

R. E. Nees
Fifty Winters Ago



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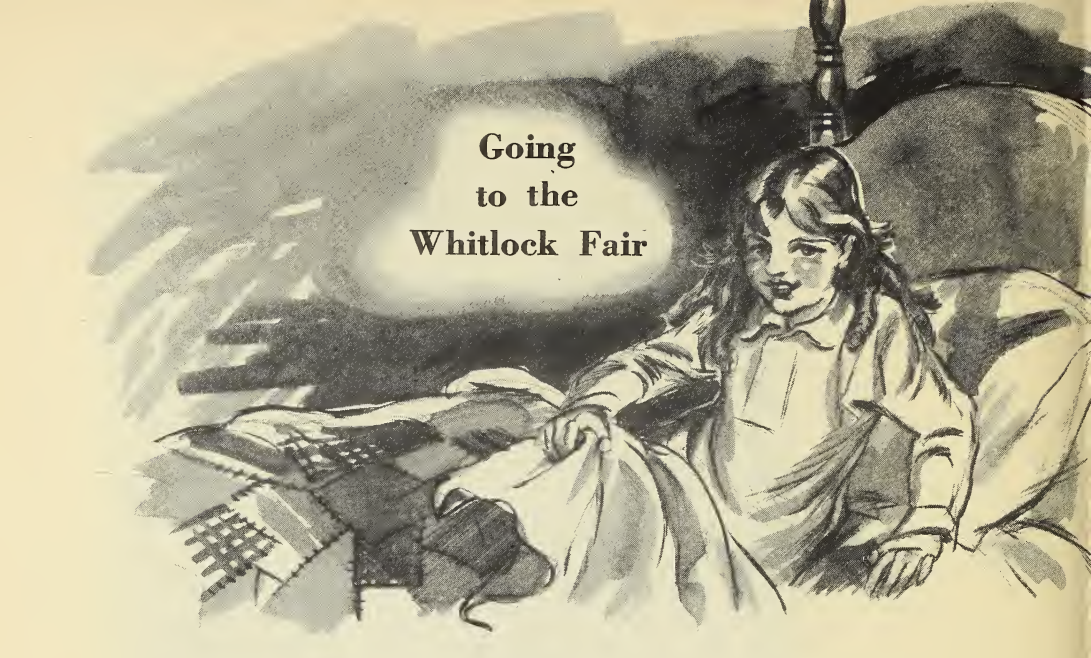
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Going
to the
Whitlock Fair

Debby woke early that morning fifty years ago. It was still dark when she threw back the blankets and put one foot out on the cold floor. There was no time to be lost.

She was going to the Whitlock Fair. It only came once a year in the fall, just before winter set in.

Debby was staying at the farm that year, and she had never been to a Fair before.

As Debby washed and dressed herself in her blue wool dress and tied a white apron over it, she could hear Uncle Cy and Aunt Mary talking in the next room.

Uncle Cy wanted to put on his best black suit and his white shirt right then and there.

"No, I would not!" Debby heard Aunt Mary saying. "You might get dirty."

Uncle Cy's voice came through the wall.

"Dirty! How could I get dirty milking a few cows?" he asked. "I have milked hundreds of times and I never got dirty before. Besides, I won't have time to dress twice. The Browns will be here to get us before you know it."

Debby went on dressing. Her fingers were cold as she buttoned her high black shoes.

At last Debby was ready. She stopped only to blow out the candle that she had lighted to dress by, and then went down to the kitchen.

The kitchen was warm and bright and full of good smells as Debby opened the door. Aunt Mary had a fire going in the black cookstove, and Jim was coming in the door with an arm full of wood for the box behind the stove.

"Hello," said Debby, looking at Jim's red cheeks. "Is it cold?"

"Not very," said Jim, pulling off his mittens. "Tommy is giving the chickens some grain. What shall I do next?"

His mother smiled and stopped mixing the flour and milk and eggs in the big yellow bowl. She was going to make hot cakes for breakfast.

"Just get the water, Jim," she said, "and that's all."

