

The Blizzard of 1948

Meade County, Kansas

February 10, 1948, dawned clear and fair over the Kansas High Plains. Residents of Meade County in southwestern Kansas enjoyed the unseasonably high temperatures. Farmers prepared to take advantage by tackling chores they might not otherwise have in winter. Town folks put on their light jackets and went about their Tuesday business.

In Fowler, Melvin Miller headed to his job. Just a year out of high school, he was building a good reputation as an outstanding young adult in his community. In Meade, the next town over, 19 year-old Phyllis Moler went to her job as a bookkeeper and clerk at Brannan's in Meade. She'd worked there almost two years since graduating from Meade High School, and by all accounts was considered a credit to her family and an asset to the community. Her sister Louise, 16 years old, went to school at Meade High, where she was in her junior year. All that was said about Phyllis was also said about Louise. In academics, extracurricular activities, church faithfulness, she was a person her parents and the community could be proud of. It's possible that, after school, she went to her part time job at the Ben Franklin Store. Once home, she waited for her boyfriend Melvin to arrive for their evening plans.

At the Moler farm, five miles north of Meade, Millard and Elfa Moler went about their daytime work, at the farm. Millard sometimes worked away from the farm as well, to bring in a little income. For years he had been the crane operator at the silica mine north of Meade. Perhaps he went to one of those jobs that day. If Elfa followed her normal routine, she would have baked bread that morning, cleaned house,

tended to laundry, and prepared meals. If she could find a few moments, she would have gone to the piano and played for a while. Blessed with four daughters, they were a hard-working couple who lived quiet lives with family and church at the center. Their two older daughters were married and in the area. Esther, the oldest, lived with her husband Wayne Cheney in a small house near the elevator in Fowler. Their son, 9-month-old Merrill, was the first and, at that time, only Moler grandchild. Faye, the next oldest, lived in Meade with her husband Leonard Pohl.

When Phyllis got home, she prepared for the evening she would share with her sister and Melvin. A gathering was planned in Fowler, at the apartment of Miss Lillian Wright. Various accounts describe it as a dinner, a birthday party, a church party, and, by some remote press accounts, a dance. It certainly wasn't a dance. It appears to have been a small dinner gathering, perhaps to celebrate a birthday. Shortly before leaving for the evening, Phyllis played the piano. She was able to play by ear, and was an accomplished player, mostly of hymns.

