

# Killer Storm

*The South Dakota blizzard was devastating — but faith and a strong sense of community survived.*

by Sara Gugelmeyer

**I**t was a perfect storm for killing. And kill it did. It killed cattle, horses, buffalo and untold numbers of native wildlife. And, “Atlas,” as the South Dakota blizzard of 2013 was named, dang near killed the spirit of many cattlemen. But not quite.

“You can’t say we weren’t warned,” Ross McPherson of Hereford, S.D., admits. “But they didn’t tell us it was going to be as bad as it turned out to be. They said the wind was going to blow and it was going to snow, but they didn’t lay it on us. By the time we realized, it was too

late to do much more than we already had done.”

Still, many South Dakotans were as prepared as they could be. Cattle were in pastures with natural shelter or man-made windbreaks. It’s not like these ranchers have never seen a blizzard.



PHOTO COURTESY OF LONETREE RANCH

Rachel, Molly and Danny Reinhold learned much about the wrath of Mother Nature during the Atlas blizzard.

Excited about the prospect of moisture, Larry Reinhold, owner of the commercial Hereford operation Lonetree Ranch, Sturgis, S.D., was planting wheat when the storm hit. After all it was barely the first of October.

By pure happenstance, Jim Baker of Baker Herefords, Rapid City, S.D., and his brother Jeff had weaned calves the week before. The calves stayed in pens by the house and cows went back out to pasture.

“When we weaned, nothing had any winter hair on them at all. We worked those cattle in short-sleeved shirts,” Jim says.

By 5 p.m. on Oct. 3, the rain forced Larry Reinhold down out of his tractor. He’d sent some of his six children to be sure the fall-calving cows were in the pasture with the most protection, while his wife, Robin, and the rest of the family picked the last of the garden. With temperatures in the 80s the week before, the region had yet to even get a killing frost.

By the next morning, Larry says they’d had an inch and a half of rain, and by 7 a.m. Oct. 4, it was turning to snow. It snowed about an inch an hour all day and by 2 in the afternoon, they lost electricity.

“We were thinking, man, this is a pretty tough storm for October,” Larry explains, when they had 2- and 3-foot drifts at dusk. “It was still snowing hard when we went to bed and we could see that the snow was weighting down the trees pretty tough. But we still felt pretty good about where we had the livestock. We were quite convinced that we had done everything we could do.”

It snowed all day Saturday, too. No one was prepared for what Sunday morning, Oct. 6, brought.

### Digging out

“The next morning, we were not ready for what we saw,” Larry says. “The yard had 8-ft.-plus snow drifts. We had places in the pasture where we had 15 ft. of snow in some of the draws. We had received about 30 in. of snow with 70 plus mph winds. We were able to get out of



PHOTO COURTESY OF LONETREE RANCH

The Reinhold family was met in the driveway by one of their herd bulls the first morning after the storm. He had drifted more than a mile to the house.

*“It was feet of snow everywhere. We had to get the tractors dug out and started moving some snow so we could get the calves fed.”*

— Jim Baker

the house and as we were walking down to the barn, we were met by one of our herd bulls. He had come from more than a mile.”

Jim Baker says that morning was grim. “The top of the doors of our sale barn are 11 foot tall, and we had drifts that were a couple feet higher than that. When we finally got out there, my brother and I, we just couldn’t hardly believe what we were seeing. We didn’t even know where to begin. There wasn’t any evidence of any cattle anywhere.”

The unrelenting winds, clocked upward of 70 mph, lasted the entire storm while up to 3 feet of snow was

dumped on the rain-soaked soil.

The result was monstrous drifts in spots, impassable snow even on the flat and mud underneath.

Of course, there were downed power lines everywhere. The cattlemen were stuck. Jim was struggling to even care for the cattle in his yards.

“It was feet of snow everywhere,” he says. “We had to get the tractors dug out and started moving some snow so we could get the calves fed.”

No electricity means no water. A call to the power company informed him it would likely be weeks before the power could be restored.

“I was calling around trying to find a generator so we could get our well back. The cattle were so thirsty. I couldn’t find a generator anywhere.”

Desperate, Jim called his brother Joel in Minnesota and told him about the dire situation. He loaded up four generators and a snowmobile and headed west.

Larry Reinhold didn’t have to get far from the house to witness the devastation left in the storm’s path. Not only had the bull drifted in but some horses had come from the north as well.

The Reinhold family operation also includes Rainbow Bible Ranch, which hosts kids from all over the country every summer for a

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faith-based real working ranch experience. The camp maintains a remuda of nearly 100 horses.

"Some of our geldings that we had at the north place had drifted in. There were four horses dead by the barn and a couple more dying. That was quite a shock," Larry says.

