

Noting the melting snow one January long ago, an old Swede in the neighborhood reportedly said—and it was repeated over the years by succeeding generations—“it’s just a January thaw. I’ve seen thousands of them.”

I suppose someone could make the same claim today, since climate change has contributed to more and more January thaws—and November thaws, December thaws, and February thaws. March and April, formerly months when there might be an indication that spring would eventually arrive, have, instead, often turned into weather that was more likely during November through February in past years.

Another quote I heard a few years ago has proved accurate so far: “Climate change has given us beautiful, mild falls and springs from hell.”

I decided to take a look back at the journals of a couple of people to see just what kind of January took place in widely separated years: 1918 and fifty years later in 1968.

January of 1918 had no thawing days. In fact, it appears that it was an unusually cold and stormy month, even by the standards of an “old-fashioned winter.” These are a few of Mr. Rainey’s entries:

“January 6—12 above. 7 a.m. Sunday. Cloudy and strong NE wind. It began to snow and wind rise about 9 o’clock. This has been the worst storm and wind I have ever seen up here. The snow has drifted in my yard and Jasper’s the worst I ever saw it.”

“January 12—10 above. 6 a.m. Snowing and a high wind from the SW with snow drifting bad. The roads are impassible. Has snowed over a foot in the last 24 hours. It dropped to 6 below about 12:30 this afternoon. Stayed there until about 4 and warmer this eve. The wind is a hurricane this evening from the NW. Trains cancelled this afternoon and tomorrow.”

“January 23—8 above 6 a.m. Light NW wind this morning. I walked to Leroy and got a pound creamery butter and a pail buttermilk this forenoon and cut a little wood this afternoon.”

The month continued on the same way. There was no January thaw in 1918. The month ended with a 22 below zero morning. February followed—and opened with a morning temperature of 40 below zero.

Fifty years later, in 1968—Albert’s notes for the month were much the same as Rainey’s. He always noted the temperature and weather and added some other comments on the day’s activities. Here are a few of his observations:

“January 1—Very cold. -18 at 6 a.m. New Year’s Day. Sheep—2 bucks, 1 wether (Poody) 18 ewes. Mabel viewed the Rose Bowl parade on color television at Sharon’s today. It has been very cold with an east wind. Zero at 6 p.m.”

“January 5— -10 at 5 a.m. Cloudy with flurries. Our three crows and 1 pheasant were up to the barn picking grain from the sheep boxes. Also one or more rabbits stay under the barn and come out at night and eat alfalfa hay.”

“January 24— -10 at 8 a.m. Fair with a north wind. 20 at noon, 10 at 8 p.m. North Koreans captured American ship the Pueblo with 81 sailors and 2 civilians. The lost dog came again today.”

There was no January thaw in 1968 either. Although the last day of the month was rainy, the temperatures returned to winter levels after a couple of days. Albert did not note any major thawing.

The weather people seem to indicate that we will have a warm spell yet this month. And, if it thaws, perhaps I will be one of those old Swedes who says, "It's a January thaw. I've seen thousands of them."