

The day the children died

1874 ~ CENTENNIAL ~ 1974

Blizzard of 1888

In memory of these who
after wandering three miles
from school, were found
four days later
three miles due east of here.

This marker, located at the Salem-Zion Church cemetery 4 miles east of Freeman, stands as a memorial to five children from the Swiss Mennonite community who lost their lives in the deadly blizzard that swept across the Upper Midwest on Thursday, Jan. 12, 1888. Their story was the subject of a tour sponsored by Heritage Hall Museum and Archives last week and led by Susan Schrag, on whose family farm the boys' frozen bodies were found. The "Children's Blizzard," as it is known, remains one of the most tragic accounts in this community's long history.

Read more about it in the story that starts on page 7A. PHOTO BY JEREMY WALTNER

Freeman, South Dakota

COURIER

Tour recalls tragedy of Jan. 12, 1888

Circumstances beyond control, one quick decision, has devastating effect on five Swiss Mennonite families

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As PUBLISHER

"Chance is always a silent partner in disaster."

That, writes author David Laskin in his book *The Children's Blizzard*, was certainly the case on Jan. 12, 1888, when an afternoon blizzard killed hundreds of people across the Upper Midwest, including five children whose families had, fewer than 15 years earlier, settled the hard east of what would later become the town of Freeman.

"The storm hit the most thickly settled sections of Nebraska and Dakota Territory at the worst possible moment," Laskin writes — "late in the morning or early in the afternoon on the first mild day in several weeks, a day when children had raced to school with no coats or gloves and farmers were far from home doing chores they had put off during the long siege of cold."

The unthinkable tragedy, the worst the young community had seen and, even today, among the most devastating events Freeman has known, was the subject of a historic tour sponsored by Heritage Hall Museum last Thursday, June 15, the tour had been scheduled for June 13 but was postponed because of stormy weather.

Led by Susan Schrag, the tour provided the opportunity for 25 people to hear about the tragedy and see firsthand the locations east of Freeman relevant to the story, including the spot where Kaufman brothers Johann, 17, Heinrich, 11, and Elias, 8, as well as Peter Graber, 16, and Johann Albrecht, 13, died.

Schrag, who also led the Children's Blizzard Tour last summer, was a logical choice to lead the group. It was in a pasture on her family farm, about 3 miles east of

'And the sky exploded'

David Laskin's book, *The Children's Blizzard*, offers a well-researched and well-documented account of the Jan. 12, 1888 blizzard that devastated the Upper Midwest, including remarkably specific details about its impact on the Swiss Mennonite community that had settled on land east of Freeman starting in 1874. The following is from his prologue:

"Thursday, on Jan. 12, 1888, a blizzard broke over the center of the North American continent. Out of nowhere, a soot gray cloud appeared over the northwest horizon. The air grew still for a long, eerie measure, then the sky began to roar and a wall of ice dust blasted the prairie. Every crevice, every gap and orifice instantly filled with shattered crystals, blinding, smothering, suffocating, burying anything exposed to the wind. The cold front



raced down the underfended grasslands like a crack ... then evening gathered in and temperatures kept dropping steadily, hour after hour, in the northwest gale. Before midnight, windchills were down to 40 below zero. That's when the killing happened. By morning on Friday the thirteenth, hundreds of people lay dead on the Dakota and Nebraska prairie, many of them children who had fled — or been dismissed from — country schools at the moment when the wind shifted and the sky exploded."

Story of survival, death

In her presentation last week, which fittingly started in the one-room school house on the campus of Heritage Hall Museum, Schrag recalled the "great migration" of

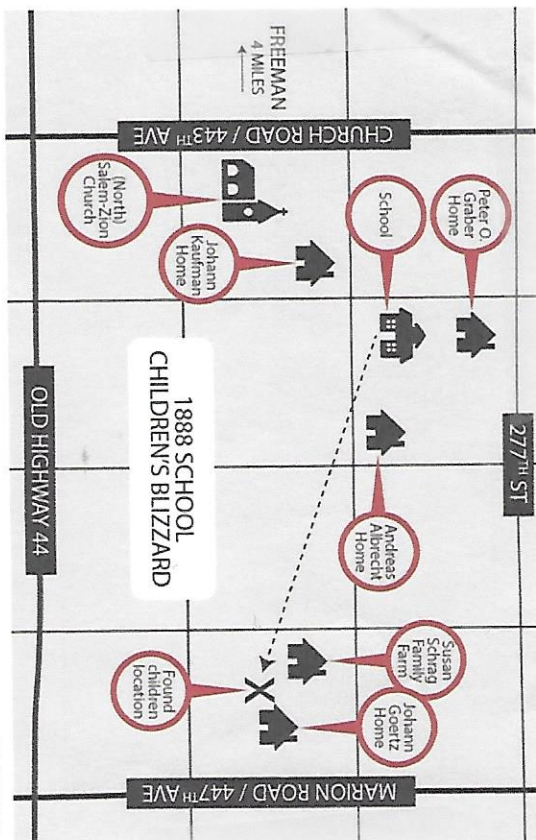
the Salem-Zion (North) Mennonite Church, where the five boys' frozen bodies were found three days later.