With pain in their hearts and dread building, Larry and his family — Rachel, 20, Molly, 18, Danny, 13, Caleb, 11, Julia, 8, and Kiersten, 6 — started digging out. The tractor was outside and Larry started moving snow so they could get hay to mares and colts.

"While I was pushing snow, Rachel had gone down afoot to this pretty good windbreak where the horses were. We've wintered a lot of storms there. She came back and held up her fingers saying she counted six dead ones. I kept moving snow and I just couldn't believe it. Then she came around again and held up 16 and went back. Before I had gotten to the gate with the hay, she counted 36 horses dead down there. In fact, by the time we were done, we lost over 50 head in that pasture."

The incredible amount of snow had everyone stranded and frustrated. It took most people days to even get to where their cattle were. Most tried to find a high spot where they could look with binoculars. One of Jim's neighbors was able to fly over the area in a small plane and delivered gut-wrenching news.

Jim says, "He called us and said, 'It looks really bad on the north side of the creek. There's hardly anything that I can see alive up there. I saw about 12 Hereford cows and that's about it.' That's where we had moved all the cows after we had weaned the calves."

Knowing their cattle were suffering or dead and not being able to get there was taking a toll on everyone.

The storm ended Saturday night or early Sunday morning, but Ross McPherson couldn't get to the pasture, just six miles from his house, till Tuesday.

"We got there Tuesday morning right at daylight," he says. "But we'd kind of seen them. You can get up on some ridges to the northwest of the pasture and we could see something out there so we knew they didn't totally drift out like a lot of people's cows did."

Ross and his help started riding two miles to the south of the pasture to pick up anything that had drifted. Luckily, most of his cows had stayed put. Still his operation suffered losses.

His cows were already in the pasture they typically winter in, mostly because that happened to be where the most grass was, which turned out to be incredibly lucky for Ross.

"We've never ever lost one from a storm there. We've been through quite a few storms in there and

never had any death loss as a result of it," Ross says.

Until Atlas, that is. "Most of them did stay and what stayed in there was fine," he adds. "We lost only five in the pasture, the rest of them must have been right at the end of the storm because you could still see their tracks in the snow where they drifted. That got them on top of some ridges and into the wind more. Those died."

At the very southeast corner of his pasture, though, Ross says he and his help spent extra time looking. There was a 50-60 foot snow bank that was full of tracks where cows had been. The bank was so deep one couldn't even tell there was a fence there. He checked for air holes but, upon not finding any, assumed that if something was in that snow bank it was dead.

#### **Like a war zone**

Meanwhile Larry Reinhold and his family were facing terrible losses. Some of their fall calf yearlings that had been north of the house had drifted in as well. They were dead in the yard.

"As we went north we found more of the yearlings either dead or dying," Larry says.

Luckily though, the 100 cows and calves got behind a good-sized dam which was out of the wind and stayed.

"We only lost one calf there," Larry says. "That was really quite a miracle."

PHOTO COURTESY OF LONETREE RANCH



The Reinhold family lost 91 horses to Atlas. Larry likened the aftermath to a war zone.



Next, the Reinholds were determined to find a way to get to the camp string of horses that were in a rough, breaky pasture to the south. Because the snow was still impassible by vehicle, Rachel and Molly went horseback and found eight dead horses and eight live ones.

“Everyone was pretty dumbfounded then,” Larry says. “These were good saddle horses — the ones we use for our kids. We knew then it was going to be a big hit. We sat by candlelight that night and counted up horses we had found and what we were still missing. There were 25, all were either used for camp or some of our kids’ personal horses.”

These were horses that were a part of the family, most of them either taught Larry’s kids to ride or had been trained by them.

“We all agreed to trust that they’d found some shelter or kept going,” Larry says.

It was a few more days before they could continue searching for those horses, though. Larry was busy pulling around linemen with his heavy equipment as most homes were still without power.

Not able to stand it any longer, Rachel, Molly and Danny braved the now deep mud and rode the more than two miles to the backside of the horses’ pasture. The horses were all dead.

“They were stretched out for about a mile,” Larry says. “You know those old scenes from the Civil War where horses are laying around after the battle? That’s what it looked like. It was like a war zone.”

All told, the Reinhold family was lucky with the cattle although there were 26 of the neighbors’ dead cattle on their place; they had only about a dozen head lost. It was not the case with the horses, though, with the death toll a heart-breaking 91.

At Baker Herefords, Jim was growing weary and frustrated. “The second day my brother was here with the snowmobile, the snow started to get soft. He was



PHOTOS COURTESY OF BAKER HEREFORDS

Jim Baker spent hours digging cattle out of creek beds and identifying to whom they belonged.