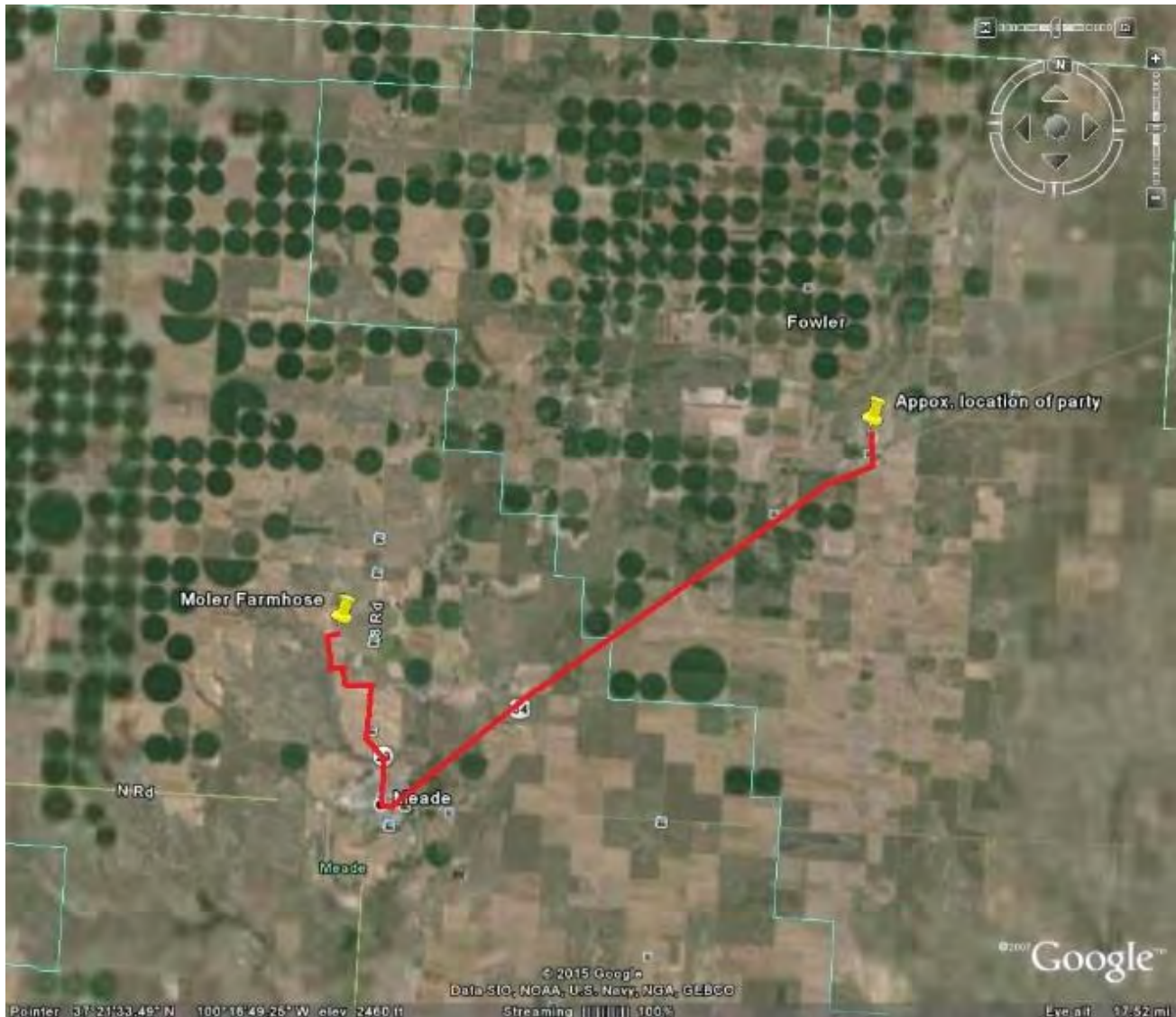
Melvin completed his day's work as a mechanic at the Dewell Motor Company, and drove his new Kaiser car to Meade (though some newspaper reports indicate it was a Frazer), then north and west, to the Moler farm. He picked up Louise and Phyllis and drove back to Fowler for the dinner. The weather held as it had that morning, and off they went, donned in their light, spring jackets. Millard and Elfa, with daytime chores completed, ate supper, and settled in for the evening.

Also attending the dinner in Fowler were Melvin's mother and his younger sister. His dad, Jess, was away in Wichita. It was two weeks since Melvin's younger brother had major surgery, and Jess was there at the hospital with him. As soon as the meal was eaten, Melvin's mother looked out the window and saw that it was snowing. No one had expected that. She decided to leave immediately for home with her daughter. The young people, however, continued with their evening visit, enjoying the time among friends.

As it turned out, the snow that began in the

spring-like weather gave way fully to the storm that had been over the horizon. Metaphors and clichés for storms are cheap. It came on like gangbusters. It came out of nowhere. Describe it how you will, it was a blizzard, of strong winds, heavy snowfall, and plunging temperatures. Some remember it as a three-day storm. Most likely the blizzard that began Tuesday at dinner time was still ferocious Wednesday morning.

The three who were visiting in Fowler started for Meade around 10 p.m. The conditions, three or four hours into the storm, must have been



evening was not a light dusting. Before long,

rapidly worsening. Their route most likely would

have been south Main Street in Fowler, which took them within a 200 yards of Esther and Wayne's house, then west on Highway 54. Highway 54 was the most direct route with the best road and most traffic (although Highways 98 and 23 were a shorter, less traveled route to the Moler home). They would come to the crossroads in Meade, a few blocks from Faye and Leonard's house. To get to the Moler farm they would turn north. A couple of miles on Highway 23, then a couple more along the dirt roads to the west and north, and they would be at the girls' home.