1874 that brought 53 Swiss families of German descent from three villages in Russia to America, including those directly impacted by the blizzard of 1888: Johann and Anna Kaufman, Peter and Susannah Graber and Andreas and Maria Albrecht.

The Kaufmans, Grabers and Albrechts had homesteaded within a mile of each other — the Grabers and the Albrechts in the same section and the Kaufmans just to the southwest — and sent their children to a school nearby that was easily within walking distance.

Seven of the three families' school-aged children walked to school on Jan. 12, 1888: the five who would perish and Johann Graber, 14, and Andreas Graber, 11, the younger brothers of Peter.

It was a mild morning following what had been a harsh string of weather and the boys set out with far less winter clothing than they would have otherwise worn. An eighth boy, Peter Albrecht, stayed home to help with chores.



This map shows the area starting 4 miles east of Freeman relative to the story of the Jan. 12, 1888 blizzard that took the lives of five Swiss Mennonite boys after they got lost walking home from school. As a starting reference point, the Salem-Zion (North) Mennonite Church is the building pictured farthest to the left.

"This was a chance for people to get out and do something that they hadn't been able to do (because of the weather)," Schrag told the group.

"And a lot of people left their homes without proper gear; they didn't have hats, they didn't have gloves, they were dressed poorly."

The blizzard hit locally about 11 a.m. as the seven boys and instructor James Cotton were in the schoolhouse, and it came out of nowhere and with force.

"What would you do if you were in the schoolhouse and the wind was blowing and you know it's not sealed up very well so the snow is immediately coming through the windows, and there are snow snakes whirling back and forth on the floor?" Schrag asked rhetorically. "They probably didn't have much fuel — probably enough for the day."

Based on the recorded history, Schrag said Cotton made the decision to leave for the Peter Graber home, just an eighth-of-a-mile to the north where LeRoy and Janette Epp live today.

"But the three Kaufman boys said 'no,'" Schrag said. "Our fathers told all of us that we should stay here and when it's good, they'll come and get us."

"That probably would have saved them," she continued. "We don't know."

Instead the seven boys and their teacher set out for the Graber home — close enough to be within shouting distance on a good day. But almost immediately, the five who lost their lives separated from the other three and became hopelessly lost.

They missed the Graber home and were left wandering to the south and east, their final resting spot a little more than 2 miles due southeast of the school.

"They went with the wind, like cattle do," Schrag said. "It was a long walk; how did they survive that?"

They were discovered all together by Johann Goertz, who had a home 40 yards from where he found the boys, the oldest of whom had his arms wrapped around the others.

They were taken to the Kaufman home after church on Sunday, where they were left on the floor to thaw before being buried together in the church cemetery.

As for the survivors, Johann and Andreas Graber and Mr. Cotton made it to the Graber home, but barely. They had originally wandered east of the home.

"When you can't see in the snow, you're just pushed by the wind," Schrag said. "You think you're going in the right direction, but you aren't."

Only a brief respite from the wind and a line of saplings, planted near the home, saved them.

"They saw that sapling," Schrag said, "and they went from one sapling to the next to the next and they finally made it back."

Schrag read the following account from Laskin's book, written by Andreas Graber, one of the two boys to survive.

"On January 12, we went to school like we always did. The weather was not very cold, but neither was it very pleasant since there was snow on the ground. That's why there were only seven pupils in school that day. At about 11 o'clock the blizzard came suddenly, with such an awful force and howling around the winds and I still remember how the teacher shook his head.

"The teacher and the bigger boys talked about what to do. Go or stay in school. The teacher insisted that we leave. So it was decided that the whole school was to go to our home. We all started out together facing the big wind which was coming slightly from the northwest. It happened so quickly that five of the boys went right on without paying any attention to the rest of us. In the meantime, I got behind in the deep snow. I couldn't see anybody. I called for my older brother, Pete, to come to help me but he did not hear. However, the teacher and my second-oldest brother heard me calling because they were behind those other boys. When coming back to help, they called after the others, but it was all in vain. So the three of us went on, thinking the others would be home first ..."

On the bus

The 25 on last week's tour visited the locations relevant to the story via a bus provided by Freeman Transit.

The group drove east of Freeman 5 miles past Fensel's Corner, where the Johann Kaufman home had been; there is nothing there today. They then made their way one mile north past the location of the school and the Peter Graber home, both on the Epp property, and then back east and south, where on the other side of the section the Albrecht home once stood.

The bus then took the group to the Schrag family farm, where just to the south, in what is today a pasture, the boys' bodies were found.

The final stop on the tour was the Salem-Zion Mennonite Church cemetery, where the five boys are buried. A marker commemorating the Swiss Centennial of 1974 stands about the grave, noting the tragedy. The boys' five names and their years of birth are engraved in the stone, a lasting memorial to a tragic ending.