Cutting off ears with tags was a gruesome but necessary way to catalog the dead.

having a hard time getting around even with the snowmobile to the point where we could hardly move at all anymore.”

About the only way to get around was afoot. Jim was exhausted. Even filling the generators with fuel to keep the cattle watered in the pens was a daunting task. Carrying a five-gallon jug of gas through snowdrifts is a big chore.

“My nephew and my brother Joel finally walked on foot out to the creek (where the cattle were) and when they came back their heads were down. ‘It’s really bad up there’ they said.”

Jim explains that four different brands of cattle had drifted into their north pasture. The neighbor who had flown over in the plane had 200 dead bred heifers up there.

A couple days later, Jim was able to get to the creek bed with his tractor. He spent six hours digging out deads and marking down whom they belonged to. Because of the mud, though, he couldn’t get any farther into the pasture. He was still missing many, many head.

The weather warmed right up, melting snow, which made it easier to see the carcasses. Then, Mother Nature gave them another sucker punch and dropped 2.5 in. of rain.

“We had a flood like I’ve never seen before,” Jim says.

The two creeks which crisscross his ranch gushed water way beyond the banks, completely burying hayfields. Giant cottonwood trees and debris laid down by the strong winds during the blizzard were strewn everywhere. A wooden bridge Jim had never seen before was lying in his pasture. Miles of fence and culverts were wiped out.

“All the creek crossings were out, the culverts gone. The ground everywhere else was soft and saturated if there wasn’t still snow covering it. We had no way of moving. We had no way,” Jim says.

It was two weeks after the storm before Jim could get in on a four-wheeler. Two long weeks of dreadful uncertainty. What he found was a sight he says he’ll never forget and the sadness in his voice drives the point home.

“The landscape was just polka-dotted. Dead cattle everywhere. I think they died in a lot of different ways. They died drowning in dams and creeks. They died simply from moisture in their lungs. There were dead cattle tangled in fences. They were dead laying down on their sides. Some were dead laying upside down. Then there were a bunch that about made me cry when we got up to them. They’d be laying down normally with their heads in

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the air like they'd just gotten done summer grazing and laid down to rest. They must have just given up.

"I was desperately trying to figure out and document what we'd lost. In the meantime, we are realizing how bad all the fencing was. It took fences down all over the place. Windbreaks were down. So we had to operate out of the one pasture to the south."

### On the bright side

The pasture to the south was the place where the fall-calving herd was and only a few head were lost.

"But instead of an L-shaped windbreak which most of ours are, this pasture had a horseshoe-shaped windbreak and the snow only filled about 2/3 of that one up so the fall-calving cows had a spot in there where they could stay," Jim explains.

In Jim's north pasture, the cows drifted two directions. One bunch went south and perished in or near the creek. The other bunch went east and found a cozy little spot to stay. About three miles away was a little ranch where an elderly handicapped woman lived. Her son had taken her to stay in town before the snow hit, but she had a long trailer house for a windbreak, a carport for shelter and all the hay her 60 acres could produce stacked up nearby.

"That's where we found those cows and it was a blessing they found a good spot to stay," Jim says. "It took quite a while to get them back



PHOTO COURTESY OF BAKER HEREFORDS

Some cattle were found dead, like this one of Jim Baker's, as though they had just laid down to rest and given up.

home, though, because the county hadn't opened any roads yet."

In the meantime, the cattle had caused quite a lot of damage that needed fixing. "There was 8 in. of manure on the deck and one of the doors going into the house was loose. They had almost gotten inside," Jim says.

The storm was over, and Jim's losses were bad but could have been much worse. "We lost 40 cows," he says. "That included half of our pregnant recipient cows and one donor cow. Still, that was nothing like our neighbors. Some pastures up north there were 300 to 400 dead in one pasture."

The days after the storm were shattering as the snow melted and the death toll rose. Ross McPherson and two friends went back to double check his pasture on Friday. A week since the storm had started and three days since he'd been there, they made the same journey, hoping to push anything back that may have gotten out again.

"We hauled clear around to the south and east side of the place and unloaded and came riding back thinking we'd make sure everything stayed in because we didn't have any fence fixed or anything yet, some of it was still snowed under," Ross explains.

They came over the top of the ridge and the southeast corner of his pasture was in view — that same corner where he'd been so careful to check because it sure looked like something could have been there.

The trio strained their eyes looking around for stray cattle.

"And there was a critter standing there right in the corner," Ross says. "And I was thinking sure enough there's going to be one there dead and we're probably half mile away."

