

December 20, 2012 Hugo Snow Storm: End Of Myan 13th B'ak'tun & A New Beginning?

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Five days before their 2012 Christmas Mike and Cindy Walker of Hugo, Oregon had been listening to the TV weather forecasters talking about a series of winter storms traveling toward them off the Pacific Ocean. These storms were the leading edge of several weather fronts centered around their low pressure zones. This pattern of air flow is called a cyclone and in the Northern Hemisphere the direction of rotation around a low-pressure area is counter-clockwise (Satellite Photo 1).

The Thursday, December 20, 2012, weather forecast was for windy and rainy, but clear of snow at lower elevations during the day until that evening. However, a surprise fierce winter storm came in earlier, lower, and colder than predicted; it really made the day challenging. The Grants Pass Daily Courier (*Daily Courier*) out of Grants Pass, Oregon had reported that there would be some concerns for those traveling to California, but no problems on the valley floor.



**Satellite Photo 1. Low Pressure Zone
Over Iceland: 2003**

Holiday Travelers Headed To California Likely To See Snow. Travelers getting the jump on Christmas would face plenty of driving challenges in the coming days, especially in northern California. In Josephine County snow fell on 1,640' Hayes Hill, on the Redwood Highway 15 miles southwest of Grants Pass, and on 2,160' Jacksonville Hill on Highway 238. The summits north of Grants Pass on Interstate 5 (I-5), between 1,700' and 2,000', were clear of snow, including 1,960' Sexton Pass just north of Hugo, Oregon. But forecasters predicted rain and snow over the next few days, with snow levels bouncing between 2,000' and 3,000'.

The National Weather Service (NWS) was calling for up to 40 inches of snow over the next three days around Mount Shasta City, about 100 miles south of Grants Pass. Heavy snow was also forecast for the Cascades, so drivers heading across Diamond Lake Junction and Crater Lake, or Lake of the Woods on Highway 140 should carry chains or traction tires.

Icy road conditions had contributed to a 60-car crash between Hornbrook and Yreka, California, on I-5 the previous evening. A semi-truck lost control on a winding stretch, triggering the accident. Cal-Trans said the accident scene stretched for two miles, and eight people had non-life threatening injuries (Duewel. 2012a).

Over the last 50 years Leon Hunsaker, Hugo Weatherman, had researched the jet stream and its influence on major weather events like the December 20 snow storm mainly in Southern Oregon and Northern California (Hunsaker. 2005).

DECEMBER 20, 2012 - THURSDAY

The Beginning The weather forecast was for a break in the weather for the Rogue Valley during the day - an interruption to a series of wind/rain/snow storms hitting the area. That was about normal for the *Climate Town*, Grants Pass, Oregon (Table 1).



Photo 1. 11:00 a.m. Snow Starting To Stick On Walker's Sidewalk

Grants Pass (GP) is the county seat of Josephine County, Oregon, United States. It is located on Interstate 5 (I-5), northwest of Medford. Local attractions include the Rogue River, famous for its rafting, and the nearby Oregon Caves National Monument located 30 miles south of the city. GP's population was 34,533 during the 2010 United States Census. True to its motto, *It's the climate*, GP (including Hugo and other communities in the Rogue Valley) has a climate with hot, short summers and mild but pronounced winters with sharply defined seasons without severe winter cold or humidity. This climate zone differs from the rest of Western Oregon in that there is less ocean influence, cooler winters, and warmer drier summers. Mike loves the change in the seasons especially the fall.

The Thursday forecast turned out to have significant problems. The following day and minute temperature records were recorded by Mike (Butt Head - BH) at his and Cindy's (Honey Bun - HB) Hugo, Oregon home at an elevation of 1,200' on a cheap digital AcuRite indoor-outdoor thermostat. The outdoor component was located under a covered medium sized front door porch area, and, therefore, the outside temperature recording might be a few degrees too high.

