



The Freeze Baby

By Tom Dickson

I'm not embarrassed to admit this: I get cold easily.

Okay, maybe a bit embarrassed. Montanans—guys especially—are supposed to endure the cold without whining. Not me. I'm shivering as I write this, and I'm in my office with the heat turned up.

I've always been sensitive to cold. Maybe it's because of where I grew up. No, not Florida. I was raised in Minnesota, where it's colder than Montana most of the time. As kids, we all wore jeans and cotton long underwear and played outside all winter—snowball fights, sledding, pond hockey. Our jeans would get soaked then freeze, and we'd have to walk around like the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz*.

The coldest we got was when skating. After about an hour, our toes and fingers would go numb, and it would be bearable until we went to the warming house. As our

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toes and fingers started to thaw, we'd be hit with such an excruciating pain that we'd have to rush back outside to numb things up again.

I think all that freezing and thawing over the years destroyed my digits.

These days I own six pairs of gloves that get increasingly warmer for every 5 degrees it drops, starting at about 40 degrees F. At 10 degrees I switch to mittens, then to down mittens at 0 and finally down gloves inside down mittens at -10 degrees. Below that I just scrunch my fingers into fists and whimper.

I recognize that mittens aren't manly. I was wearing them at a gas station in Cascade on a cold morning this past winter. As a rancher walked past, wearing no gloves or hat, he gave me a withering look. I'm used to it.

I don't think it has to do with pain tolerance. Studies have verified what women have always known, that most of them get colder than men do. (A sweatshirt I once bought for my sister reads: "Yes, I'm cold.

I'm always cold.") The main reason, scientists say, is that men have a higher metabolic rate and more muscle mass, so their bodies act like portable space heaters.

It's definitely not because women are wimps. Those I know who've given birth tell me it's more agonizing than a severe burn or a broken bone. And some of them actually did it again.

As for me, I've broken my right leg twice, had a hip replaced, and had 12 teeth pulled. I'm familiar with pain. Even so, maybe I am just a cold-weather wuss after all, what we kids called a freeze baby. But I think it's just that my body generates less heat than most guys. In January, I see high schoolers wearing shorts, and white-bearded retirees standing in the Costco parking lot in nothing but shorts and a sweatshirt. It's like their legs are so warm they can't bear to wear long pants, even in winter.

But fashion has always taken casualties. A popular look these past few years, even in winter, has been women wearing shoes with no socks. I even saw a sockless woman downtown, doing her Christmas shopping, on December 21, the day it dropped to -34 degrees here in Helena. I have to say that if you're cold in that getup, you get no sympathy from me.

Meanwhile, I looked like the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man from the *Ghostbusters* franchise: Sorel boots, snowmobile overalls, hooded Antarctica-grade down parka, and a wool scarf wrapped twice around my face and head. I realized as I set out for work that day that I could not dress any warmer. And I was still freezing. The only thing that kept me going was gratitude I didn't live in Elk Park, located a few miles northeast of Butte, where the NOAA weather website said it had dropped to -49 degrees, making it the coldest spot in the nation.

I don't know what the guys down there were wearing that morning, but I hope it wasn't shorts. 🐻