The family liked to drink water from an old spring that was near their house. Everyone liked it better, even if it did have to be carried in. Though the water was very cold, Debby thought it looked so good that she just had to drink it.

By the time Jim got the water and Tommy was in the house, their father had come into the kitchen.

“Oh, Uncle Cy!” cried Debby. “How fine you look!” She had never seen her uncle dressed in his best black suit and his white shirt before.

Uncle Cy laughed. He was a big man and he had a good, big laugh. Debby said even his blue eyes laughed.

“Ready for milking, boys?” he asked, as Jim and Tommy pulled on stocking caps and mittens again.

“Yes, Father,” they said.

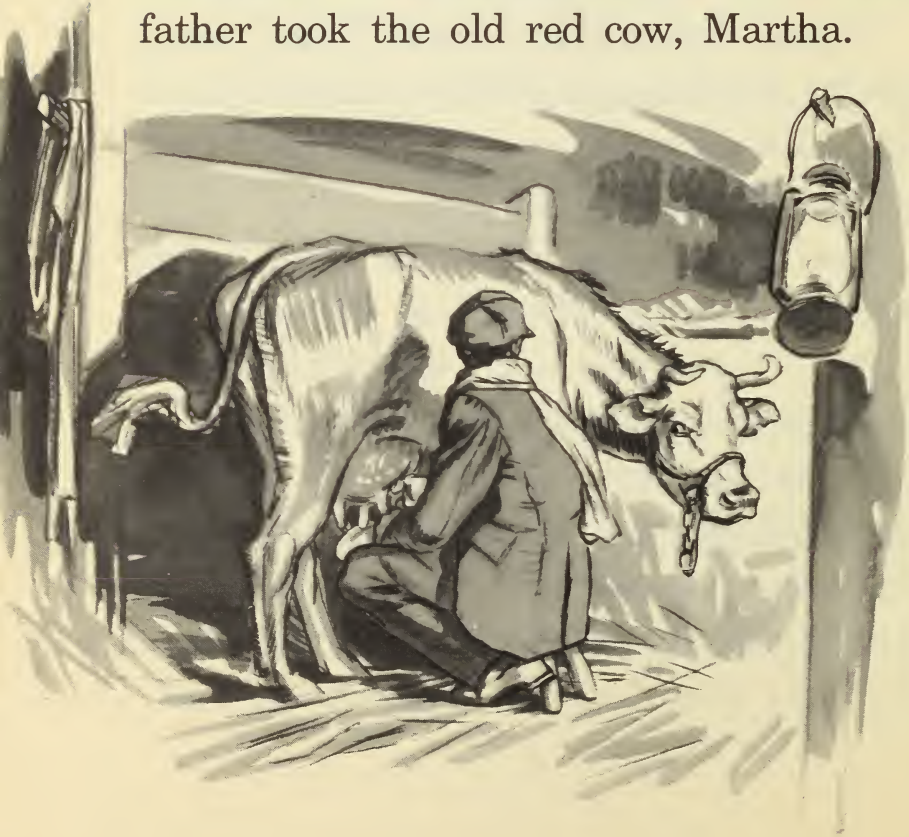
Aunt Mary said, “Be sure to light the lanterns, Cy. Don’t try to milk in the dark. That’s the only white shirt you have. Don’t get it dirty.”

Debby watched them from the window. They climbed up the hill to the barn. She turned to set the breakfast table.

“I should have tied my apron on Uncle Cy,” she said.

A cold wind was blowing up on the hill where the barn stood, but inside it was dark and warm. The cows turned their heads this way and that, waiting for Jim to pull down their hay. Tommy lighted three lanterns, and their father went to the milk room for pails.

Then they sat down to milk the cows that they always milked. The boys took the young black and white ones, and their father took the old red cow, Martha.



Martha was a good, quiet cow. She had been quiet for years, but this morning she just knew that something was going on. Maybe she did not think, as Debby did, that Uncle Cy looked fine in his black suit and white shirt. She kept turning her head and rolling her eyes.

