



# VOICES FROM HISTORY: GETTING READY FOR WINTER - PUBLISHED 11/23/2018

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When fall arrives these days, most homeowners spend a weekend or two preparing for winter: raking leaves, winterizing the lawn mower, firing up the snow blower to make sure that it works, and, if you're really lucky, getting the Christmas lights up before the bitterly cold weather sets in.

In the 19th century, preparing for winter was much more labor intensive and could take several months to complete. Occasionally, circumstances such as inclement weather or ill-health could cause these chores could go on well into the winter. That was certainly true for the Davis household, at their 1st home located close to what is now the intersection of Albert St. and Grove St, then, beginning in the fall of 1845, at the old Fell farmhouse and later I-house addition, and finally, after 1872, at the David Davis Mansion that we know today.

The number of people in Sarah's household, or her "family" as she referred to them, changed from year to year. This family would have included anyone, hired help or family, for whom she was responsible. It is unlikely that Sarah was ever truly and completely alone as the running of a household and a farm would always have required at least one hired girl and several men to work the farm and maintain the property.

*"Mr Davis brings in every day more wood than we burn on both fires – always leaves a large bucket filled with water in the sink – and if I am alone – assists me in a variety of ways about my house work [sic]." Bloomington, February 13, 1840 (AL 3) SWD-WPW*

*"My [health?] is tolera[bly?] good this winter – tho my strength is not [up] to doing my work without the assistance of a girl. I have one about 16 years of age – who does very well. We have 5 in the family. Washing is very expensive when it is done out of the house. Mr Davis keeps no boy – but does his own "chores" with the exception of milking which is performed by*

*Catharine [the hired girl]. She runs of errands, helps me to tend the fire & does a great many "odds and ends". I have tried to teach her to sew and read some.*" Bloomington, January 10, 1842 (WMS C) SWD-FWW

*"[My dear sister], - Oh how busy I have been ... - We have a steady family of nine hearty ... [persons staying with us] - the milk of four cows to take care of - and a general house cleaning not to speak of sundry calls we have received -... I bake my bread and pies - wash milk pans, etc. - in addition to the other duties that devolve upon me as housekeeper - and really Sister dear, I have been too weary to write you until now -"* Bloomington, November 12, 1855 (WC 4) SWD-FWW

*"The winter thus far, has been very open and Mr Davis has several times opened the cellar to admit fresh air. A cold day makes us all joyous."* Bloomington, January 19, 1844 (WMS B) SWD-FWW

*"Our cellar seems just now free from rats - probably owing to the fact of our having caught 20 - By keeping the cellar cool I hope to preserve the apples - which now look very well - ... our cider is good -"* Bloomington, December 16, 1866 (ALPL) SWD-DD

One of the constants in the lives of the Davis family was the late autumn (or, depending on the weather, early winter) slaughter of Sarah Davis' pigs. The timing of the slaughter was crucial because there wasn't just the slaughter to consider but also all of the related jobs that were created by the slaughter. Fat needed to be rendered for lard, ashes from the smokehouse were used to make lye for making soap, casings for sausages were made from the washed intestines, and the feet, tail, head, etc. were used to make souse [*A version of head cheese pickled with vinegar is known as souse. Head cheese is not a dairy cheese, but a terrine or meat jelly made with flesh from the head of a calf or pig, or less commonly a sheep or cow, and often set in aspic. The parts of the head used vary, but the brain, eyes, and ears are usually removed. <http://beef2live.com/story-head-cheese-0-111468>*] Very little went to waste. The Davises occasionally butchered beef as well. Butchering time provided employment for a number of men and women who were hired to help get all of these things done while the ingredients were still fresh. That is why it was important to wait until the weather was cold enough to keep things fresh.

