- 4) After the class has completed their squares, hang the squares on a wall or bulletin board in a quilt fashion. Do this by taping the squares together.
- 5) Ask the students to face in the direction of the quilt and listen carefully. Call one student at a time to the front of the class and give that student a short interview. The teacher may ask the following questions:
  - a) Who is shown on your square?
  - b) What are they doing?
  - c) Why did they act in the way they did?
  - d) What happened to them?
  - e) How did their situation make you feel?
  - f) Are there any heroes portrayed in your picture?
  - g) Would you have acted differently if you were in their place?

## **Assessments**

Assessment of art activity:

- The students created a quilt square using art materials to depict the setting, characters, and events of the Blizzard of 1888.
- The students verbally communicated with the teacher and class the “who, what, where, when, why, and how” of a particular event through the interview session in front of the class.
- The students listened to each other’s interview session.

Note: Students may benefit from making a trip to the **International Quilt Study Center Museum** (33<sup>rd</sup> and Holdrege, Lincoln) to learn more about the Art of Quilts and the stories they can tell.

## **Additional Activities**

### **1) Spontaneous Poetry**

Four poets (students) sit together. Using the Stories they have learned about that arose from the Blizzard of 1888, each takes a turn spontaneously creating and reciting an improvised poem. One student “throws out” a first line of the poem to start the process. The “poet” speaks the first line and the second poet leaps into improvisation at the end of the sentence to add an additional line. The students continue their spontaneous poem until all four poets have participated and the poem has drawn to an end. The poem does not need to rhyme. The poem must have a vivid image somewhere in it and a sense of finality, or closure, when it is done.

## 2) Story Circle

One student begins a story about the Blizzard of 1888 and stops after a few sentences. The next student picks up the story thread and continues it, then stops. The next student adds to it and so on until all students have made a contribution and the tale comes to a resolution. The story could begin with a pre-selected title to guide the improvisation. Try recording the story circle on a tape recorder for later listening.

## 3) Writing Narrative Poetry

Narrative poems tell a story. Students will write a poem that tells a tale based on the Blizzard of 1888. In a short story there is a conflict that needs to be resolved by the story characters. What makes the narrative poem different from a short story is that the poem is written in stanzas instead of paragraphs. Students need to choose their words wisely, as there are fewer words in a narrative poem.

*Step 1:* Tell students to think of a story that relates to the Blizzard of 1888 that they want to tell in poetry form.

*Step 2:* Ask students to break the story down into five sections. The five sections should include the beginning, middle and end.

*Step 3:* Each of these five sections should now become stanzas in their poems. The stanzas should all have the same amount of lines, but should tell the story. Students should try to employ a rhyme scheme and use other [poetic devices](#).

### **Poetic Devices:**

**Tone:** *feelings or meanings conveyed in the poem (not so much what is being said but how it is said)*

**Stanza:** *a grouping of two or more lines of a poem in terms of length, metrical form or rhyme and scheme (provides order and an expectation of closure)*

**Simile:** *a comparison between two unlike things using the words “like” or “as” (My love is like a red rose.)*

**Metaphor:** *a comparison between two unlike things without using “like” or “as” (Life is a journey—enjoy the ride.)*

**Personification:** *giving human qualities or characteristics to animals or inanimate objects (My shoes are killing me.)*

**Alliteration:** *Repetition of initial consonant sounds in a group of words close together (Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.)*

**Assonance:** *repetition of a vowel sound (The eagle lived free and easy)*

**Hyperbole:** *overstatement or exaggeration (I will just die if I do not go to the party)*

**Symbol:** *An object or idea that stands for something else (Common symbols for love are roses and hearts)*

**Onomatopoeia:** *the use of words which imitate sound (Buzz, tweet, ping)*

**Imagery:** *words that appeal to the senses (creates vivid mental pictures)*

**Speaker:** *the voice in the poem (not always the poet) (provides focus)*

**Oxymoron:** *a seeming contradiction in two words put together (jumbo shrimp)*

Step 4: Once students have written a rough draft, they should continue to work on the word choice for their poetry. Telling the story concisely in the poem is essential. The students will read their finished poetry aloud to the class and all the poems will be compiled into a loose-leaf notebook to be kept in the classroom.