The storm, however, had other ideas. Once they got off the paved road, the young people found the dirt road severely drifted and hazardous. The several curves in the road were prime locations for drifting, and the drifts would be in a different location at each turn in the road. They made it about a mile, then the car was stuck. We can imagine the conditions, probably four or five hours now into the storm. It was likely whiteout, visibility essentially zero, wind-chill most perhaps down to zero. The distance to the Moler farm, about a mile along the road and then two hundred yards down the driveway, with no other houses on the way, might as well have been a hundred.

At the farm, Millard and Efla didn't know what to think. Where were their two youngest daughters? It was a school night, and a work day tomorrow, so the girls wouldn't stay out real late. When 11:00 p.m. came and the girls weren't home, given the ferocity of the storm, the parents were probably worried. Having no phone, they couldn't call anyone. Plus, neither Esther nor Faye had phones. The parents would have wondered if the young people decided to spend the night in Fowler, either with their friend Lillian or sister Esther. Or, if they did start for home, by the time they reached Meade they may have realized it would be too difficult to make it to the farm, and would have stopped

and stayed at Faye's. At some point the Molers would have gone to bed, most likely believing Phyllis and Louise, and their friend Melvin, were somewhere safe.

North of Fowler, Melvin's mother and sister had a phone at their farmhouse, but who could they call to find out about their son, his date, and her sister? When Melvin didn't come home, his mother probably thought he and his friends had spent the night elsewhere. In Wichita, it's most likely Melvin's dad didn't even know his son had gone out for the evening.

Morning came. The Molers and the Millers would have had the same thoughts they went to bed with: The three youths were somewhere safe, having been unable to get home in the storm. Daily routines would have been altered, due to snow. Except for tending animals, work would be inside this day. At some point during the day Wednesday the storm tapered off, but getting around by vehicle would have been about impossible. Roads wouldn't be cleared immediately, and few people were going anywhere. At Dewell Motors and at Brannans, it was noted that Melvin and Phyllis did not come to work. Wednesday was pretty much a quiet day. The day passed and Millard and Elfa, and Melvin's mother, could do nothing but wonder where their children were, presumably somewhere safe.

The first indication that anything was wrong was on Thursday when the car was found. Faye (Moler) Pohl's recollection is that her father was the one who spotted the car. Wondering about his daughters' absence, then over 36 hours, he climbed to the top of the windmill near the house and looked up and down the road. He saw a car stuck in the road, maybe a mile from the house. Newspaper stories don't specify, but suggest someone drove along the road to the Moler farm, saw the car stuck in the snow, almost completely covered by it. Whoever first saw the car, did he know it was Melvin's?

