

The Old Man Is Back

Do you remember a couple of years ago when everyone was saying how mild the past few winters had been? We went on about how we had dodged another bullet, that the latest storm skirted just south of us. A few clicks north and we would have gotten clobbered. We all knew, of course, that the benign winter pattern was a temporary phenomenon. Everyone would smile and wink when the current winter was proclaimed to be a piece of cake. Somewhere in the back of our minds we knew the Old Man would return someday.

Boy, howdy! Did he ever. This one is a beaut, isn't it? The last time it was anywhere near above freezing we had two days of sideways sleet and rain, instant road slick everywhere and ditched vehicles all around reminding those of us still on the highway to go home. That was our Christmas weather. All those family dinners and all those visits to Grandma delayed and cancelled because, for a lot of folks, you just couldn't get there from here. We have a long gravel driveway which dips in the middle and is Rocky Mountain steep at both ends. For Christmas and the days surrounding it there was no question at all about leaving the farm. Hunker down, folks. We're here for a while. Thank goodness that our daughter and her daughter were hunkering with us. I feel sorry for the rest.

Of course on either side of our Christmas sleet we've had deep snow and ten below. Our outdoor thermometer hasn't cracked twenty degrees in two weeks. So far we have had to tow two cars out of the driveway ditch and it's only January. OK, one car was driven by rookies who didn't know better (actually got stuck again immediately after being towed, ouch). But the other car belongs to neighbors who have resided along the drive for years. These folks know everything there is to know about negotiating the local slope, nope. Sometimes it's just so bad out there that you have two choices. Pilot and all wheel drive vehicle or stay home.

It's a good thing that Old Man Winter is so handsome or we just might not get along at all. The truth is that what I'm looking at now, the crystalline scene that surrounds us, is just about as pretty as a landscape can be. I'll walk by a window and get stopped in my tracks by what I'm seeing. The snow capped Norway spruce towers over and shelters the willow and honeysuckle which, in turn, are absolutely brimming with red birds and blue birds and gray birds and herringboned birds.

The sky is Santa Fe blue. The air is as clean as our air can be and if I climbed that spruce (if only I could!) I'd see clear to Pennsylvania.

The deep snow has blanketed us in three layers. The first is about ten inches of packed powder. This is covered by that Christmas ice which, in turn is topped by six inches of blowing fine crystals that lift in sudden swirls twisting down the prairie slope and across the neighboring fields. We can walk on top of the first two layers sinking only through the fresh powder. It makes us taller. For a Lilliputian like me the experience of being six foot two is quite a heady experience indeed. I just love having to duck under a branch that is far above my head during the other three seasons. I think I'll go buy a heavier axe to suit my new stature, maybe a cowboy hat and some cigars too.

We go through a lot of firewood here on the farm. We keep the furnace set pretty low and we supplement that heat with the most excellent, comforting warmth supplied by two wood burning stoves. The challenging part comes in keeping the wood bins full of ready to burn fuel. I'm not one of those guys who'll spend a day splitting enough to last for a couple of weeks. I'm afraid these old parts just won't stay focused for that long. So I find myself by the woodshed every other day or so with my spiffy new Collins axe and some smaller tools for kindling. There is something completely satisfying when your axe splits the target as if it weren't even there, two halves of the same log exploding in opposite directions. This experience more than makes up for the times you get Ex Caliber stuck in a log that refuses to be rent. The minutes spent trying to pull the blasted thing out are undignified at best.

As cold as it's been, I've spent a lot of time on the chopping side of the shed. But I'm not complaining. It's a good workout and you have something to show for it. I prefer it to the in-town kind of workout where all you get is a gym towel and a locker key. Come to think of it I prefer everything out here at Ella Bella to the in-town version. Whether its walks or workouts, food or fuel, this is the place for me.

Now if Old Man Winter would cut us a little slack this week I'll get started on the pruning. If not there's always inside stuff to do. And if any given day is not the right day for fixing things there are all those birds that need to be watched. Someone has to do it and I know just the guy for the job.