*Back Home by Chris Hardie*

**Cold shoulder to cheap thermometer**

There’s been a thermometer of some sort hanging on the wall of a building on our farm for as long as I can remember. A few of them are still there, bearing the names of agricultural companies no longer in business.

Living in the country we live with the weather — the highs, the lows and everything in between. I don’t need an instrument to tell me when it’s 20-below zero because my frozen face and aching bones are all the proof I need. But I still want to know the actual temperature.

Whenever we have a cold snap I think back to a bitterly cold Sunday morning some 45 years ago. It was a day when breathing made my nose hairs ache and it hurt to face the wind.

It must have been divine intervention that brought us to church that day because doing chores on the farm takes at least twice as long when it’s that cold. It was the end of the service during announcements when the pastor remarked to the small group of shivering pilgrims about it being something like 35-below that morning.

My grandmother Cecil Hardie promptly stood up — all of her barely 5 feet — and proudly offered in her Norwegian lilt, “It was 44-below in Franklin this morning.”

If any other worshipers had a colder temperature to report, they held their tongue. Grandma had spoken. End of the conversation and pass the coffee. Grandma watched the thermometer outside her kitchen window with great vigilance. She took pride in being the amateur meteorologist of the town.

We have a digital thermometer to create our own little weather station measuring both indoor and outdoor temperatures, but it’s designed to register only as cold as 35-below. During 2019’s polar vortex that wasn’t sufficient to measure the negative-40 we had.

Recently, I decided to buy an old-fashioned thermometer to hang by the back door. It would be convenient for me to glance at on my way in from doing morning chores. I didn’t need anything fancy, just a plain unit. So, naturally, I reached for the row with the least expensive prices.

Cold weather must have seized my brain because I didn’t realize until the next morning that the thermometer had a major flaw. It only goes down to zero degrees. What good is that in Wisconsin? It needs to be less than zero before I even think about wearing long underwear.

I figured the store must be served by a southern thermometer manufacturer that thinks life ceases to exist at temperatures below zero. Then, much to my chagrin, I found out it’s made in Wisconsin — talk about a design flaw. I guess it’s a summer thermometer. About the only thing I can use it for now is to be sure the refrigerator is at 40 degrees.

And I need to stop using the phrase “the mercury dipped to” because mercury is no longer used by that company. The red dye in the thermometer is made of 99.7% coal oil and 0.3% red pigment.

My wife would remind me that perhaps I shouldn’t reach for the least-expensive-price shelf.

Caveat emptor.

**Readers weigh in**

My recent article on milking cows on a cold winter day received several reader responses.

Grant Mosely from Warrens said he had never heard the word “surcingle” that is given to the belt that holds the milker bucket to the cow.

“At one time in my life I did relief milking for several different farms,” he said. “Thankfully, most of them had pipelines by then, but one farm used the ‘belts’ and transferred milk to the bulk tank just as you said. Another used buckets that sat on the floor. The milk was then dumped into a stainless steel can and carried to the milkhouse. I believe the can was called a ‘shotgun can.’

“That was about 40 years ago. None of those farms milk today. One is a cranberry marsh, another is a sand mine (and) another a small beef farm. (The) rest just have empty barns with crops being grown on the land.”

Lora Wimer of Rusk County said my recent columns about cutting wood hit close to home.

“I am 62, moved to Rusk County from northern Indiana when I was just 4, so I grew up here in the cold north,” she said. “We cut wood with a buzz saw that my Pop attached to our Farmall H. We could do a lot of wood in an afternoon. We never had much woods of our own so we purchased a logger’s truckload, one of those smaller trucks, not a semi-load like today.

“I also grew up milking cows in a cold barn, real cold — I was the youngest of 8, and the only one that had any interest in farming. Cold hands were always put between the udder and leg of a cow. I taught my two daughters to do that when we farmed; our barns were never ‘toasty’ warm. We haven’t had cows since 2012 but just the last time my 32-year-old — who works as a physical therapist assistant — was home she said, ‘I need a cow udder; my hands are cold!’

“The saying ‘you can take the kid out of the country but you can never take the country out of the kid’ is so true.”

Wimer’s other daughter, 27, milks cows for a neighbor.

“We still have a farm and horses and a half-dozen beef but we don’t farm for a living,” she said.

Apparently, my secret spot for warming hands is well-known by milkers.

Danny Pawelski of Mosinee wrote, “Thanks for the write-up of the memories of winter-morning milkings. We had a similar setup. It has only been just over a year since I got out of dairy, but the article sure brought back some ingrained memories. I was ever so thankful during those harsh winter days last year of not having to go into the barn, but I do reminisce the hand-warming secret that you mentioned!”

I always appreciate reader feedback and story ideas. Keep them coming.

And stay warm — whether the thermometer works or not.

*Chris Hardie spent more than 30 years as a reporter, editor and publisher. He was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and won dozens of state and national journalism awards. He is a former president of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association. Contact him at**chardie1963@gmail.com**.*