As a culmination of the activity, the Teacher may read excerpts from Ted Kooser's book of poetry entitled "The Blizzard Voices" for class discussion and enjoyment.

### **Resource Articles:**

#### **Article One:**

#### **"Blizzard of 1888"**

**By James C. Olson**

**January, 1947 Issue of Nebraska History**

**Posted with Permission from the Nebraska State Historical Society**

January 12, 1888--Nebraska was hit with what old-timers will tell you was the worst storm in the memory of man in this state. The territorial pioneers looked back on the winter of 1856-57, which began with a life-taking storm on December 1, as the most terrible they had spent in Nebraska. Likewise, the Easter storm of 1873 was talked about for years. The Blizzard of 1888, however, which covered the entire Plains area, seems to have been worse than either of these.

At least, the Blizzard of 1888 is the most celebrated snowstorm ever endured in Nebraska. Hundreds of reminiscences have been written about it. An organization known as the Blizzard Club, composed of men and women who went through the storm meets each year on January 12 to commemorate the event. The club soon will release a book about the storm, based on much careful research.

Although conditions differed somewhat in various parts of the state, most accounts agree that the early hours of that eventful January 12th were unseasonably warm. Cattle were out in the fields. School children in some areas played outside during the noon recess. In some cases, men were reported to have worked out-of-doors in their shirt-sleeves.

Then, the wind suddenly changed to the north, driving before it a great mass of thick, blinding snow. Men and animals alike were trapped in a freezing, white wasteland. The thermometer plummeted to 34 degrees below zero.

The storm lasted from 12 to 18 hours over most of the area, and was followed by minor local storms. The state was two weeks digging itself out. When the newspapers finally were able to

assemble the details from isolated farms and ranches, it was evident that the loss of life and property sustained in the great blizzard was the greatest ever known in the West. Estimates as to the number who died in Nebraska ran as high as 100. In Dakota Territory, 109 lives were lost.

A particularly harrowing aspect of the storm was the fact that it caught so many school children away from home in tiny one-room school houses, with no food and little fuel. The heroism displayed by a number of school teachers, and their older pupils, in caring for the young children will always share a place in the annals of Nebraska.

Of all these, the one who probably gained the most fame was Minnie Freeman of Mira Valley, Valley County. When the storm broke there were 13 children in her school. She tied them together, single file, with herself at the head of the line, and ably assisted by the older pupils managed to get them to the nearest farmhouse. A popular song of the day, "Thirteen Were Saved" or "Nebraska's Fearless Maid," was written in commemoration of her achievement.

Lois Royce, teaching near Plainview, attempted to get to a farm home with three small children. The children perished and she lost her limbs below the knees. Emma Shattuck, a teacher in Holt County, found refuge in a hay stack, where she remained from Thursday night until Sunday. She was so badly frozen that both limbs had to be amputated, and she later passed away. A relief fund was subscribed for these and other sufferers--both teachers and pupils.

By James C. Olson  
Superintendent, State Historical Society  
January, 1947

Source: [www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/...blizzard1888.htm](http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/...blizzard1888.htm)

## **Article Two:**

**Weather Events:  
The Children's Blizzard of 1888  
Used with Permission from Dr. Keith Heidorn, The Weather Doctor  
[www.island.net](http://www.island.net)**

## **The Human Impact of the Blizzard**

In the days before high-speed weather warnings, the suddenness of the blizzard caught many unaware and unprepared. In part this could be blamed on the return of relatively warmer weather following the cold that covered the region the week before. The second factor which heightened the impact of the blizzard was the timing of the event across much of the region. It came during the daylight hours while children sat in school and adults worked outdoors or

travelled to and from town. Had the front passed through in the evening or overnight, most residents would have been relatively safe in their homes.

David Laskin, in his well-researched book [\*The Children's Blizzard\*](#), places some of the blame on the inadequacies of the fledgling weather forecasting service. “There was no CNN or Weather Channel or even local radio to fill the airways with warnings, and many of those affected by the storm would have had no way to receive those warnings posted [on local bulletin boards] — they live too far from town. And if there is blame to spread, the telegraph communications network had equally dirty hands, the system of spreading news and warnings were still too primitive to have helped most rural residents.”