*"I am debating about the propriety of killing the pigs this week - I shall be governed by the weather - and the certainty of getting Catharine to help me -"* Bloomington, December 10, 1866 (ALPL) SWD-DD

*"Owing to company and my cold, my pigs were allowed to live beyond the time I had allotted them. Last week we sent them to the slaughter house and I sent for an Irish woman who once lived with me and we got on famously... The lard was made and the sausage ground and bagged before bed time. The hams, shoulder, and sides packed away - The*

heads I divided with the needy as well as the ashes – and except the heads Catharine took home to make cheese on shares. The feet we use for souse – one tail (the only one from six hogs) I saved for Sarah but she forgot it and Mary disposed of it – “Bloomington, January 21, 1860 (WC 4) SWD-FWW

“Yesterday we had a young cow driver over from the Farm – and tomorrow [a man?] from one of the Shops in town is to [Kill] it – I was afraid it would be too late to make dried beef if we waited any longer – To day [sic] we had the Beef killed – and it is to hang till tomorrow when Con [ O’Driscoll, an Irish hired man] will cut it up – The hams of pork are now in the smoke house-“ Bloomington, February 20, 1861 (ALPL) SWD-DD

“Both Katie and Bridget are in today. We have been quite busy with the pork – Catherine taking charge of meat and men – I never have known such heavy meat – and I had a half barrel of pork put up – and then had lard enough from the remaining sides to fill my own and my neighbors jars – I now feel that we may consider the heavy work of the season over – and settle down to every day life again-“ Bloomington, January 11, 1874 (ALPL) SWD-DD

And there was a rather surprising, at least to our 21st century eyes, beauty benefit which Sarah looked forward to enjoying after the pigs were slaughtered:

“I have sent 6 large hogs to the Slaughter house to day – and shall be able to grease my hair after tomorrow.” **Bloomington, December 4, 1876 (WMS B) SWD-DRW**

Of course, there were always the usual chores to be done despite the hustle and bustle of butchering:

“Con will cut my sausage and then begin again at his wood – I believe everything is covered out of doors – we did not finish trimming the berries but that can be done another time as well.” Bloomington, December 4, 1861 (ALPL) SWD-DD

“Yesterday it rained and Con did not go to the timber but did odds and ends that were needed – “ Bloomington, December 8, 1861 (ALPL) SWD-DD

“Joe is cutting wood in the grove – I mean splitting it – I fear we cannot fill our Ice House this year – all the ice about is engaged to Mr Monroe and Mr O’Brien who are putting it up for sale – There is none on your land –“ Bloomington, January 26, 1862 (ALPL) SWD-DD

“It rained Sunday night and Monday but cleared up Tuesday morning with a high wind. As it was our washing day we found it dangerous to put out the clothes to day – as two old sheets proved – the hems being almost torn off”. Bloomington, November 15, 1871 (ALPL) SWD-DD

*“It rained again last night and turned cold and a little snow fell early today. I am looking for a cold Winter. I hope the men may cover the vines and shrubs tomorrow as the weather is very variable. The Fall has been very pleasant, and we cant [sic] look for much mild weather after this. Mike and one other man trimmed and covered the grapes today – also covered tender plants. I have had some bulbs planted in the garden – and have had the roses from the front yard heeled in for the Winter. Shall try to get straw to cover Strawberries this week. The ground freezes some at night – and the weather is comfortably cool.”* Bloomington, November 21, 1871 (ALPL) SWD-DD

*“We dried our clothes this week in the attic to the new house.”* Bloomington, November 30, 1871 (ALPL) SWD-DD

*“I have had my vinegar & cider taken to George’s [their son, George Perrin Davis] cellar – and my flowers went there yesterday – I find a constant necessity for watchfulness to keep things from being forgotten –“* Bloomington, November 19, 1870 (MCMH) SWD-DD

*“I succeeded in getting some shades for the dining room windows – and had them put up – also had two panes of glass put in, which Bridget unfortunately broke since I had the others mended....you will be pleased to know that we have up the double windows –“* Bloomington, December 16, 1866 (ALPL) SWD-DD

*“I still keep my few plants in the south chamber over the Hall – but must get my paint and windows cleaned in the dining room, and the double windows in – so that I can bring them [her plants] below.”* Bloomington, November 21, 1871 (AL 7) SWD-DD

*“The wind was so strong here this week as to keep the floors very cold – and every room froze but the dining room which, by hanging up shawls on the West [wall] and pinning papers over my plants, kept them safe.”* Bloomington, February 15 1872 (AL 7) SWD-DD