The pail was nearly full of milk when suddenly Martha struck the pail with her foot. Up flew the pail and down again! Down came the milk all over Uncle Cy's black suit and white shirt.

Jim and Tommy jumped up. They cried, "Father! Oh, Father!"

Their father was too angry to say a thing. How could Martha, the good, quiet cow, play such a mean trick on him? He reached up with a milky hand and tried to get the milk out of his eyes, but it kept running down from his hair. It ran into his ears and his nose and his mouth.

He looked so funny! Jim and Tommy could hardly keep from laughing.



Debby opened the kitchen door when she saw Uncle Cy coming. He walked in and stood by the stove. Aunt Mary never said a word. Debby never said a word.

Then suddenly Uncle Cy threw back his head and laughed and laughed.

"It was Martha," he said when he could get his breath. "Martha didn't like me in this black suit!"

Uncle Cy went up to his room to change his clothes, and he was still laughing.

Jim and Tommy came in with the pails of milk. Their mother put the milk into big round pans. She and Debby carried them to the shelves in the north room.

"How about the Fair, Mother?" asked Jim, as he sat down to breakfast.

"Ask your father," she said, turning the hot cakes. "Here he comes now."

"How about the Fair, Father?" asked Jim.

"You are going, just the same as ever," said his father. "You will go with the Browns just as soon as they come."

"Are you going, Cy?" asked Aunt Mary.

"Not this year," he said. "That suit will take a lot of cleaning, and I have only one shirt. Besides, I can stay home and put up fences in the south field."

"Oh, Uncle Cy!" cried Debby. "Stay at home by yourself? You wanted to go more than any of us did. I'll stay with you."

"No, we will!" cried Jim and Tommy.

There was so much talking and laughing that no one heard Fred Hill at the door. He just had to walk in.

"Hello! Hello!" he said. "What is all the noise about?"

Then everyone tried to tell him all at once about Martha and the pail of milk and Uncle Cy's best suit.

Fred Hill laughed and laughed.

Then Uncle Cy said, "Well, Fred, what brings you down our road this morning?"

Fred said, "Cy, I came to ask for two of your white oxen. I always take twelve to the Fair. Two of my oxen are sick. I thought you might let me have two of yours."

Just then Fred Hill had a good idea.

"If you can't go to the Fair with your family," he cried, jumping up from his chair, "why not go with me? You and I can drive the oxen to Whitlock. My boy was going with me, but he can go with your children."



Uncle Cy smiled and said slowly, "Fred, that is not a bad idea! I don't need my best black suit and my white shirt for the oxen, do I?"

"No," said Fred Hill. "Those overalls you have on now are just the thing."

"All right," said Uncle Cy. "We can start now. Mary, you and the children go with the Browns. Fred and the oxen and I will see you this afternoon at the Fair."



And that was how Uncle Cy got to the Whitlock Fair.

As for Debby and Jim and Tommy, they had a very good time seeing everything. They were very tired that night when they got home, but they wanted to start out for Whitlock the next day and see the Fair all over again.

But the next morning when they woke up, the ground was white with snow. Debby looked out into a queer white world.

“Fall has gone,” she said to herself, “and winter has set in. Winter at last!”

Squire Wiggins Goes Sliding

There is always something wonderful about the first snowstorm. Maybe it is because even ugly things look suddenly beautiful. Maybe it is because the whole world looks white and still.

This first snowstorm was wonderful to Debby. It was exciting, too. She could hardly get dressed because she ran to the window so often.

There was a soft, steady sound of the snow falling against the glass. Slowly a little hill of it was being piled up against the window.

Debby wanted to get out into the snow. She wanted to make snowballs, and then throw them. She wanted to fall into a pile of snow, and even roll in it like a puppy.

She could hardly eat her breakfast as she listened to the noise of Uncle Cy's snow shovel on the porch steps and on the snow-covered grass going down to the road.

Debby finished eating her breakfast, and then watched Aunt Mary at the green pump by the kitchen sink. The snow made the inside of the house look bright and cozy. The bright rag rugs looked pretty on the dark floor. Even the plants were showing tiny flowers.

