

Granpaw's Tales: The Blizzard of 1873 *by Susi Bocks*

Foreword

Granpaw's Tales invites the reader to gain a better understanding of life during the beginnings of the cities, Empire and Galva, located in Kansas along the historic Santa Fe Trail.

The stories are told through the fictional characters "Granpaw" and his grandson "Timmy," during the late 1940s. These historically accurate events took place during the blizzard of 1873 in Old Empire, a town established in Kansas at the intersection of the Santa Fe Trail and Running Turkey Creek. The events in this story led to the death of Michael Sauer, the first person buried at the Empire Cemetery.

Modern-day people understand that tragedies occur, but might have a hard time relating to the struggles of early life in the Midwest. The simple act of existing, even thriving, in the face of constant assaults on their lives brought about by nature, and the harshness of the land shows us they were brave and durable people. This story will illustrate just one of those struggles they had to endure.

Fidgeting in his seat, the snow-filled backyard of his parent's house beckoned Timmy after breakfast. He couldn't wait to finish eating so that he could go outside. As soon as he was done he quickly put on his coat and gloves, let his mother know where he was going, and headed to the backyard.

Once outside in the white wilderness, Timmy worked hard building the fort that had been just a daydream during breakfast. He used all his strength to make his ideas come alive! Little by little his efforts took shape, and the fort stood proudly. He attached a flag signaling it was complete. After a long day of constructing he was cold and worn out, but he was satisfied with what he had built when he decided it was time to go back inside.

With a big smile, Timmy ran into the house. Layer after layer of clothing landed on the back porch floor. His imagination had taken him to far-away places once again, but now he was back with his family, and he looked forward to eating his mother's fine home-cooking.

"Granpaw, when will dinner be ready?"

"Well, Timmy," said his Granpaw. "I would imagine it'll be very soon. Are you getting hungry?"

"Getting hungry? No, Granpaw, I am starving!"

Timmy's mother overheard the conversation and told them that dinner would be ready very soon.

"Come here, Timmy," Granpaw motioned him over to the fire. "Let's get you warmed up until it's time to eat. We can talk about some of the cold times my father had back when he was about your age."

Timmy sat down and got comfortable by the fire. He was eager to hear about the adventures his great-grandfather had seen a long, long time ago.

Granpaw looked into Timmy's eyes and said: "Let me tell you the story about Michael Sauer and what happened to him during the blizzard of 1873."

Traveling on the Santa Fe Trail was hard on the men, women, and children who were determined to go westward and start their lives in Kansas. Many families arrived at Running Turkey Creek, including Michael Sauer, his wife, and their six-month-old child. In staking their claim in December of 1872, they knew they would have to work very hard and quickly since the cold of the late-season was already upon them. Michael was determined to forge a new life in the town of Empire and prosper through his efforts.

They hurried to get their dugout completed, making it as suitable and comfortable as possible. Spurring the family on was the fact that a sturdy home would be much warmer and drier than being outside in the temporary shelter of the tent. They carved their dugout into the side of a hill on the open prairie. It was dark and small, but being in the hole was better than fighting the elements of the outdoors. The dugouts commonly seen at that time had just enough space for the families that built them. If they could afford it, many even added sod houses right in front of their dugouts and used it as another room.

Surviving Kansas winters was a challenge even for the toughest of the settlers along the Santa Fe Trail, so they had to make sure the homes they built could withstand the snow and windy conditions of the open plains. The food and supplies they depended on for survival had to last for many months when the storms forced them to remain in or close to their homes.

Many people claim Michael Sauer knew a storm was coming that fateful day, January 27, 1873, when he went in search of firewood. Families on the plains needed to have a big supply of it to keep the dugout warm, and for the fires that helped to cook the meals. The mighty blizzard that stirred that day would prove to be his undoing.

Michael set off towards Gypsum Creek, traveling north about 12 miles from his home to gather the firewood from around the trees that grew on the banks of the creek. He stayed out much longer than he should have to make sure he had plenty of firewood to take care of his family in case the weather got awful. Michael didn't realize that his decision to gather more wood than what was needed would change his life forever.

