

H A R L A N R I C H A R D S

January 1, 2018

Squeaky Snow

This blog is being written for all those people who live in places where winter doesn't come with piles of snow and below zero temperatures.

Living in a place where it gets below zero every winter and it snows regularly, I have a tendency to take the weather conditions for granted. We are currently experiencing our first really cold spell. By that I mean that we are having day after day of below zero weather along with high winds. For the first few days, it seems so cold as to be unbearable. But then it becomes the new normal and it's no big deal.

As I was walking outside the other day after we had received less than an inch of new snow, I noticed that the loose powdery snow under my feet squeaked as I walked on it. It sounds sort of like the sound you can make by squeezing an inflated balloon and letting your fingers slide along the surface. Snow acts differently when it falls during very cold weather. The snow that saqueaks usually falls when its less than 10°F. As the weather warms up, the closer it gets to melting (it melts at 32°F), the less it squeaks. Snow that has been lying on the ground for a while during temperature swings often becomes hard and forms a crust. This is caused by the snow starting to melt and then refreezing. Snow like this crunches instead of squeaks and often the snow underneath is soft so your foot sinks down after you break through the crust.

It is said that indigenous people living up by the Arctic Circle have numerous words to describe each type of snow. I can see why. In Wisconsin, we have about 5 months per year of winter weather (Nov.-March) with our harshest months being January and February. The further north you go, the less daylight there is, the colder it gets and the longer it stays cold. People living in a more wintery climate would benefit from having multiple words to describe the different consistencies of snow. Each type of snow can be equated to a specific set of temperature and wind conditions.

The second major factor in winter weather is the effect of the wind and is called "wind chill." It is based on a combination of temperature and wind speed which reflects how the weather feels to a person (this morning the temperature was -18°F and the wind chill was -37°F). It does not mean that an

inanimate object would be reduced to that temperature. It means that a 98°F human would cool down to the actual outside temperature as if the human was in a place with the colder temperature and no wind.

On the day I received my typewriter back from the repair shop, I carried it back to the unit where I lived without wearing gloves. It was a cold, windy day which created a wind chill below zero. I had to shift my typewriter from one hand to the other every minute or so because the wind sucked the heat out of my fingers so quickly I was in danger of getting frostbite (the liquid in your cells freezes and damages the tissue). It is called frostbite because of the stinging pain which accompanies the lowering temperature of the body part. It's so cold it feels like you're getting burned. You can get frostbite on your extremities and survive - sometimes losing a finger or toe in the process - but when your core body temperature drops below a certain point you can die. That's how people freeze to death.

Northern people know all this and deal with it every winter. Rarely does anyone get frostbite or freeze to death. Occasionally a homeless person will freeze to death and we are always cautioned by the experts to keep food, water and warm clothing in our vehicles so that we won't die of exposure if we break down on a lonely country road.

I see guys in Stanley who don't bother to wear a coat during the winter. We are generally only outside for a few minutes at a time walking from one warm building to another. Until last year, I never wore a hat in the winter and only started wearing a scarf 2 years ago (I'm about to turn 64 and my body does not stay as warm as it used to). I still don't wear gloves unless I'm going to be outside for a while - such as to work out (which I do whenever the outside rec is not closed due to the wind chill). It's easier and warmer to tuck my hands up my coat sleeves for the few minutes it takes me to go from one building to the next.

But not everybody takes the cold in stride. There are some guys here who wear thermal underwear all winter long. I've seen guys cover their entire head in a scarf and hat whenever the temperature drops below 40°. To each his own. In the early 1980s I chose to spend one winter living in my van and loved it. Put on enough clothes and you can live outside year around.