The cold blast, teamed with high winds and blowing snow that extinguished visibility past a few yards, took, by most accounts, around 230 lives (other accounts push the total to 500 or more), almost all the result of exposure to the elements. Perhaps 100 of those were children. Thousands were caught outdoors or, as the case with the schoolchildren, some distance from home on foot or horseback. All were accustomed to dealing with bad weather conditions, but few had experienced conditions such as these.

With hindsight, we can see many instances where poor judgment led to death or injury from the blizzard conditions. There were also many instances of heroism, and several came from the quick actions of youth caught in extreme conditions. When the blizzard struck the many small communities around the region, schools were still in session. Some teachers panicked at the raging storm and dismissed their classes, often relying on the children to find their way home in the blizzard. In other cases, such as in the school of Seymour H. Dopp in Pawnee City, Nebraska, they stayed in the small schoolhouses until the storm abated. Rather than send the seventeen children home, Dopp kept them overnight in the country schoolhouse. Stockpiled fuel kept the building warm during the frigid night. The following morning, worried parents negotiated the snow-drifted roads toward the schoolhouse seeking their children. Relieved, they found all safe, but hungry at the school.

That afternoon, Dopp returned to his home in Table Rock to find the teacher at the school in that community had made a different decision. His 11-year-old daughter Avis and her classmates had been released from school. She, and undoubtedly others, suffered frostbite from the cold exposure on her one-block trek home.

The newspaper in Wahoo, Nebraska ran an article datelined February 10, 1888 about the heroism of a Colon school teacher. Only 17 at the time, Miss Alma Carlson kept her students in the schoolhouse into the evening rather than risk their lives in the raging storm. Miss Carlson herself, however, attempted to reach her nearby boarding house for food and light to bring back to the kids. But once out in the swirling snow and biting winds, she became disoriented and lost. Stumbling on a haystack, she began to tear down the stack to make a shelter from the cold.

When she did not return to her boarding house that night, the owner ventured out to determine what may have happened to her and her students. The article reports that "For an hour he wandered about unable to find the school house. When he arrived there he found the children alright, but their teacher was missing." Carlson was able to see the light, and after nine hours buried in the hay, she stumbled out and returned to the school. "[A]s she fell into the door, [she] said, 'my hands and feet are frozen,' and then fainted."

"In spite of all this, Miss Carlson has continued her school every day....She will lose the nails of her right hand and perhaps the ends of some of her fingers. Her right foot is still very sore, swollen and painful."

The students in Plainfield, Nebraska were not as lucky as those in Colon or Pawnee City. By mid-afternoon, the schoolhouse there had run out of heating fuel, and teacher Miss Lois (or Loie or Louise, depending on the newspaper) Royce made a fateful decision. Three pupils huddled with her in the cold schoolhouse (six others had gone home for lunch and not returned due to the storm). Royce decided to take the three with her to her boarding house. The decision was not totally unreasonable, for it was located but 82 yards away. Once outdoors, however, the raging blizzard closed in on the small party and they became completely disoriented. Wandering in the frigid wind, she and the students began to feel the effects of the cold. One boy died, and Miss Royce decided to sink to the ground and cuddle the remaining two children to her body for warmth. By daylight, the two students, a boy and a girl, were dead and the teacher frozen of body and numb of mind. She would lose both feet by amputation.

The students of Miss Minnie Freeman of the Midvale school in the Mira Valley, Nebraska fared much better. Like Alma Carlson, she was still in her teens, the same age as several of her students. They had enough coal on hand to weather the night, but the winds tore the leather door hinges and blew it in, not once but twice. Then an extreme gust ripped off a corner of the tar-paper and sod roof, leaving a hole. Expecting the entire roof to go at any time, Freeman determined it was impossible to remain with her seventeen pupils in the schoolhouse and decided to lead them to her boarding place, about a half mile from the school.

They left the schoolhouse through a south window. Miss Freeman lined her students together in single file and tied them together with rope (though one student later denied this had happened), placing herself at the head of the line. Despite the driving winds blowing sheets of ice and snow over them, the small party eventually reached the farmhouse safely.