But as the group continued to look, it appeared to be moving. In disbelief they made the slow trek over to it and, amazingly, it was a live heifer calf. The snow had melted down enough by this time

that she could have gotten out, but wasn't trying.

Ross explains this behavior is often the case with cows in snow. "They'll tromp around in one spot for the whole storm and get the snow packed down underneath where they are. But right on the edge of that it's real soft and when they start to step off in there it feels like they're going to fall. They get stuck and don't like to go."

Not sure how else to get her out, Ross tossed a loop on her head and dragged her to the edge of the snow bank. Ross's friend heeled her to get the rope off, and they drove her around the corner to the right pasture. She was gaunted up pretty bad, Ross says, but she walked to the bottom of the draw and got a drink and immediately looked better. She started grazing.

"She was snowed in there the whole time," Ross says. "For sure from Saturday until Tuesday and maybe she came in sight shortly after that, I am not sure because I wasn't there. But that was pretty incredible."

Despite the inconceivable amount of stress she had been through, she didn't get sick; in fact, Ross says she's done really well. They plan to breed her for a replacement this summer.

"That was the brightest spot for us," Ross says. "We had a lot of other stuff to be thankful for because we didn't lose anything near like a lot of other people did. But it was still pretty unbelievable to see that live critter in that snowbank that had been there that long and



PHOTO COURTESY OF LONETREE RANCH

Young Caleb Reinhold helped pull this yearling steer out of the snow, only to have it die the next day.

was completely buried the last time I looked there.”

Though the storm was over, cattlemen now had endless damage to repair, dead cattle to pick up, pieces to put back together — all with a heavy heart.

The Bakers’ ranch sustained much damage — fence and windbreaks needed re-built, but it was still so muddy Jim couldn’t get around.

“We fed two months of hay which we should never have had to feed because we couldn’t put the cattle where they needed to be. We were just trying to get so we could use the place again,” he says.

“It was just an incredible amount of work,” he says. “I’d get up and be out there when the sun came up and come home at 8 or 9 at night and be so tired I could hardly get cleaned up. All you could do is just all you could do for one day. Then just get up the next morning and try to do some more and try to do some more. Then every day we chipped away a little more it got easier. The inability to be able to maneuver around was really difficult.”

Jim admits, “There are nights yet when I wake up alarmed. I must be subconsciously thinking about it or dreaming. But for a couple months there it was so hard to even sleep because at night it was churning through my mind about what I had to do. Emotionally and psychologically it really did a number on me.”

Boyd Dvorak of Dvorak Herefords, Lake Andes, S.D., wasn’t hit by the blizzard. But he had called Jim Baker shortly after to see what he could do.

“You could tell he was emotionally exhausted,” Boyd says. “You could hear they were overwhelmed. Mentally it was wearing on those folks so bad.”

### **Neighbors helping neighbors**

People were quick to help one another amidst the devastation.

“I was really blessed there were two pastors in town that came from ranching backgrounds and they came out and spent about three and half

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*People that were hurting with us; we all pitched in together and did what we could to get back up on our feet.”*

— Larry Reinhold

weeks helping me get stuff put back up and back together again,” Jim says.

He was also able to hire two other men to help out. It took a couple of months before he could use the whole ranch.

“I don’t know what I’d have done without those two pastors,” Jim says. “They worked their rear ends off out there. And it was wonderful because we prayed before we started in the morning and it changed the day knowing that they were out there and God was with us.”

Larry Reinhold says he and his family were impressed with the outpouring of support and sympathy, as well.

“You really experience the sense of community beyond barbed wire. People that were hurting with us; we all pitched in together and did what we could to get back up on our feet,” Larry says. “We’ve heard from a number of people with encouragement and assistance. We’ve heard from people from 40 states. We’ve had the opportunity to share the story with a number of media outlets.”

Larry says the most interesting and enjoyable media experience was with the BBC network. Two women with farming roots came out and did

three pieces on the storm, one of which was 22 minutes long.

“We got to tell the story. Through the whole situation we definitely saw how even in the midst of hard times God sustains and keeps you going. Because it was definitely a difficult situation and we’ve never seen anything quite like it,” Larry says.

Fellow ranchers and cattlemen stepped up with support as well. The Feddes family of Feddes Herefords, Manhattan, Mont., was quick to help out the Reinhold family.

Dan Feddes says, “Anytime you read about a disaster like that, if you run cattle, you know what it’s like. You know what it’s like when you lose one, so the helplessness you have when you get a storm like that is overwhelming at times. I think

any rancher can relate. I think that’s why we saw the huge amount of support for those cattlemen, because every rancher knows we are here but by the grace of God. The blizzard could have just as well been right through here.”