Aunt Mary took a pan off the stove, and a rich, sweet smell filled the kitchen. It started Debby to thinking of all the good things to eat in the cellar.

There were rows and rows of glass jars full of things to eat on the shelves. There were all kinds of vegetables and fruits in these jars. Barrels full of potatoes stood next to the shelves. And next came barrels of apples — red ones and green ones.

In the north room next to the kitchen, the flour and sugar for pies and bread and cakes were kept. There were many, many good things to eat in this house, no matter how much it snowed!

The animals would be cozy in the barn, too. The cows could not go out to the fields any more, but they had enough to eat and drink. Debby was sure that they talked over the good times they had had in the summer.

The horses would be taken out now and then. Debby smiled to herself when she thought of them flying down the hill with the light cutter behind them. It was so much fun to ride in a cutter!

Uncle Cy had been working on it for two weeks, painting the sides and shining it up here and there. The heavy sled that the oxen pulled was made ready, too.

All such work was finished, and Debby knew that Uncle Cy would soon be ready to go to work in Squire Wiggins's shop.

This shop was in the village, a little way behind the schoolhouse. A great many of the farmers worked there in the winter when the snow lay white and deep on their fields.

Debby and Jim and Tommy started off to school very early the day of the first snow. They wanted to play in the snow with the other children.



Aunt Mary had bundled them up so well that only their bright eyes and the tops of their noses showed between the edges of their stocking caps and the edges of the little shawls they had around their necks.

They were very warm by the time they had run up the hill, making new tracks in the fresh, snowy road.

At the top of the hill they nearly ran into old Squire Wiggins. It was a good thing they didn't, because Squire Wiggins was feeling very cross that morning.

Then Debby said, "Good morning, Squire Wiggins. Isn't this a nice day?"

"No, it isn't!" said the Squire. "Good weather for breaking necks. That's what it is!"

Debby wanted to laugh, but she didn't. She and the boys looked at one another and thought to themselves, "My, Squire Wiggins is worse than ever!"

Squire Wiggins was a cross man most of the time — anyway, the village children thought so.

He lived in a white house at the top of the hill. He had many barns behind it, and apple trees of all kinds. There were early yellow apples and late red ones.

But do you think any of the village children ever picked an apple from one of the Squire's trees? No!



No boy had ever climbed up one of Squire Wiggins's trees without finding an angry Squire at the foot of the tree when he climbed down.



You can see why Debby and the boys ran by Squire Wiggins so quickly. As they ran, he called out something about sliding and breaking their necks, but they didn't listen.

Then suddenly they heard a yell behind them. They turned just in time to see two legs fly out, a red shawl waving, and Squire Wiggins himself sliding down the hill as fast as he could go. His lunch box was left behind.

As Squire Wiggins went sliding by, he yelled, "Stop me! Stop me!"

Jim and Debby ran to help the Squire. They tried their best not to laugh, but he did look funny.

He had really stopped himself before they reached him. He had put out both arms and caught hold of a tree growing close to the road. His red shawl had wound around the tree until the Squire looked like a horse tied to a post.

Debby hoped Tommy could see him. She looked up the hill where he was getting the Squire's lunch box. And just as she looked, she saw Tommy put a white package into his pocket.

"How queer!" she thought.





At last Jim and Debby got old Squire Wiggins on his feet. Tommy came with the lunch box. He had what Debby called the “secret look” on his face, but she was too busy brushing snow off the Squire’s coat to be worried about Tommy.

When Squire Wiggins was quite sure he had not broken his neck or his arms or his legs, they started on down the hill.

All the way down the hill the Squire was still very angry. He was not angry with Debby and the boys. He was angry at the snow and the hill and the wind. All the way down to the school the Squire kept talking about it.

"He was even angry at his own feet," said Debby later to the boys, "for not holding him on the road."

When they reached the schoolhouse, the Squire suddenly said, "Please don't say anything about this to anyone."

He looked at Debby and Jim and Tommy with his hard bright eyes, and they said, "We won't tell."