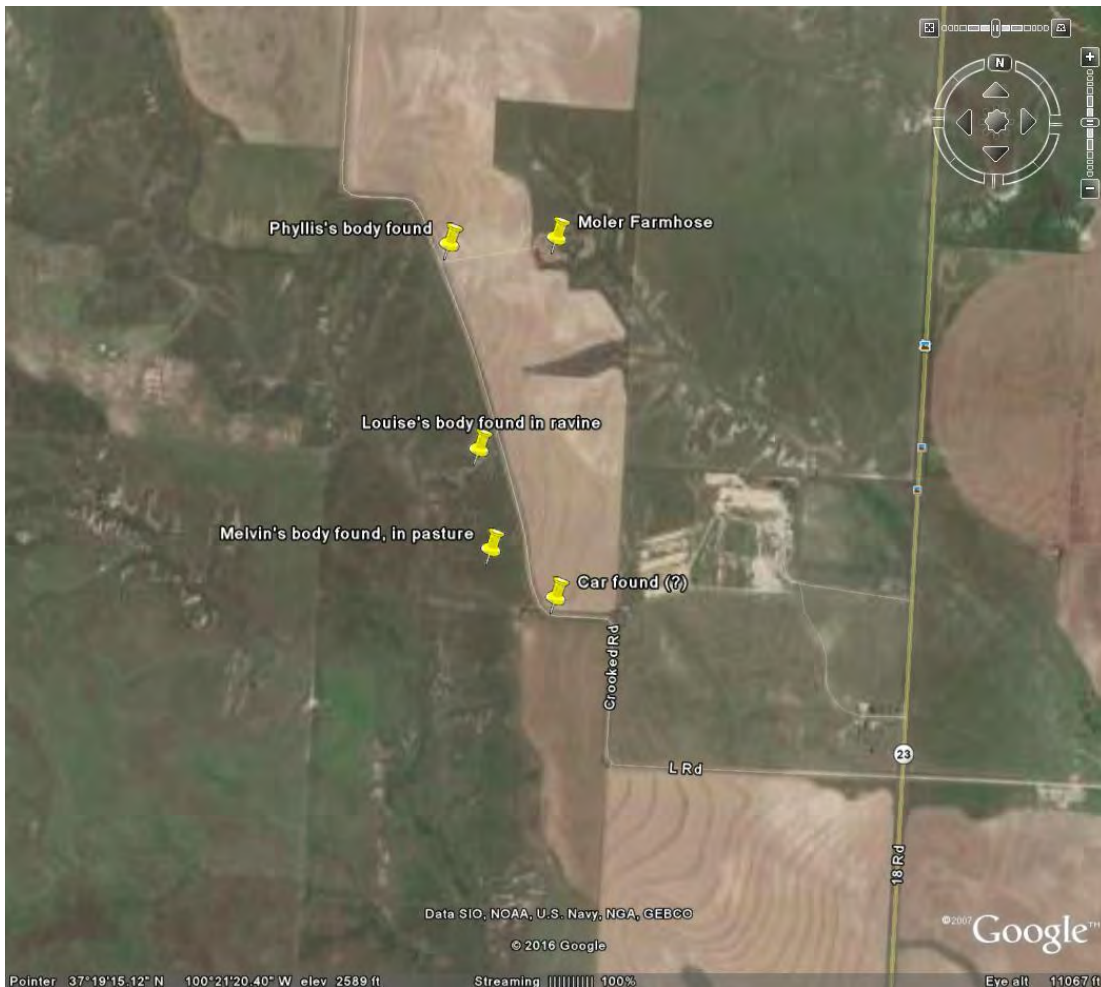
Between the car and the farm had no unusual sights, other than snow everywhere, deep in most places and deeper in drifts. Whether the first person to see the car stopped at the Moler place or continued on up the road isn't known, but we suppose he probably stopped. There he learned that Phyllis and Louise hadn't come home Thursday night, and that they had been out with Melvin. Most likely he returned to the car, and found it almost filled with snow, and no one there.

The first step was to determine whose car it was. Somehow, someone determined it was Melvin's. Soon the alarm was raised.

there that someone stopped and told him something: perhaps that a car was stuck near the Moler farm, and that Esther's two youngest sisters and their friend were missing; or may be just that the three were missing without any mention of the car being found. He would have told them that they didn't come by his house in Fowler the night of the storm.

Before long a general alarm was out. Radio station KGNO in Dodge City learned the news, and broadcast information for the search party. Three young people, last seen 36 hours or more ago, apparently had driven through the storm, became stuck, and were now missing. A group

of



Although roads were bad, Wayne Cheney knew he had to see to his cattle. He had recently bought some, and had them grazing between ventured out and made it to his pasture. It was

about 200 assembled for the search. However, it was Elfa Moler who had the misfortune of making the first discovery. There, at the end of the drive, just two hundred yards from the

farmhouse, she saw a shock of red hair sticking through the snow. It was the body of Phyllis.

Not long after, the searchers found Melvin's body, closer to the car, in a field west of the road but buried in snow. Louise's body, however, was not found right away.

The car was examined. A fencepost was wedged under it. It appeared that Melvin had yanked it from the nearby fence and tried to somehow break the car loose from the snowdrift with it. Whether the engine was still running after the car became stuck is unknown. At some point the three young people had decided to try to make it the mile to the Moler house. Without winter coats, without gloves or warm hats, with only light, spring jackets, they headed into the whiteout conditions. It appeared they followed the fence line. Both Melvin and Phyllis had cuts on their hands, and bits of their clothing had stuck to the barbs, suggesting that they went through the storm grasping at the fence.