Afterward, the *Omaha Bee* proclaimed in a bold headline:

### ***A Heroine of the Storm***

Minnie Freeman thus became a national hero with her image rendered in wax throughout the nation. Reportedly, she received 80 proposals of marriage through the mail. Lyon & Healy, a



Chicago music publisher, released a song about her deeds: "*Song of the Great Blizzard 1888, Thirteen Were Saved or Nebraska's Fearless Maid.*" Many years later, one of those students Mrs. Ellis of St Paul, Nebraska, then 78 years old, penned a poem in tribute to Freeman's heroism:

### **An Acrostic**

'Midst driving winds and blinding snows,  
Impending dangers round her close;  
No shelter from the blast and sleet,  
No earthly help to guide her feet.  
In God alone she puts her trust,  
Ever to guide the brave and just.

Fierce and loud the awful storm,  
Racking now her slender form,  
Eager to save the little band  
Entrusted to her guiding hand.  
Marshaled her host, see, forth she goes  
And falters not while tempest blows;  
Now God alone can help, she knows.

See them falling as they go;  
Angry winds around them blow.  
Is there none to hear their cry?  
Now her strength will almost fail;  
Tranquil, she braves the fearful gale.

Preëminent her name shall stand,  
A beacon light o'er all the land,  
Unrivalled on the page of time;  
Let song and story swell the chime.

Other stories of rescue and tragedy arose from the storm. In Great Plains, Dakota, two men tied a rope to the house closest to the school and headed into the storm. Once there, they tied off the rope and used it as a guide back. All children were thus led to safety. In Runningwater, Dakota, Mrs. Wilson left her schoolhouse with nine children, but they never made safety. All were later found frozen on the prairie.



***The Friesen Family in 1883. Front: Anna (mother), Isaac, Peter, and Jacob (father).  
Back: Jacob, Anna, Katharina, John.  
Peter, Katharina and Isaac were the three children rescued.  
Photo courtesy US Library of Congress.***

The afternoon of the storm, three of the Friesen children of Henderson, Nebraska walked to visit their older brother about a mile and a half away. When the blizzard struck, the trio headed home, but, blinded by the driven snow, they quickly became disoriented and lost their way. They, like many others on the Plains that day, burrowed themselves into a haystack to get out of the frigid winds. When the children did not return home as scheduled, their parents Anna and Jacob became worried. First, Anna placed a lamp in the window, hoping they could see it and use it as a beacon home. Then Jacob ventured out to find his children. He used a barbed-wire fence as a guide as he pushed through the storm. The children heard him call their names, and they emerged from the hay. The foursome followed the barbed wire home, and all arrived safe and unharmed.

Not all those affected were children. Dr. G.C. Paxton, of Chambers, Nebraska, wrote his wife, several days later of his 13-hour ordeal in the wild weather:

"...every one said, 'We are going to have a January thaw,' but alas how untrue. In less than one minute, without warning, with no indication that death and destruction would follow that awful storm, with no premonition that an impending and horrible doom await them, the people were out attending to their stock, or at their respective avocations, when it came. The wind blew a terrible gale, the air was full of powdered snow and so cold that hundreds of cattle and livestock of all kinds froze to death."

"We could not see five feet from us in any direction. We got probably within twenty feet of the house, got lost, shouted as loud as we could, but could hear nothing but that fearful wind. We were not clothed to be out half an hour. After trying to find the house we started with the wind which was blowing from the northwest. We were frightful looking human beings with ice hanging from our whiskers and clothes, our faces a sheet of ice, but we staggered on. We went through corn stalks, over cultivated farms, came to trees, went within a few yards of houses, shouted and screamed, but no echoing voice returned. By this time night was approaching, but still we traveled on, determined not to yield until we were forced to do so. We finally came to some cabbage and castor bean stalks and we knew we were close to a house. We shouted long and loud, and a dog heard us and barked, and we followed the dog who led us to a hog shed which we welcomed with open arms. More dead than alive, we crowded in among the hogs. There was not a dry thread on us when the ice melted. My toes were frozen as I didn't have very warm shoes and only cotton socks. I pulled my shoes off and my feet froze solid and I would have lost them only for Lee Baker, who told me to put them under his coat. I feel very grateful to him as he saved my life. He had no overshoes so he put his feet under a hog and kept them from freezing. We stayed with the hogs ten hours when the storm abated and Mr. Gorman ventured out and found the house. I could hardly walk when I started to go in. We were out altogether thirteen hours."

The blizzard caught William Saxton, who lived in Albion, Nebraska, out filling his sled with hay. Saxton hollowed out a cave in the haystack with his pitchfork and crawled into it with his dog. When the worst weather had ceased, the dog returned home and lead a rescue party back to Saxton. His fingers were severely frozen and, the local doctor later amputated parts of his fingers.