Then they ran into the schoolyard and began to play in the snow. That is, Jim and Debby did. Tommy went skipping off.

Just before school started, Tommy came back. He called to Jim and Debby. He was laughing, and he could hardly talk.

"I played a trick on Squire Wiggins," he said.

“How?” asked Debby.

“Well,” said Tommy, “up there on the hill his lunch dropped out of his box, and I put it in my pocket and put some stones in the box instead.”

Then Tommy and Jim laughed as hard as they could. But Debby said, “Oh, Tommy! That was mean. He is old and he will be hungry.”

“No, he won’t!” said Tommy. “I just went down to the shop and gave his lunch to Mac. I told Mac to wait until Squire Wiggins opened the lunch box and found the stones, and *then* give him his lunch.”

“Maybe that’s all right,” said Debby. “But I do wish you had not put the stones in the box.”

Then Tommy thought his joke was not so funny after all.

“You didn’t tell Mac what happened on the hill, did you?” asked Jim.

“Oh, no!” said Tommy. “We said that we would not tell.”

When Uncle Cy came home that night, he had a package under his arm. He handed it to Debby.

"Squire Wiggins told me to give this to you," he said.

"Oh, dear," thought Debby, "if Tommy had not put the stones in the lunch box!"

She opened the box and there lay three pairs of shining new skates. There was a letter in the box. It said, "To my three friends, to help them go sliding the right way! From Squire Wiggins."

"How nice!" cried Debby.

Tommy's face was very red, but no one said a word as to why the Squire made them such a fine present.

The next day Tommy saw Mac, who said, "I guess I had better tell you that I put the Squire's lunch in his box, and took out the stones before he saw them."

"Oh, thank you, Mac!" Tommy cried.

And from that minute on he could like his skates as much as the others did.



Cutting Ice

In a few weeks the ice was heavy enough to hold skaters. Harrison's Pond was the best place to go. All the children went there after school, and the grown-ups went there at night.

Debby wished she could go at night and see the lanterns shining on the snow and hear the fires cracking on the bank.

Near the pond lived old "Aunt Ann," as everyone called her. Debby could never find out what her last name was. No one knew, and she didn't like to ask Aunt Ann.

Aunt Ann lived all by herself in a tiny house. There was a high stone wall all around the house. And it had a big tree near the kitchen window that had pretty blossoms in the spring.

The exciting thing about Aunt Ann was that she carried a queer-looking stick, and because of this the boys laughed and said she was a witch.

But Debby knew better. Aunt Ann was no witch. She was a kind old woman.

Debby had made her many visits in the fall. Aunt Ann always gave Debby fresh milk, and cakes that she had just finished baking.

It was nice to run into Aunt Ann's house when you were skating at Harrison's Pond. Debby's fingers would get so red and cold that she could hardly take off her skates.



But once she came to Aunt Ann's door and went into that warm little kitchen, she would forget she had ever been cold.

Aunt Ann always said, "I take bundles of clothes off you, and you drink tea. Then I put bundles of clothes on you, and out you go!"

Sometimes Jim and Tommy came along, but most of the time Debby went by herself. The other children would not go.

All the children had fun at Harrison's Pond until the ice cutters came. In those days as soon as the ice in the ponds and rivers was hard and deep, men came with saws and cut out big cakes of it.

Then they pulled the ice on sleds to the icehouses, where it was covered with straw and stored until summer. On hot summer afternoons anyone in the village could buy ice and make ice cream.