The best guess of those who saw the scene was that the three started for the farmhouse together. Why they did that, instead of staying with the car, no one would know. Perhaps the engine died when the car got stuck. Perhaps they stayed in the car for a long time, engine running, heater on, until the fuel ran out. And, there is no way of knowing if all three left the car at the same time. It's possible that Melvin headed out first, and that the girls remained at the car a long time, waiting for the help he had gone after. For whatever reason, they headed out. Possibly he was exhausted from his attempts to free the car, and decided he couldn't go on. To searchers it appeared he doubled back toward the car, and somehow wandered off into the pasture and succumbed there. Obviously Phyllis, found so close to the farmhouse, had continued on to get help from her parents. She made it nine-tenths of the way before succumbing. It appeared that she reached the mailbox, but, being unable to see

the house, turned the wrong way. She went a few steps north (instead of east, down the drive) before her strength was exhausted. The only part of her not covered by falling and drifting snow was that lock of hair that Elfa saw. So Melvin and Phyllis were found, but where was Louise?

It was later in the day, Thursday, when Louise's body was found. She was in a small ravine on the west side of the road, under eight feet of drifted snow. She was sitting, hunched up, her arms clasped around her knees, back to the earth. Most likely she slipped and went under the fence, sliding down into the ravine and couldn't get back up. She had the same cuts on her hands as her friends did. In fact, it was the pieces of her jacket on the fence, and seeing where they stopped, that lead the searchers to look for her in the ravine.

The tragedy greatly affected Millard and Elfa, as can be imagined. Their daughter Esther describes it this way: "Mama never did get over it...she just almost fainted away. Poor Daddy...I never saw him cry so hard. For a long time Mama wouldn't let anyone play the piano. Phyllis had been the last one to play it, and for a long time it stayed that way."

The funeral was on Tuesday, February 17, one week after the storm hit. Preparation of the bodies for open-casket viewing was a difficult task, and the morticians did an excellent job. Because of the expected size of the crowd, some suggested the funeral be held in the school. The Moler family, however, wished it to be in a church. The sanctuary of the Church of the Nazarene, where the Molers and Melvin attended, was too small. So the funeral was held at the Meade Methodist Church, which had the largest sanctuary in Meade. Local newspapers covered the event. Seven clergymen, church ensembles, and school classmates participated in the service.

Melvin was laid to rest in Fowler Cemetery, and Phyllis and Louise in Valley View Cemetery in Garden City. The entire day was blessed with fine, spring-like weather, so different than Tuesday evening a week before.

As a nation we now have much improved weather forecasting and dissemination of information. Most likely you know on Tuesday morning if a blizzard is going to hit at supper time. You would know to dress for the weather that was coming, or even if you should cancel your plans and reschedule. You would have a phone, and be able to call someone and get a report on road conditions. Or, if your car got stuck, you would be able to call for help.

Today, few remain who participated in those events. Archives contain newspaper stories of the events, though we can't be sure they are correct, even though they captured information a

conflict. An example is the whereabouts of Melvin's dad. The newspapers reported he was in Wichita, and that he didn't get back to Meade County until Friday. However, Esther remembers that "it was Mr. Miller who saw Wayne with the cattle and stopped to tell him Melvin and the girls were missing." Faye also remembers that Mr. Miller was in the area. So perhaps he had been in Wichita Tuesday night, but hurried back Wednesday and saw Wayne Cheney on Thursday. In that case, the report of him returning to Meade County on Friday would be in error.

Only three knew exactly what happened that night. The rest of us rely on written reports, memories of those who participated, and stories passed down in the family. I'm not sure the truth can be known more exactly than reported here. I hope this article will help



few days after the events. Memories tapped now are sixty-eight years later. Still, memories of such events tend to be vivid and long-lasting. Sometimes the memories and the newspapers

preserve the memory for those who come after us.