

Waiting

on **Winter**

Preparations begin long
before the *snow flies*

STORY BY ALAN J. BARTELS



Farmers' thoughts turn to winter once harvest is in the bins. Will there be enough moisture? Or too much? Too late? We prepare the best we can, but all we can really do is wait to see what winter brings.

Johnson



Winter roller coaster

A light dusting of snow on a hilly gravel road west of Winona, Minn., offers little resistance to Nebraska drivers adept at winter driving. Frosty roads and grass catch light at Stagecoach Recreation Area in Lancaster County.

Roxy Lang



Ainsworth-Livingston

Nebraskans often use words like “dreary,” “lifeless” and “long” to describe winter. Some even threaten to move to warmer climes or sequester themselves indoors until summer.

Winter was a villainous character in the lives of prairie pioneers. The nearly treeless plains challenged their ability to maintain the most basic need – staying warm. The solution was found in “prairie coal.” Settlers stacked mountainous piles of bison and cattle scat in preparation of winter. The continual task solidified their disdain for the season.

Stories of blinding blizzards killing livestock and livelihoods, family, friends and neighbors are still passed to new generations. No wonder so many people claim to hate winter.

Today we look at winter in a less harsh light thanks to modern conveniences and improved clothing, but preparing for winter remains part of life in Nebraska.

Darrel and Ruth Ann Steele are modern-day pioneers. Their winter preparations begin right after the last frost. Large gardens on their former dairy farm near Ainsworth produce onions, green beans, eggplant, rutabaga, beets, turnips, peppers, Swiss chard and other staples. Darrel lugs buckets of tomatoes to the kitchen, and Ruth Ann promptly turns them into gallons of juice. Butternut squash is harvested after the first freeze. There is an orchard of apples, pears and rare Niobrara River Valley wild peaches.

Traditional family corn-canning sessions ended last year after masked bandits sneaked through Darrel’s three-wire electric fence and decimated the crop. “Those dang raccoons. I’m done growing sweet corn,” Darrel said. “And this year the deer got their heads into the wire cages and got to my beans.”

A bumper crop from years past rests in rows of glass jars on wooden shelves in the Steeles’ large cellar. The “cave” was already being used by Darrel’s family when he was born 87 years ago. He has lived in this house his entire life with the exception of two years during the Korean War.

The cellar his father dug stays at a constant 40 degrees during winter, and there is enough surplus squirreled away if the season arrives early or lingers into May. “We’ve probably got enough food in there to last for several years. As long as the jar is sealed,

the food never goes bad. Some of it even gets better,” Darrel said.

“I’ve got 10-year-old sweet pickles in there that I could wash off, sprinkle with sugar, and they would be wonderful,” Ruth Ann added.

Darrel remembers the winter of 1949 as the worst ever. Keeping the snow off the cellar door was exhausting. Well-placed shotgun blasts meant prairie chickens, pheasants and rabbits supplemented the family’s winter diet of the meat and produce his mother canned.

“There was no running water or electricity. Mother cooked on the wood stove,” Darrel said. “The meat had to boil for five hours.”

Winters haven’t been bad for the couple, who married in 1956. They got even better after planting a shelterbelt of cedar, ponderosa pine, Scotch pine and hackberry trees. Sixty years later the Steeles are realizing the full benefits of that living snow fence.

Ruth Ann settles into her recliner and pulls a comforter over her lap as winter winds swirl. Darrel slips a flannel shirt on under his bib overalls and over his tall and lean frame. Bring it on, winter.

WINTER BEGINS IN August for a Hall County man with a round belly and white beard who travels thousands of miles from chimney to chimney. No, the community of Cairo west of Grand Island isn’t the North Pole’s southern outpost, and Lee Echtenkamp isn’t Kris Kringle. His phone begins ringing in late summer with calls from Nebraskans who have winter on their minds. The giant of a man is a chimney sweep.

Echtenkamp racks up 40,000 miles in the four months leading up to Christmas and changes the oil in his work truck every 10 days. His workplace ranges from the South Dakota and Kansas borders to Seward in the east and west to North Platte. He’s swept up a few stories during a 30-year career spent cleaning approximately 8,000 chimneys.