*“Sallie needs some thick clothing at once – and the pigs must be killed this week if possible – and my double windows are not yet spoken for, & all things considered I think it best to give up my visit to St Louis –“ [David Davis was in St. Louis at Abraham Lincoln’s request to serve, along with 2 other men, on the Fremont Commission. They were examining and deciding on unsettled claims incurred by deposed general, John C. Fremont.]* Bloomington, December 1, 1861 (ALPL) SWD-DD

Warm clothes were definitely a concern as Sarah prepared her household for winter, not only for the outdoors but for the indoors as well. It is hard for us to imagine just how cold a house could be in the days before central heating was perfected. In the very early days of their marriage, Sarah wrote to her parents back in Lenox MA to reassure them that she was ready for an Illinois winter. It seems that as she was nearing the end of her 2nd winter on the prairie, practicality had won out over fashion:

*“[My dear father] “We have had a thaw which has made the roads shocking for a week. I had my feet wet Tuesday – for the first time this year - and I believe for the first since I came to Illinois. I actually went over the tops of my cowhide shoes that William Holden [a Lenox shoemaker] made. My india Rubbers [rubber overshoes] were badly burnt on top – as I was coming out – and I cant [sic] procure another good pair. I am pretty well cased in Flannel – wear thick stockings – and wonder sometimes how I used to change [clothes] so foolishly. Comfort before looks – is my motto...”* Bloomington, February 13, 1840 (ALPL) SWD-WPW

*“..... I had a crimson Petunia and two rose geraniums when I was taken sick [when Sarah gave birth to 3rd son, Mercer] – but they were taken from my room and froze.”* Bloomington, March 10, 1846 (WMS B) SWD-FWW

*“I have kept George out of school some days – as there is no fire in the schoolhouse ... and perhaps it is as well for him to play in the air – I think sitting in a cold room injurious – I hope they may get a stove soon –“* Bloomington, October 1852 (ALPL) SWD-DD

*“I dont know how the thermometer stands – but I do know that my feet were not warm any part of the night – Jennie [a cousin of Sarah Davis who was visiting] and I slept in my room- I could not sleep – rose at two and went out in the dining room found the stove about cold – this oak wood burns beautifully but the coals soon lose their heat when the wood is gone – I took all my flowers down cellar and then went back to bed – but no warmth was in store for me – Did I not think of someone far away – whose feet have imparted warmth to mine for “many a year”?* Bloomington, December 10, 1866 (ALPL) SWD-DD

There were years when circumstances complicated or prevented even the routine preparations from being accomplished. The year 1872 was one of those years. They were in the midst of a drought and, by that summer, most households found themselves having to conserve their water as most households depended on cisterns and rain barrels for their water supply.

*“Our cistern water is about gone. Many in town have to buy all they use.”* Bloomington, February 4, 1872 (ALPL) SWD-DD

*“We caught several tubs of water from the melting snow that dripped from the roof. Mary [Finley, an Irish hired girl] was very active in carrying it to the cistern. I saw by yesterday’s paper that rain fell in Springfield on Friday – and snow to the depth of 10 inches in Jacksonville.”* Bloomington, February 18, 1872 (ALPL) SWD-DD

*“The wind blows hard and a driving rain is falling. I had arranged to go to town for some errands but will not go out in the rain. It will be a great blessing to the County to have a heavy rain. Water is much needed by many.”* Bloomington, November 4, 1872 (ALPL) SWD-DD

If the drought wasn't bad enough, autumn brought with it reports of an epizootic, or an epidemic which affected animals, in this case horses. In time, it would become a nationwide outbreak of equine influenza. It was first reported in Ontario, Canada in September. It worked its way into and across the US throughout the autumn of 1872 and spring of 1873. You have to remember that horses were the lifeblood of daily life then. Every wagon, carriage, street car, fire wagon, virtually every vehicle in use required horses for locomotion, not to mention the horses used daily for work and personal travel. With an estimate of up to 75% (some reports say 85-90%) of horses ill and unable to work at some time during the epizootic, daily life and the national economy were seriously affected.