The storm came up quickly, and the big, thick snowflakes began to cover the ground. Michael pressed on gathering more wood. It didn't take long before he

realized that he needed to head home. Heavy winds raged, picking up the snow that was freshly laid down, swirling it, and mixing it up with more continuing to fall! With the sun setting early, the white snow against the black of the sky cast a dangerous mood over the plain; the winter storm had turned into a raging blizzard.

He steered the oxen on a path towards home, abandoning the idea of collecting more wood. Michael realized that it was becoming too dangerous to stay out in this storm, but he still had a long way to go to be safe again. The blinding snow made it very difficult to see, and he lost his way. The cattle led by instinct, but he decided to follow a different path. It proved later not to be the best decision. He realized afterward that he was probably only a few miles north of his home when he made that decision.

The storm was getting worse, the progress going home was even slower. Michael had to abandon the cart if he was to have any chance of making it home safely. The oxen wandered off, and he continued towards what he thought was home. Michael was numb, frozen, and his legs were tired. When he couldn't walk, he crawled. He came upon the cellar of his neighbor, James Richardson, and just couldn't go any further. The exhausting journey back home from Gypsum Creek led to him collapsing into the cellar where half his body was in the ground, and the other half of him was on top of the snow. He laid there until morning. The storm had passed, and it was calm once again. The sun was bright, the scenery a brilliant white. Animals found him alive, and he fought to keep from being drug away. Luckily, members of the Middleswart family discovered him before that could happen. Michael could hear their Newfoundland dog barking, and the children of Thomas Middleswart thought they saw a wolf, but then realized it was a man who needed their help. They got Michael safely to his house to warm up. His friend soaked him in cold water to thaw out his frozen feet, legs, and eyes. He was alive, but barely. They summoned Dr. Gregg of King City to attend to his weakened state.

Michael Sauer managed to stay alive for a month after that fateful blizzard. The care he received from his family, friends, and neighbors only prolonged the inevitable. Michael Sauer died on February 27, 1873, from the gangrene that had set in after his feet got frostbite. He died from lockjaw, the deadly bacteria that affected his muscles and nerves. There were no doctors in the town of Empire, but Joseph Colby, a neighbor and also a nurse, did the best he knew how. Sadly,

Michael died when his body just couldn't fight the infection anymore. He got buried in the Empire Cemetery, established in 1870 with land donated by the Colby's, becoming the first grave there.

The tombstone read:

Michael Sauer
Nov. 10, 1842... frozen Jan. 27, 1873
Died
Feb. 27, 1873

"Beyond the chilling winds of earth,
Beyond its storm skies;
There is a bright immortal land,
Where friendship never dies."

AFTERWORD

The events on that fateful day led to Michael Sauer's tombstone being the first in the Empire Cemetery. It was the first gravesite to mark the tragic events of the harsh nature that the settlers battled; it followed with more filling the cemetery with other tragedies where they could not conquer the sometimes brutal conditions endured on the land they had made their home.

The death of Michael was not the only loss Old Empire experienced following the blizzard; his wife and small child, unprepared to handle living life in the wilderness without him, sold their claim and then moved back to Indiana. The Kansas plains took her husband from her, and she gave up the fight to claim victory in the battle for survival.

No one, especially Michael Sauer, could have predicted that the simple act of gathering firewood, only trying to exist the way they knew how would have ended up with him losing his life. Mother Nature proved to be a challenge to the settlers in not only the day-to-day events that needed attention but especially in those times when nature would quickly turn catastrophic. Most of them who had hoped to forge better lives for themselves and their families frequently had their dreams shattered while enduring the harsh conditions of early life in Kansas. Some were able to thrive and find success through luck, hard work, and sheer determination, but sadly, many gave up their lives during the struggles of daily life or just gave up, finding that it wasn't as easy or as rewarding as they would have thought it could be.

Nature can be harsh and even deadly, but the struggles that challenged the early settlers taught them to fight harder for survival. The town of Empire along the Santa Fe Trail gained its first residents (Joseph Colby and his family) in 1871, and even with all the hardships, it continued to grow until it eventually evolved into the town called Galva in 1880.