Fifty-five year old HB was a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) computer support specialist and had left for work to the BLM/Forest Service Interagency Office in GP. Sixty-eight year old BH was retired and had been pretty much an invalid stuck at home since his three operations: 1. October 19, 2012 ERCP surgery and Sphincterotomy for Acute Gallbladder Pancreatitis, 2. November 9, 2012 Extracorporeal Shockwave Lithotripsy on a 14 mm kidney stone in his left kidney, and 3. December 11, 2012 laparoscopic removal of his gallbladder (Cholecystectomy). For what its worth, BH was discharged from the Three Rivers Community Hospital December 12, 2012, the same day his brother Jon had a hernia operation. Mike felt he had lost a big chunk of short-term memory and HB had to drive him ever where. He was still taking massive pain medication for his now diagnosed Chronic Pancreatitis with pain in his stomach and flanks (i.e., Percocet: Oxycodone-Acetaminophen 5-325 MG Oral Tablets; 2 tablets every 4 hours as needed).



*Photo 2. 11:20 a. 1" Of Snow On Bench At Front Porch (1" SBFP)
Date Should Be 12/20/12*

This story was BH's attempt at something normal. He would later think of his pre-operations life as his old normal, and his post-operations life as his new normal. With some effort he could walk from the livingroom to the front porch and measure actual depths of the snow, record some weather he saw outside laced with the highlights of what was reported in the *Daily Courier*, and some of the family happenings as a result of the storm.

5:00 a.m. The Walker's had just feed their doggers (i.e., puppies, Deeno and Pebbles with their mindless puppy love, and 13-year old dogger Fred with his old grandpa talk).

5:30 a.m. The weather was as forecast, rainy.
10:00 a.m. Snow was falling on Hayes Hill, 1,640' on the Redwood Highway 15 miles

southwest of GP, and on Jacksonville Hill, 2,160' elevation on Highway 238. The summits north of GP on I-5, between 1,700' and 2,000', were clear of snow, including Sexton Pass north of Hugo at 1,960' (Duewel. 2012a).

10:45 a.m. At the Walker's Hugo home (Walkers) there was rain, no snow, and the ground was completely clean. BH took a shower in preparation for the I-5 ride to his kidney doctor, Dr. Bui, in Medford, Oregon. He took photographs from his front porch.

10:55 a.m. During the time BH was in the shower there had been a quick a change in the weather - it was now snowing hard with big flakes; but they were not sticking on the ground.



Photo 4. Noon With 3" SBFP

11:00 a.m. Soon after snow starting to stick on Walkers sidewalk (Photograph 1).

11:15 a.m. More snow on house sidewalk.

11:20 a.m. In 20 minutes "Snow on Bench at Front Porch" was 1" deep (**1" SBFP**; Photo 2). BH telephoned HB and encouraged her to come home. He was worried about how fast the snow was sticking; it was really coming down. It turned out she had just talked with her folks, Chuck and Jan Stull, who lived south of GP in Kerby and they already had snow.

11:25 a.m. Five minutes later puppy Deeno was learning about snow from veteran 13-year old red Fred (Photo 3; Photos 1-8 are incorrectly identified as 12/21/12); loss of T.V. reception because of snow sticking on dish.



Photo 3. 11:25 a. Red Fred & Black Deeno In Snow At Walker's Front Yard

11:45 a.m. 36 Degrees (○) F Outside.

Noon In one hour there was 3" **SBFP** (Photo 4). BH could not remember a snow dump in low lands Hugo that deep (3"), that quick, (1 hour). HB telephoned home. She was driving her 2-wheel drive Toyota pickup without chains and the snow was bad where she was located on Monument Drive between I-5 and Three Pines Road.



Photo 5. 12:35 a. 4.5" **SBFP**

While driving home on I-5 she had watched vehicles coming south as she was driving north toward the Hugo I-5 Exit 66. It turns out they were being turned around by the authorities at the I-5 exit just prior to the mountain and four passes between Hugo and Canyonville. Later that same day, the *Daily Courier* had reported snow north of Hugo.

Freeway Open Again After Being Closed By Snow Storm. I-5 between Hugo and Glendale was open again after being closed for much of Thursday afternoon, and early evening. By 9:00 p.m. Thursday, the freeway was open but chains continued to be required in that stretch of freeway.