The Feddes family gave the Reinholds two bred cows. “It didn’t seem like very much with their loss,” Dan says, “but we just felt like the least we could do is help them out if we could. We knew they had lost a lot.”

And the Feddes family has long been a supporter of Rainbow Bible Ranch, not just because Larry buys bulls, but because they believe in the program.

“We try to support what they do,” Dan says. “What they do for kids is very important and the example they set as far as glorifying God is something we support wholeheartedly with our whole family. That was at the base of where our support came from. Their beliefs and our beliefs coincide. Part of living a Christian life is when somebody is in trouble like that, you help them if you can.”

Dan says they also felt helping the Reinholds individually guaranteed they knew where the money was going,

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not necessarily to a cause, but this way they were helping individuals.

Another gentleman from eastern South Dakota gave the Reinholds a “real pretty polled Hereford heifer.”

“Things like that are special,” Larry says. “Those three cows have a special spot in the herd now because you know how they got here. We have been blessed by some folks giving horses and some contributions directly to the camp.”

Jim Baker says he and his family received a little help from the Rancher Relief Fund. That fund is staffed by the South Dakota Cattlemen’s Association, the South Dakota Stockgrowers Association and the South Dakota

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Sheep Growers Association and administered by the Black Hills Area Community Foundation.

To date, the fund has paid out about \$4.2 million to those who applied, based on need. Hereford producers have been big supporters of that fund.

In fact, Boyd and Jenni Dvorak of Dvorak Herefords, Lake Andes, S.D., donated a heifer to be auctioned at the Black Hills Stock Show sale to benefit the fund.

“The South Dakota Hereford Association all agreed to do something,” Boyd explains. “We couldn’t make it to the meeting, but we were glad to donate a heifer. Then Danny Fawcett got the bulk

of the money committed from other breeders.”

Boyd got the heifer all ready for the sale and then people really stepped up to support the cause. She sold twice and ended up garnering about \$43,000. Brad Veurink purchased the final rights to the heifer for \$6,750 but then sent her back home with the Dvoraks in a partnership arrangement.

“I felt our part in that whole deal was small,” Boyd says. “There were so many others that gave so much more. It was very humbling to see that kind of money put up for the cause.”

Around the Black Hills Stock Show in early February 2014, there was a feeling of thankfulness and camaraderie, Boyd says. “Those people were just so thankful, even though I wasn’t writing the check personally. I don’t even know if it was about the money so much as the gesture that people would open up their pockets because they know what tremendous suffering they went through.”

#### Healing continues

Larry Reinhold and his family will be years making horses like the ones they lost. “We’ve been blessed by people’s encouragement and their generosity,” Larry says. “But truthfully we have never worked so hard in our lives as in the last six months.”

The family has planted more than 2,000 trees because nearly all of theirs were destroyed by the winds. They’ve also had a tremendous amount of dirt to move because the flooding after the storm ruined their dams. But the hardest part is the loss of horses.

Rachel Reinhold is the camp’s main horse wrangler and says, “Those horses are like our best friends.”

And Danny Reinhold commented shortly after the storm that every time he rode by where a horse had died, he could remember a certain camp attendee who had ridden him.

“It takes a long time to make a good horse and we knew that bunch of horses,” Larry says. “We knew their little idiosyncrasies, we knew what made them tick, knew what kind of kid could get along with that horse. Now we are basically starting over on the camp string of horses and we want to be certain that we have the right kind of horses that we can make sure the kids have a good first experience horseback.”

But that’s a challenge they’re up for. “It’s oftentimes easy for us to put our trust in God and say we trust in God in good times, but so often we end up relying on ourselves more,” Larry says. “When you go through these kind of situations, you realize how helpless you can be in the face of the storms. You realize it is vital to have that trust in a greater One. We just can’t handle these kind of situations without Him. That’s what we tell our kids, we don’t just trust in the good times, we have to learn to trust in the difficult times as well. We’ve really seen that God has given us the opportunity to continue life even in the hardest of times. I think in reality, the spotlight’s on all of western South Dakota, because I think people have realized that in and of ourselves, we just are not as capable as we would like to think. I think out of this whole thing we have recognized blessings that would just blow many people’s minds.”

Larry was especially touched by a church all the way in Canadian, Texas, that reached out to help his family.

“That kind of encouragement is overwhelming — to have people you’ve never met step up to help you and encourage you. This whole storm took place during the government shutdown and yet, people came together and pitched together in ways that would just definitely surprise most urban dwellers. I think that’s where the rural spirit definitely comes in. People rise to the occasion. It’s pretty neat to be a part of that.” **HW**