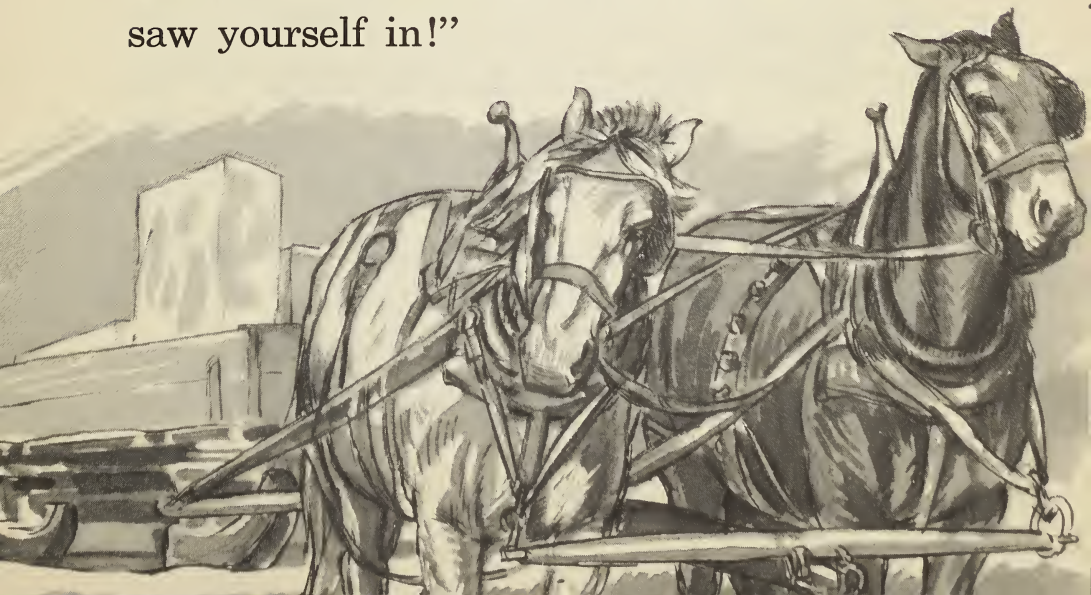


One afternoon when Debby and Tommy and Jim went to Harrison's Pond, they found the ice cutters were there. Frank Perkins and three men were at one end of the pond cutting ice with long bright saws.

The children were told to stay at the other end. But Debby had to have a good look. She had never seen ice cut before.

"Is it hard to do?" Debby asked Frank Perkins.

"Well, now," said Frank, pulling his fur cap closer about his ears, "it isn't so hard, but you have to take care. You saw this way and that way and this way. Then you have to take care that you don't saw yourself in!"



“My,” said Debby, “how cold that water looks! Still, don’t you think it would be exciting if someone sawed himself in?”

Frank Perkins didn’t think so.

Debby skated for a while, and then came back to the bank to watch Frank Perkins and the other ice cutters. Now they had a big pile of ice cakes ready to put on the sled.

As Debby stood there, jumping up and down and clapping her hands to keep warm, who should come along but old Charlie Richards! In his hand he carried a bright new saw.

“Coming to cut ice?” asked Frank in a cross voice.

“Yes,” said Charlie Richards. “I’m filling the icehouse in the woods. I’m getting ice for Aunt Ann and myself. She didn’t have ice last summer, but she is going to have it next summer.”

“You can’t cut ice here,” said Frank.

“Just watch me!” said Charlie.

Old Charlie Richards had a gray beard that wobbled up and down when he talked. Debby could never take her eyes off it. And now that Charlie was angry the gray beard wobbled faster than ever.

“I’ll cut ice!” yelled Charlie Richards. “I’ll cut the biggest cake of ice you ever saw!” And he started to work.

“You can’t cut ice by yourself,” said Frank Perkins, as he gave Charlie another angry look.

Debby watched them both. It was such fun that she had forgotten about the cold. Old Charlie Richards talked softly to himself, and all the time his gray beard moved slowly up and down. She saw his bright saw cutting up one side and down the other of a great cake of ice.

Then suddenly there was a crack and a big yell!

The cake of ice that Charlie Richards was cutting turned right over and landed him in the cold, black water.

Debby began to yell, too.

“He cut himself in! He cut himself in!” she cried.

“I knew he would!” said Frank Perkins.

But just the same Debby saw that he was the first man at the hole where old Charlie Richards had gone down.





Frank lay down on the ice, waiting for Charlie's head to come out of the water. Debby held her breath.

"This is terrible!" she thought.

All the men were quiet.

And then after a little wait, up came Charlie's head. Frank reached for his arms, but Charlie began to go down again, and Frank found himself holding on to the gray beard.