Mary Matilda Sisson of Douglas County, Dakota recalled that when the snow finally melted, they found dead horses and cattle across the prairie near their homestead. The bodies of several men and schoolchildren were also revealed with the thaw.

The tale of the blizzard can best be summed up by the words of Sadie Shaw in a letter to her relatives back east. From her Douglas County homestead, she lamented: "I have seen the Dread of Dakota. A genuine blizzard and am now ready to leave anytime, that we can sell. *Oh, it was terrible.* I have often read about Blizzards but they have to be *seen* to be fully *realized.*"

## **Afterward**

In the wake of the Children's Blizzard, a great cold wave descended upon the region and eastward and southward across America.

The storm moved at a breakneck pace during the day, from Montana in the early hours of the 12th, it crossed the Dakota Territory from midmorning to early afternoon, reaching eastern Nebraska at mid afternoon. By 10 pm, it had reached western Wisconsin heading northeast

into upper Michigan. The rapid rise in temperature overnight was soon followed by an even more rapid plummeting of the mercury in the storm's wake.

In Huron, Dakota, the winds around noon on the 12th, began to rise to storm fury. Sergeant Samuel W. Glenn, the Signal Corps observer at Huron, a conscientious weather observer, recorded the wind speeds every few minutes as the cold front swept across the region. From 42 mph at a quarter to twelve, the wind rose with each passing minute, 57 mph at 12:15 pm, then a building-shaking jump to 60 mph at 1:30 pm with a gust to 80 mph. At Moorhead, Minnesota, just before one in the afternoon, Private Frank L. Harrod wrote: "sudden and fierce change of wind from south to north." Then "heavy blinding snow."

As the front raced eastward at around 60-70 mph, those who saw it reported the sky blackened suddenly as if night had descended, and after the wind had shifted to the north, it was impossible to see buildings across the street or the homestead yard due to the blowing snow. When the front passed Crete, southwest of Lincoln, Nebraska, the observer, Signal Corp Private C.D. Burnley noted with the wind shift, "the temperature fell 18 F degrees in less than three minutes. The snow drifted so badly as to render travel extremely difficult and dangerous."

In Leavenworth, Kansas, the temperature dropped 29 F degrees in seven hours, but faster and greater drops were recorded elsewhere: Helena saw a descent of 50 F degrees in about four and a half hours; North Platte dropped 32 F degrees in thirteen hours; and Keokuk, Iowa, an amazing 55 F degrees in just eight hours.

The litany of "fierce winds," "blinding snow," "heavy drifting," and "bone-chilling drops in temperature" repeated across the Plains states and into the northern Mississippi Valley as the storm system rushed toward Sault Ste. Marie and the Canadian border. By dawn of the 13th, the blizzard had subsided across Dakota, Nebraska and western Minnesota, but the cold stayed. Not only did it stay, but it sprawled out across the American midsection as a large arctic air mass dropped out of northern Canada across the American west and then continued southeastward to touch most of the American territory. To make matters worse, the low temperatures were accompanied by winds reported at 30 mph (50 km/h). This combination resulted in a wind chill temperature (using today's equation) of around minus 67 °F (minus 55 C), a temperature where frostbite can occur in 5 minutes.

The banner headline in the on 13 January edition of the *Denver Evening Times* read:

**"An Awful Blizzard — The Worst Storm of the Season in the North — Grown Men Lost in the Storm — Little Children Herded with Ropes — Terrible Degree of Cold."**

Source: [www.islandnet.com/~see/weather/events/childrensblizzard.htm](http://www.islandnet.com/~see/weather/events/childrensblizzard.htm)

## **Other Recommendations for Researching the Blizzard of 1888:**

Ted Kooser's Book of Poetry: "The Blizzard Voices"

"The Children's Blizzard" found YouTube

"The Children's Blizzard" by David Laskin found on Free Google Books

"History of Hall County, Nebraska: A Narrative of the Past" by August F. Buechler (beginning on page 202) found on Free Google E Books

Recommended Viewing: "The Blizzard of 1888" a Venetian Glass mural by Jeanne Reynal, found at the Nebraska State Capitol Building in Lincoln, NE