

Archive | NHPRC IT'S REALLY COLD...Leif's cold wx extravaganza! 1PBVBVJDQJGN4KYRCQZHTORPR

LEIF ENGER: First the news you already know. The Iron Range town of Tower has posted 60 degrees below zero, setting a record low for Minnesota and scooping a neighboring community that would have liked the record for itself. Jim Nelson, who's been selling a lot of space heaters and extension cords from his Tower hardware store, says the news you may not know is more interesting. That is, compared to occasional unofficial readings from just south of town, 60 below is tame.

JIM NELSON: It's a little cooler there. It's a little lower out there. So there they probably get another 10 degrees. That's unofficial. I heard that they were moving the thermometer out there and they went down into a little lower area and hit 74 degrees with it. That's 74 below.

LEIF ENGER: But it's the official reading that counts. In the early morning hours, reporters and residents in nearby Embarrass gathered around their official thermometer. Embarrass is often the coldest town in the state and seemed a logical spot for the record to occur. Watching the mercury crawl southward, Embarrass denizens seemed to have history in their grasp. What happened next is likely to become scandalous folklore hereabouts. Township supervisor Buzz Schultz told Gary Eichten about it on MPR's *Midday* program.

BUZZ SCHULTZ: At 3:30 this morning we registered 53 below. And we've had so much media coverage with the TV people and their cameras that I think they disturbed the probe. And at about a quarter of 4:00, the temperature started to fluctuate from the probe, which is really the sensor. And we were getting terrible readings, and the bar thermometer, that kept dropping. But that is not our official taker, as we call it.

GARY EICHTEN: Mm-hmm. So the media may have sabotaged your run for the record?

BUZZ SCHULTZ: I don't know if you'd call it sabotage. It's just one of those things that everyone was so excited that we possibly had the opportunity to break the record.

LEIF ENGER: The other Minnesota city with a burning interest in cold, International Falls, also set a local low temperature. But at only 45 below zero, no one even noticed. Still, city officials are delighted with the arctic snap. Cold weather product testing used to be a million-dollar business in the Falls, and city clerk Gary Davison says it could be again, if the errant companies who departed are watching the weather.

GARY DAVISON: We had those two firms that left this year and went to Michigan. I'm sure the people that left are sorry, because this would have been probably the best year they've ever had to test in this area.

LEIF ENGER: All this cold is a lot less enjoyable if your car won't start or your furnace conks out. Across the state, auto clubs and service stations report hundreds of vehicles gone dormant. And if you heat your home with bottled propane, you should know that the volatile gas turns docile as bucket of paint at exactly 44 degrees below zero. At that temperature, says Ardis Brissett of Suburban Propane in Staples, your tank loses pressure, your fire goes out.

ARDIS BRISSETT: A lot of people called at 5 and 6 o'clock this morning saying their furnaces were out. We give them advice to get the snow away from the tank, and try and protect the tank, warm the tank up. And a lot of them were back and running by noon.

LEIF ENGER: Brissett says the best and safest way to warm a propane tank is to throw a dark-colored tarp over it. The tarp absorbs heat and the propane becomes gaseous and useful again. Another note, Brissett says-- in a prolonged cold snap like this one, a tank that ordinarily heats your home for a month might last only three weeks or so.

Her thermometer, by the way, bottomed out at 40 below. But she says a friend called to say his had gone to 60 below, and then broken. On a day like this, you've probably found you don't even have to ask people what the temp was at their place. They just tell you and expect you to tell them back.

SUSAN CAROL It's interesting. Maybe it's some kind of immortality that we seek, the same as we do for other kinds of records.

HAUSER: We hope it will last a long time. And I'm sure people will be saying, oh, but you should have been here in '96.

LEIF ENGER: Susan Carol Hauser is a writer and Minnesota Public Radio commentator who lives near Puposky, north of Bemidji. She was a bit ashamed to admit the temp at her house only reached 38 below, but agreed to write this limerick in honor of the day.

SUSAN CAROL Minnesotans are hardy, we know. They brag about living with snow. But this winter's so stark, their tall tales

HAUSER: won't start. Even words freeze at 60 below.

LEIF ENGER: MPR commentator and deadline poet Susan Carroll Hauser. The official low temperature record of 60 degrees below zero set in Tower beats the old mark of minus 59 set at the Leech Lake Dam in 1899. Leif Enger, Mainstreet Radio.