On November 9th, a great fire, similar to the one that had struck Chicago barely a year before, struck Boston. The Boston fire chief had visited Chicago after the fire there in October 1871, hoping to avoid a similar disaster if such a fire would strike Boston. To his dismay, when such a fire did hit, his newly and highly trained horses were unable to work as they were sick with the equine influenza and the fire department had to resort to hiring 500 extra men to help the regular firemen pull their wagons and equipment to the fire.

There was a personal connection between the Davis family and the Boston fire. Eugene Flagg (1842-1874) was the son of prominent Bloomington resident, William F. Flagg, and close boyhood friend of George Perrin Davis. He had served in the Civil War and was seriously injured in the battle of Prairie Grove, Arkansas. After the war, he had been in business in Chicago in the firm of Farnum, Flagg, and Co., when it was very hard hit by the Chicago fire of Oct. 1871. Eugene was in ill health due to his war injuries, so he decided to go to Boston with other members of the firm and help build a new business there. That new business was thriving when it was destroyed in the Boston fire of Nov. 1872, a mere 13 months later. He eventually went to California hoping that the weather there would help his health but it was too late. He died on March 11, 1874, at the age of only 32.

*“Mr Fisher has sold his house – and it is to be moved off the ground – as soon as horses can be procured well enough to draw it. ... Oxen have been used to draw goods and baggage from the Depot. The streets are very quiet and seem almost like Sunday [sic]. Many horses have died.”* Chicago, IL, November 9, 1872 (ALPL) SWD-DD

*“Field and Leitner [the name from 1867-about 1881 of what would become Marshall Field & Co.] have a very handsome assortment of goods and seem full of business though the sickness of the Horses has been quite a hindrance. They are beginning to run the street cars not as often as usual – and I saw a few carriages driving today-”* Oakland IL, November 16, 1872 (ALPL) SWD-DD

*“The wind blows like a storm tonight. We had a fall of snow yesterday – but it ceased before night. I hope to make some calls, the first pleasant day – as I am owing several. Some of the horses in town are taking the disease so prevalent in other places. Ours show no signs as yet.”* Bloomington, November 22, 1872 (ALPL) SWD-DD

*“The wind was from the West last night and the morning was very cold – The East rooms are warm – and we took our dinner in the sitting room – The sickness of the horses makes it inconvenient to get coal hauled – and to save the coal we have on hand – we burn large logs in the furnace. This is owing to George’s direction.”* Bloomington, November 29, 1872 (ALPL) SWD-DD

*“Not that we have any snow now – for the day has been like Indian Summer – warm and charming. The roads are very fine – but one cant ride with sick animals.”* Bloomington, December 5, 1872 (ALPL) SWD-DD

Transportation at the best of times was a very real concern as autumn rains turned the roads to a morass of mud. Wagons and carriages could become mired in the mud and people, especially women in their long skirts, would find walking difficult. When the temperatures dropped below freezing, the rutted mud would freeze making it dangerous for the horses. A deep snowfall could keep the trains from getting through but there was general rejoicing when a deep snow came because then sleighs could be hitched up and used, not only for transportation but for entertainment and courting as well, despite what David Davis wrote to his father-in-law soon after they came to Bloomington:

*“The winter so far has passed very pleasantly – we have had an unusual quantity of snow – in truth this winter now resembles a New England one. Such a thing as a genuine New England sleigh ride is never thought of here. There are no towns within a reasonable distance to stop at and frolic a little.... Our population is not much given to visiting though they generously indulge themselves a little in the Christmas and New Years Holidays -”* Bloomington IL, January 19, 1840 (ALPL) DD-WPW

*“Mr Davis made an early start this morning – got us up in prime good season and after tying his leggings, mounted old Fox, for so Mr Colton calls our furry nag and set off for Mackinaw some 15 miles distant...”* Bloomington, January 17, 1844 (WMS B) SWD-DRW

*“The roads are very poor – Snow has fallen – but the roads are cut up and no one travels who can avoid it.”* Bloomington, February 17, 1861 (ALPL) SWD-DD

*“I read that eastern railroads were very much blocked with snow. I am afraid that the [deletion] of the trains will interfere with the arrival of your letters.”* Bloomington, January 28, 1867 (ALPL) SWD2-DD

