



## *Snow Survey Centennial Celebration* 1906-2006

### CABIN FEVER

Anytime I tell a new acquaintance about my job as the Snow Survey Supervisor in Colorado, one of the most frequent comments I get is something to the effect of "Boy! That sure sounds like a great job." It's true. There are many days in the field when you're quietly saying to yourself, "Am I really getting paid to do this"? But then, there are also a lot of those other days, when you're saying, "Am I going to make it through all this?"

One of those occasions happened to a couple of my co-workers back when I was in my first year on the job. We had a SNOTEL site that was not reporting data and we needed to visit the site for repairs. SNOTEL sites are remote data collection stations that collect daily meteorological data that are used for everything from producing water supply forecasts, to tracking Caribou herd migrations, and everything in between. These sites use ionized meteor trails to send data back to our master stations back on earth...but, that's another story. Earl Halseth was our Electronics Technician, whose job was to try to solve the electronic mysteries of meteor-burst radio telemetry. Ken Jones was our Water Supply Forecast Hydrologist and had the best knowledge of the site route and location. Me... I was just tagging along to try to lend a hand and try to learn as much as I could.



SNOTEL site in Summer



SNOTEL site in Winter

We took snowmobiles out to the trailhead, pulled by two pick-up trucks. The day was a normal February day; a clear sky, sunny, but cold temperatures. At the trailhead, we backed the trailers in and uncovered the snowmobiles. That's always

when the fun begins... right? Wrong! In typical fickle snowmobile fashion, we had a tough time getting the engines to start. The cold temperatures sure weren't helping things. Finally, after choking the carburetors, flooding the engines, checking fuel lines, and pulling spark plugs, we managed to get a machine running. Time continued to pass into late morning, and we finally got another machine to start.

Now, with two snowmobiles running, and noon just around the corner, it was decision time. Should we continue to waste the day trying to get the third machine running, or just send Earl and Ken into the site with the two running machines? The answer was a pretty obvious. If we wanted the site fixed that day, Ken and Earl had better hit the trail, since it was a two hour trip into the site. So, I stood at the trailhead and enviously watched them take off up the trail. I returned to town in one of the trucks, leaving the other at the trailhead for them to take when they returned.

Later that night, about 8:00 o'clock, the phone rings and it's Ken's wife on the line. "Do you know where Ken's at? He's usually home by now," she said. My response was something wise, like "Are you kidding?" I look out the window at the pitch black sky and I'm thinking "Something's gone terribly wrong. They should have been back several hours ago." Then, coming to my senses, I tell Ken's wife "Don't worry, they'll probably be home soon, today's trip was just a typical repair visit. But, better call the county sheriff's office if they're not back soon. Give me a call when they get back, just so I'll know everything's OK."

About 10:30pm the phone rings again. It was Ken's wife... again. I was hoping it was Ken instead. "Ken's still not back, and I called the sheriff's office, she said. They said they'd get the Search and Rescue out to look for them first thing in the morning." I try to console her, but she seems quite accepting of the predicament. "I'm not worried. He's been trained in what to do when this kind of thing happens", she said. I was wishing, at the time, that I felt as confident, and in a weird way was feeling guilty that I was not out there to help in some way.

I didn't sleep very well that night, laying there wondering what went wrong. Was someone hurt, freezing, what? Morning finally came, and I got my things ready in case the sheriff's office needed my help to show them to the trailhead, give descriptions of their snowmobiles and gear, etc.

I was to meet the search and rescue group at the trailhead bright and early. My boss and I drove out there ready to help in whatever way we could. Not long after we arrived there, we could hear snowmobile engines off in the distance and they were getting closer. In a couple of minutes the two lost snow surveyors showed up on the machines. They were all smiles after a good night's sleep. I was relieved and couldn't believe it. "What happened", I asked.

It turns out the weather turned into a whiteout as they got near the site. They couldn't see more than several yards ahead of themselves as they tried to find the site. After a while, they come upon a set of snowmobile tracks. Without knowing what to do next, they decide to follow the tracks. After following this unknown snowmobiler a while, they take a look around and realized they had been here before. They were following their own tracks, and were going in circles. Realizing that they were in trouble, they made a last ditch effort to try to backtrack back to town.

After a short while, Ken looks off to the side and sees a dark object. He takes a chance and rides the snowmobile over toward the object. As he gets closer he

realizes it's a cabin. They both went up onto the porch and knocked on the door. Of course, no one was home there. It had to be just a summer cabin. It was late afternoon, and they realized they only had maybe another hour of daylight left. It was hopeless to think that they'd be able to find their way back to the truck that night. It was just a simple choice, either find a place to build a snow cave, or find a way to get inside the cabin.

It turned out to be a fairly simple task to stick a knife blade into the window edge and flip the hasp open. The window slid open easily at that point, and they were inside. Looking around, they found just about everything they needed for the night; a couple of cots with blankets, a wood stove, and even a box of Macaroni and Cheese.



The next morning dawned clear and sunny. The previous night's storm had dropped only about 6" of new snow, but in typical Wyoming fashion, most of it was traveling horizontally by a strong northern wind. Ken and Earl got on their snowmobiles and rode back to the trailhead without incident, arriving just in time to meet us and the Search and Rescue Team.

In retrospect, it seemed like Ken and Earl's luck changed quickly for the better when they found that cabin. From their story, it sounded like they had gotten a more restful night than I had.

Mike Gillespie  
NRCS, Data Collection Office Supervisor  
Denver, Colorado