A fierce winter storm that came in lower and colder than predicted caused a huge snarl of traffic between Hugo and well beyond Glendale on I-5 Thursday. Huge flakes fell for several hours Thursday. Cars were stuck for more than four hours, as the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) closed the freeway from Hugo to Glendale around noon, then later from Glendale all the way to Canyonville, for a total of 33 miles. Meanwhile, the wet heavy snow was pulling down tree branches, causing scattered power outages that have been reported throughout Grants Pass and Josephine County (Duewel. 2012b).

The wet snow was so bad HB had almost gotten off at the I-5 Merlin Exit 61 thinking she would drive Monument Drive home, but did not. After the North I-5 Manzanita Rest Area she drove by 18-wheelers everywhere over the fog line alongside the I-5 running lanes putting on their chains.

The Hugo off-ramp was an ordeal and with her non-chained Toyota pickup going sideways; she almost did not made it up the hill to the Monument Drive stop sign at the overpass. HB and BH stayed on the telephone talking. BH was frustrated because he could do little, but be there in voice for moral support. ***She Was Not Having Fun Driving Home!*** The following are bits and pieces of what BH remembered her saying. These words do not capture the tense, excited, worried frame of mind that BH had heard HB's words being expressed.



Photo 6. 12:45 p. **Ford Pickup In Walker's Lower Driveway From Garage**

She was driving slow between 5 - 15 mph and coming up to the Three Pines Road junction with Monument Drive. *I'm coming to the turn.* Someone was stopped ahead and she slowed down to a stop. *I shouldn't have stopped.* She decided to continue on off the little hill from Monument Drive onto Three Pines Road. *I'm going; I can make it. Come on, come on. I'm down. I just had a car pass me going to Monument*

Drive, hardly any other tire tracks. I'm coming up to the right-hand corner (i.e., Dickerson's corner). I'm going about 5 mph. I'm almost around the corner, come on. I made it around the corner and no one came by me. Past the corner and on the straight away west toward the Three Pines School hill. I'm coming to the little hill – I have to go faster. Come on, come on. I'm still moving; come on, come on. Oh no, I'm sliding, I'm sliding. I'm stuck in the middle of the road sideways; I'm not going to be able to put the chains on.

12:10 p.m. HB was soon stuck sideways in middle of Three Pines Road downhill from the old Three Pines School house site on the flat straight-a-way near the junction of Templin Avenue and Three Pines Road. BH was nervous, but HB was O.K. She was safe in a known place within a half mile from home.

12:20 p.m. BH so much wanted to go and help his wife. However, he made the cold calculation that if he went he would create a greater problem without helping HB, he would probably have to be rescued himself.

I was funny thinking about being rescued in the short distance of ½ mile from your home. BH telephoned Bam, the boyfriend of his niece Summer. They were both living at BH's 89-year old step-mother's, Lee Joy Walker's (Mom's) home at 850 Three Pines Road. As the crow flies Mom's 1,000' elevation home was just down the hill from the Walkers, a short distance. Bam would be coming to help HB as he was going to his dentist in GP; BH felt better. He telephoned HB and found out to his relief that two guys had already stopped to help HB put chains on; she soon drove to Mom's.



Photo 7. 1:05 p. Cindy Taking A Picture Of Mike At Garage



Photo 8. Five Inches SBFP, North Along Walker's Sidewalk

12:25 p.m. **3.25" SBFP**

12:35 p.m. 35°F Outside; **4.5" SBFP** (Photo 5). BH marked a block of wood up to five inches (boy was he off; needed a 9" scale) and put it on the front porch bench.

12:45 p.m. Picture from garage of BH's Ford pickup in lower Walker driveway (Photo 6).

1:05 p.m. HB home. All was well, the family was together, Cindy and Mike, and their three doggers, Fred, Deeno, and Pebbles. BH took pictures from the garage of dogs and her in snow. One of them was of her taking a picture of him (Photo 7).

2:15 p.m. 35°F Outside; 5" SBFP (Photo 8).

2:30 p.m. One of the puppies, Deeno or Pebbles, was farting. HB & BH took them outside. Our older 13-year old Fred could hardly move through the snow, and when coming back uphill - he needed snow shoes.