Old Charlie Richards liked his gray beard, and maybe he thought that Frank Perkins was going to pull it out.

“Let go!” he yelled as soon as he could get his breath. “Let go of my beard!”

Debby wanted to laugh, but she didn't. It was very funny to see Frank holding Charlie up by his beard!

Soon one of the other men threw a rope over Charlie. Somehow or other, the men got it under his arms. Then, and only then, did Frank Perkins let go of Charlie Richards's gray beard!



Debby watched Charlie being pulled out of the cold water, a great wet bundle of clothes. Then she looked up and saw Aunt Ann standing beside her. She had covered her head with a blanket and she looked more like a witch than ever.

“Frank Perkins,” she said in her queer, high voice, “I want him brought over to my house. I’ve some clothes he can put on and hot tea in the kitchen.”



Old Charlie opened his mouth to talk, and his beard wobbled up and down, but no one listened to a word he said.

Frank Perkins and the other cutters carried him up the bank and across the road to Aunt Ann's warm kitchen. They stayed right there until old Charlie was dressed in clothes that had belonged to Aunt Ann's brother. They were a little too big, but they would do to get home in.

Then Aunt Ann and Debby came into the kitchen, and they gave the men hot tea and fruit cake.

The other children who had been at the pond ran back to the village as fast as they could go. They wanted to tell their mothers and fathers that Charlie Richards had cut himself into the pond and Frank Perkins had pulled him out by his beard.

Later Debby learned that Frank Perkins filled the icehouse in the woods for Aunt Ann. Old Charlie cut no more ice that winter.



The Big Blizzard

One day, not long after old Charlie went through the ice, it began to snow again. A cold wind was blowing from the North that sent the snow into every tiny crack. The snow began to sting like icy needles, and it grew too cold for the children to play outside.

Uncle Cy came up from the barn to the house and shook the snow off his fur cap and coat.

"Looks like a blizzard, Jim," he said, as he saw the children carrying in wood. "Be sure to bring in enough."

Tommy and Debby worked with Jim until they had filled the wood box behind the stove and made a pile in the cellar.

After supper Uncle Cy went to the barn again just to see if the animals were all right and to make sure that the doors were closed.

It grew colder and colder. Aunt Mary sat with the children in front of the big fireplace. Debby and the boys warmed red apples under the logs. And all the time they listened to the wind roaring around the house and the snow falling against the windows.

"I like a blizzard," said Jim. "Once before we had a blizzard and we could not go to school for three days."

That night the family went to bed early. Debby went crawling under the covers and was glad to put her feet against the big bottle of hot water. Aunt Mary had put it there to warm the bed.



She woke next morning to find herself in a *real* blizzard. It was still snowing very hard. She could just see the trees when she looked outside. The roads and fences and gardens had long since been covered with snow.



Uncle Cy was up early to shovel a road to the barn. In some places the snow was nearly over Tommy's head. It was hard for the boys to help much.

It was still so cold that the boys had to stop now and then. They came in to warm themselves by the kitchen stove, and drink the hot milk Debby gave them.

At last Uncle Cy and the boys reached the barn and the hungry animals.

Two days later the sun came out, and the snow stopped falling. The sky looked very blue in this all white world. Debby could hardly see because everything was so bright and so white.

Aunt Mary was cutting carrots into a big pot of soup, and Debby was washing dishes. Uncle Cy came into the kitchen.

"Do you know what I think?" he said. "I think I'll go to town."

"To town!" said Aunt Mary. "Why, the road needs breaking first!"

"That's just it," said Uncle Cy. "I'm going to make a new road."

Debby opened her eyes wide. She cried, "Make a road! Through all this snow? How wonderful!"

"The oxen can do it," said Uncle Cy. "And when I get up to our village, I'll get Fred Hill and his oxen to go along."

"Well," said Aunt Mary, "Christmas is only two days off, and no mail can get through until the road is broken."



Uncle Cy went to the barn to get the oxen and the big sled ready. He filled the bottom of the sled with straw and put in some old blankets.