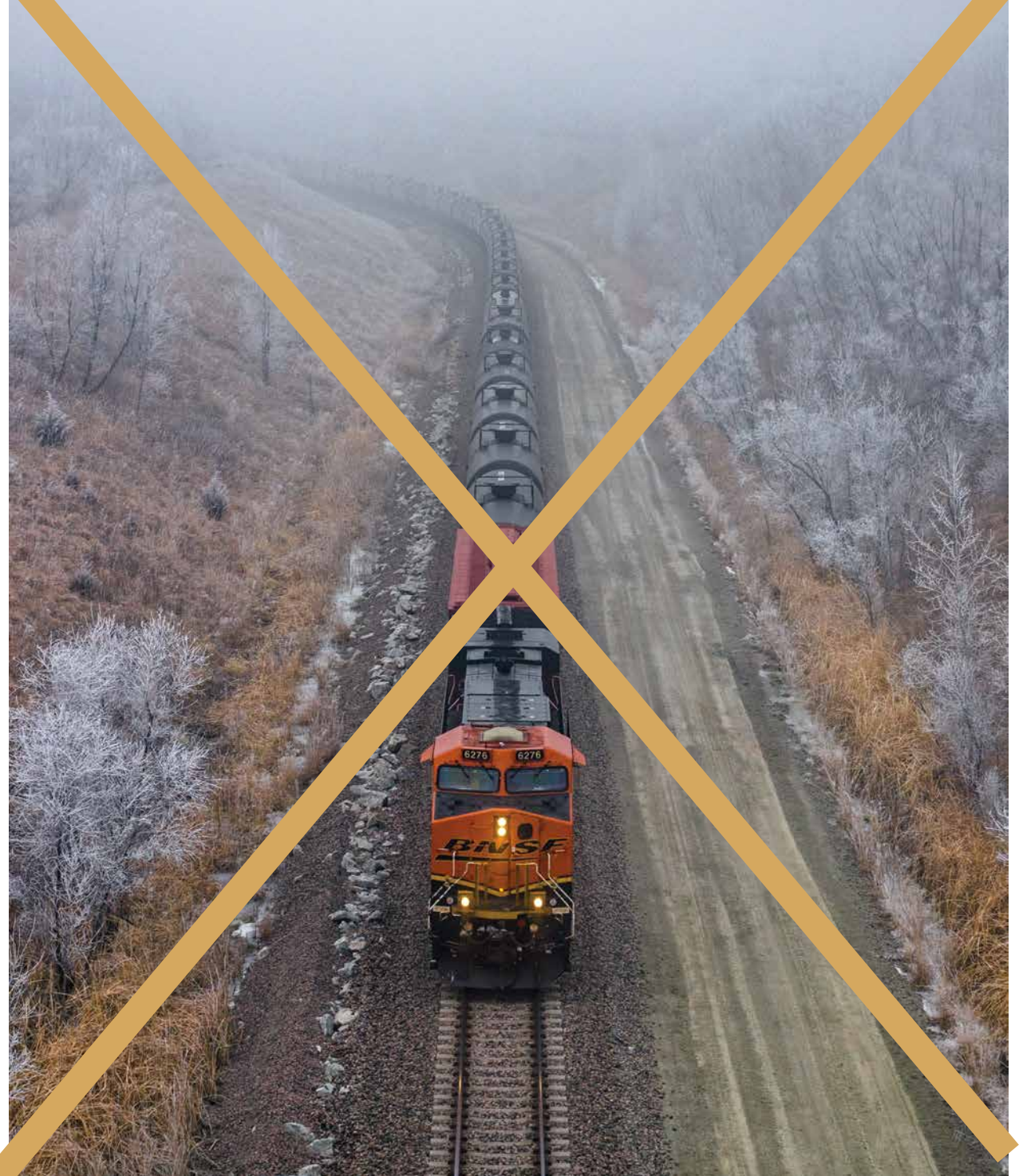
There was the time he was halfway up his 40-foot



Clean sweep

Lee Echtenkamp has spent 30 years knocking the soot from thousands of Nebraska chimneys while preparing for winter. The chimney sweep from Cairo suggests cleaning chimneys once a year. As for this portly, white-bearded fellow slipping down a chimney like St. Nick, "That ain't gonna happen," Echtenkamp said. "That is what the brush is for."

Alan J. Bartels



Erik Johnson

A train emerging from a thick haze of frozen fog is flanked by icy hoarfrost near Firth. As that long train whistle whines, Nebraskans with winters already under their belt wonder about the severity of the approaching season.

ladder when the smooth pavement of a new driveway, wet with rain, caused it to slide. He woke up on his back on top of the ladder. Another time he found something unexpected above the flue.

"I was sweeping this guy's place by Arcadia, and I went inside to clean up," Echtenkamp said. "I stuck my hose up there and hit something. It moved. I slowly put my mirror and light up there. Turns out his daughters were into sports. I had chased down a volleyball."

Echtenkamp once found himself in a small basement full of gunpowder, bullets and a wood burning stove. "In one home I found a wooden crate that said 'U.S. Military Rocket Launcher' leaning on the stove. I suggested he move that," Echtenkamp said.

In 1986 the Wakefield native took a job with a Cairo construction company that installed stoves during slower winter months. Customers began asking if they cleaned them. "I swept chimneys on nights and



Carla Schaffer



Pat Schoenfeld

Evelyn Frisch of Madison prepares for winter while crocheting warm items and sharing time with her grandson, Johnathan. The beauty of a pine-perched dark-eyed junco in Chase County can't chase away winter.

weekends because I needed the money," Echtenkamp said. He bought the company three years later.

"You can't read winter. I used to think that the more calls I got the more severe winter would be. Not true," Echtenkamp said. "When propane and natural gas prices go up, more people burn wood and I get busier. You can't really outguess Mother Nature."

Preparing for winter waits until October at Scotts Bluff National Monument. Rock slides are common until the ground cools. Only then is the heavy equipment retrofitted with snow blades and chains. That doesn't leave much of a buffer considering that the snow could fly any time.

A four-inch snowfall on the valley floor means four-foot snowdrifts and windchills of minus 50 degrees atop the monument. Keeping Summit Road

open is a constant battle for facilities manager Kevin Haberman. "The tunnels are challenging," Haberman said. "Getting rid of the snow isn't easy with a retaining wall on one side of the road and the cliff face on the other. Opening that two-mile road can take four days. People don't like hitting ice patches where they can see over the edge and down into the canyons below."

The eventual passing of winter presents another unique challenge for Haberman's crew. "We have these tumbleweed migrations that sometimes block the road in front of the first tunnel," Haberman said. "They can be 10 feet deep!"

Maybe those pioneering Western workers could burn those tumbleweeds for warmth in a pinch. Don't worry about winter. Spring is just around the corner. ♡



Sonic winter trails

Even the stealthiest of creatures can't cover their tracks after a fresh snowfall. This granary not far from Omaha is attractive to meandering wildlife and wandering photographers alike. Love it or hate it, winter is a beautiful season. We hope you will leave the comfort and warmth of your home for an exhilarating adventure in Nebraska this winter.

Erik Johnson