*"It is very cold and it snowed some this afternoon but I think it has ceased now. The roads are very rough but not at all muddy as you would think if you saw them. They are frozen perfectly stiff and I should think would hurt the horses feet to travel on them."* Bloomington, December 12, 1867 (ALPL) SWD2-DD

*"Some snow fell the middle of the week tho [sic] not enough for sleighing. The roads are worn comparatively smooth, & we went to Church in the new carriage."* Bloomington, January 21, 1872 (ALPL) SWD-DD

*"Em[meline Betts] was out sleigh riding – and the night before, the young boys called and brought Oysters which Sue cooked [up?] after their evening ride."* Bloomington, November 26, 1871 (ALPL) SWD-DD

*"The snowstorm has been the severest ever known. Sleigh bells have been tingling night & day for several days and they remind me of my young days in Masstts when it was bliss to get you in a sleigh and ride with you to the tintinnabulation [the ringing or sounding] of the bells..."* Washington DC, December 16, 1867 (ALPL) DD-SWD

Despite all of the labor required to prepare for winter, people enjoyed the slower pace, had time to attend parties and lectures, and everyone enjoyed the warmth of a cozy fire:

*"How happy we should be to see you this evening - seated around my cheerful fire we should not mind the wind whistling in gusts every now & then blowing around the corner of the house. Rachel is seated near me writing – George fast asleep in his cradle & Catharine knits & rocks the cradle at intervals.... On Friday we invited a young party of 14 – including Dr. Hobbs ... – Rachel [Colton] and I exerted ourselves on this occasion – set a table in the dining room intending our guests to stand during supper. She pouring tea at the one end of the table and I coffee at the other. The evening proved stormy – some of the ladies were ill, alias tired out attending a party the night previous and my guests amounted to seven only – We had gained something – for we all sat comfortably and passed a quiet evening.... Rachel attended a party with Wells at Col. Gridley. I visited quietly with Mr Hawks. I saw that evening a successful experiment on the hand of Miss Sarah Hawks. General Covell was the operator. He magnetized her hand so that she would not keep it still and the motion ceased not until her hand met that of the General. No mistake dear Sister – I can vouch for it.... We have had Temperance lectures lately – one from Mr Grubbs the Methodist minister was very good – .... The Bloomington Band perform at these meetings occasionally."* Bloomington, January 19, 1844 (WMS B) SWD-DRW

*"We made candy Thursday night. Mr Maclean and his wife came in for a social evening just after we put it on the stove – and Mr Bushnell followed – my 25th Anniversary ring was drawn off my finger while I was pulling candy – and great search was made for it – but all in vain. Yesterday Emma Davis called to say Good Bye as her Father has had an attack of*

*Asthma and she is to leave for home tomorrow. I gave her some candy on a plate. Some sticks of it were left after she had gone – and Emma Betts took one to eat – and came across my ring in it safe and sound – much to my joy and surprise.”* Bloomington, February 18, 1872 (ALPL) SWD-DD

Inevitably, winter would wear on and soon there would be signs that winter was waning and, much to the relief of everyone, there were little signs that it would soon be spring.

*“The Sun was warm to day – every thing looks as if Spring was almost here- The Robins and Blackbirds have come – and I heard a Turtle Dove cooing one day last week- To day a little Spider came spinning down from the nook where she spent the Winter- She spun carefully as if she was feeling her way- There is something pleasant to me in the change of the seasons – and much as I like Winter I am glad to see the leaves and buds appear-“*  
Bloomington, March 19, 1865 (WMS B) SWD-FWW

\*Key for the correspondent initials used in letter citations:

**DD** – David Davis    **DRW** – Daniel Rogers Williams, husband of Frances M. “Fanny” Walker Williams    **FWW** – Frances Mary “Fanny” Walker Williams, younger sister of Sarah W. Davis    **SWD** – Sarah W. Davis    **SWD2** - Sarah Worthington Davis, daughter of David & Sarah W. Davis    **WPW** – William Perrin Walker, father of Sarah W. Davis

\*Key for the archive initials used in letter citations:

**ALPL** – Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield IL    **MCMH** – McLean Co. Museum of History, Bloomington IL    **WMS or WC** – Williams College, Samuel Chapman Armstrong Collection, Williamstown