When all was ready, he drove the oxen out the side road from the barn and down the other road to the house.

The big white animals moved slowly. They did not like the deep snow, but they went plowing through it, pulling the sled behind them. Slowly, but surely, the road to the house was broken.

Aunt Mary met Uncle Cy at the kitchen door with a box of lunch. She said, "The children want to go, too."

"Oh, yes, the boys can go," said their father.

"Debby wants to go," said Aunt Mary.

"Debby?" said Uncle Cy, looking down at her bright little face. "Our little city girl will get cold. It is five miles to Whitlock."

"Oh, please, Uncle Cy!" cried Debby. "I won't get cold. I'll bundle up."

"All right," he said. "Come along."

Debby fairly danced out to the sled, she was so happy. How exciting it was going to be to see the road broken!



Then slowly the big white oxen went plowing on through the snow, up the hill to the village. The oxen made a small trail, but the road was opened at last.

When they drove into the village, the people came out of their houses, calling and laughing.

“Breaking the road to Whitlock!” called Uncle Cy. “Going to get the mail!”

Debby was glad to see that many of the people in the village wanted to go along. Fred Hill brought out two of his oxen, all ready to go. Frank Perkins came with his two boys, and Squire Wiggins said he wanted to go.

By this time there was no more room in the sled, and old Charlie Richards had to stay behind.

Fred Hill had hung a string of sleigh bells around the necks of his white oxen. It was a jolly, noisy party that called good-by as the big sled pulled slowly along, breaking the road to Whitlock.

Most of the time the men walked behind the sled. They all had on fur coats and caps, and walking kept them warm.

Jim and Tommy and the two Perkins boys jumped in and out of the sled. They made snowballs and played in the snow.

Debby rode in the sled covered up with one of the blankets, but she got tired of that. At last Uncle Cy said she could get out, too.



“Come on, Debby!” called Jim, and they ran and jumped into the big snow banks at the side of the road.

“Let’s catch the sled!” cried Debby, and away she ran like the wind. She ran so fast that the boys could not catch her.

And they laughed and played, ran and threw snowballs all the way to Whitlock.



The streets of Whitlock had been partly shoveled. Horses pulling light cutters went flying up and down. Horses pulling heavy sleds went much more slowly.

"The people all look happy," said Debby. "I guess they thought the blizzard was fun."

"A blizzard is fun," said Uncle Cy, "if you have enough wood and food." And then he added, "Well, here we are at the Post Office. Everyone out! I will get the mail and all the Christmas packages going to our village."

One mailman helped Uncle Cy carry out the big bags and all the other packages.

"I see my name on one!" cried Debby, dancing up and down in the snow.

"Here is one for us, too," said Tommy.

Then the mailman said, "There are new people in town looking for you, Cy. They wanted to go out to your farm, but got tied up by the blizzard. They are staying at Mrs. Adair's house."

“I w
said L
Cy,”

He said, “Mrs. Adair lives up the next street, and we can find out.”

But they didn’t have to go that far, because Debby suddenly gave a cry and ran toward a man and a woman.

“Mother!” she cried. “Father! When did you come?”

Everyone talked and laughed at once, but Debby found out that her mother and father came as a surprise for Christmas. The blizzard had kept them in Whitlock.

“Well, now,” said Uncle Cy, “the oxen broke open the road for us. What do you say to going home?”

Then the four white oxen turned their heads toward home. Debby rode between her mother and father. The boys sat in front, and all the men walked.

It was very dark when they reached the village, but they were all happy as they came down the snowy road.

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If *Fifty Winters Ago* is read subsequent to the reading of Unit Four of the Third Reader, *Wide Wings*, all words in *Fifty Winters Ago* will be familiar with the exception of fifteen new words which are contained in the following list.

The new words are grouped here under the pages on which they first occur.

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Where *TODAY'S WORK-PLAY BOOKS* are in use, *Fifty Winters Ago* may be read upon completion of page 166 of the Third Reader, *On Longer Trails*.

FIFTY WINTERS AGO

Macmillan