3:05 p.m. It quit snowing - a drizzle outside. HB takes a picture of BH wearing his Dale, Oregon ball cap trademark and classic shorts, but with long wool socks (Photo 9).

7:30 p.m. 35°F Outside. The building heavy snow had predictably found its victim knocking trees into the power lines. **Electricity Goes Off** at Walkers; outside there was heavy snowing and a light moon.



Photo 9. Mike At Walker's Home

9:00 p.m. I-5, between Hugo and Glendale included several mountain passes, was open again if the driver had chains. I-5 had been closed for much of afternoon, and early evening.



Photo 10. 18-Wheelers Chaining Up North Of I-5 Manzanita Rest Area

Courtesy Of Bullard, *Daily Courier*

The next day, December 21, the *Daily Courier* reported on its front page the previous day's snowstorm.

Heavy Snow Swamps Region. A mass of wet snow fell on Southern Oregon on Thursday, closing I-5 north of Grants Pass for several hours, knocking trees into power lines and making driving miserable everywhere in Josephine County (Photo 10). The snow depth topped 3 inches in Grants Pass, but it was a foot deep in the Illinois Valley and other outlying areas — up to 2 feet at higher elevations. It had been over 4" at the Walker's Hugo home at noon and over 8" by 9:30 p.m. that evening.

More than 19,000 customers in Josephine County lost power during the peak of the outage, as trees and limbs bent under the weight of wet snow and fell onto power lines. Area fire departments responded to 46 calls for power line issues on Thursday. As of 7:00 a.m. 10,138 customers still did not have power, almost all outside of Grants Pass. "We're bringing in internal crews from around the state and contract crews as

well," said Monte Mendenhall of Pacific Power. "Even though we're rallying resources, this is going to be an extended outage, through the weekend in some areas. We're going to be working all weekend on this one."

Rob Brandes, Public Works Director for Josephine County, said more than 100 trees went down across roads. County workers were also plowing roads through the night with two large plow trucks, two graders and six pickup trucks with plows.

Brett Lutz of the NWS said Thursday's storm came in stronger and dumped more snow at lower elevations than expected. He said the storm stalled and had more snow than predicted, pushing the snow level down. *"Predicting valley snowfall can be a challenge,"* Lutz said.

Cars were backed up for several miles north of Glendale on I-5 after ODOT closed I-5 between Hugo and Canyonville at around noon Thursday. The freeway wasn't reopened until after 7:00 p.m. *"We had very heavy, wet snow come in real fast, and nobody chained up,"* said Shawn Stephens, transportation maintenance manager for ODOT in Grants Pass. *"Everybody was sitting there and we couldn't get anybody moving."*

Stephens said at least 20 big trucks jack-knifed or slid off the road on Sexton Summit and Smith Hill Summit. "It was so plugged up our snowplows couldn't get through. They were sitting in the traffic jam." (Duewel. 2012c).

9:30 p.m. 68°F Inside/34°F Outside; **8.5" SBFP** (Photo 1.5 hour nap, dogs had to pee; **A fire was started in the Walker's fireplace.** BH & HB had never had 8.5 inches of snow at their Hugo property since they built their home in 1997.

Sixty-eight year old BH and his Mom had to memory reach back to the 1950s and 1960s for this kind of snow. However, it had happened much worse before: *"While we say "it can't happen here," just look back into local history: in February 1917 more than 34 inches of snow fell on Grants Pass"* (James. 2012a).

10:55 p.m. 34°F Outside; light drizzle snow.

If it wasn't such a challenge for BH, it would have become boring real fast - all this repetitively recording temperatures and snow depths. Where's the sex and excitement in that!

The neat thing was the challenge of taking many measurements each day when BH did not feel good and just wanted to lay on the couch. There definitely was not boredom fighting with his inner thoughts of why he was doing something so mundane as recording temp and snow.

For Mike, the forced planned challenge to unconditionally record gave value to the moment. It was not extracting meaning and fully rejoicing in the project, but the self-fulfillment and satisfaction of the self-imposed goal of writing and sharing his family story. It was not so much enthusiasm and energy and drove him, it was a determination to start and to finish, it was finding the end result that mattered.