

Where Is the Polar Vortex Coldest? Two Minnesota Towns Compete for the Title

Embarrass, Minn., hoped to win the state low-temperature crown, which it argues unjustly went to a neighbor in 1996 when the official thermometer broke



Outside a welcome center in Embarrass, Minn., a box on stilts houses thermometers. PHOTO: ERIN AILWORTH/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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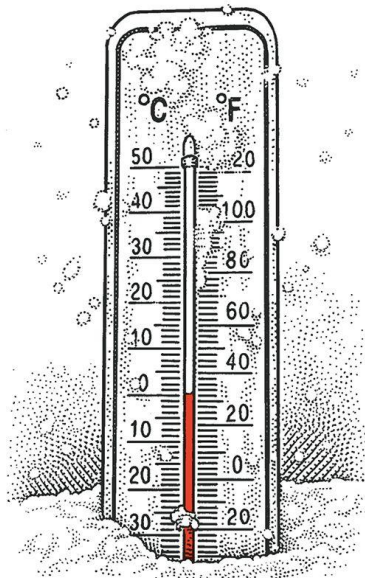
By

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EMBARRASS, Minn.—[Arctic air that has gripped the Midwest](#) meant there was a chance this morning that temperatures could set a record in a little town that's one of America's chilliest. It would be revenge served extremely cold.



How low can you go?

On Feb. 2, 1996, Roland Fowler was the observer for the National Weather Service in the town of Embarrass, more than 200 miles north of Minneapolis.

The fluid dropped so low in his thermometer it split apart, disqualifying his reading. The neighboring town of Tower got credit for 60 degrees below zero Fahrenheit, a state record

Mr. Fowler, 86, said his backup thermometer read minus 64. He sent it to a lab, which certified its accuracy. But, he said, the weather service rejected his appeal. “We had the facts to back it up, even though it wasn’t official,” he said. “We knew we were colder.”

That was cold comfort to the town of 607 on the Mesabi Iron Range, whose official website says its name is from a French word meaning “to hinder, confuse or to be complicated.” Embarrass has staked its reputation on being “The Cold Spot.” Many locals trace their heritage to Finland and are creative when it comes to ice.

This December, as part of the annual Ice Candle & Holiday Gathering, residents let water freeze in 700 buckets to form shimmering holders for candles in a cemetery one night. A maintenance worker jury-rigged a John Deere tractor with a wet piece of fabric trailing behind to smooth the ice at the town skating rink, dubbing it the “Finnboni,” a play on Zamboni machines used in rinks.



Frigid Arctic air hit the Midwest on Wednesday, sending temperatures plunging to their lowest in decades and forcing a third of the country indoors. Several states declared states of emergency. Photo: Getty

Meteorologists say geography gives Embarrass its shivery winter temperatures. Dense cold air collects at low points in a saucerlike river valley that is bordered by the Laurentian

Divide—a continental divide—and the Vermilion Range, said Dan Miller, science and operations officer with the National Weather Service in Duluth, Minn.

Other spots in America are known for frigid conditions. Prospect Creek, Alaska, reached minus 80 in 1971, a U.S. record, according to data from the National Centers for Environmental Information. In the lower 48 states, Rogers Pass, Mont., hit minus 70 in 1954.

Thursday morning, Embarrass registered minus 42, edged out by Tower’s minus 43. Both were beaten by a negative 56 in Cotton, roughly midway between Embarrass and Duluth. Cotton appeared to hit the U.S. low Thursday based on preliminary data, Mr. Miller said.

“We got really excited today,” said Greg Larson, the observer for the National Weather Service in Cotton, “knowing that we had a possibility of breaking the record.”

Winds quieted Thursday, pushing temperatures in the area lower. A fog of tiny ice crystals may have prevented a new state record, said Mr. Miller. “There was a lot of shallow ground fog that could have made the difference,” he said. He traveled to Cotton to be there in case the record was tied or broken and said the fog looked like diamond dust in the air.

As the Midwest warms in the next few days, he said, temperatures in Cotton could rise about 75 degrees from the low—into the 20s.

In Tower, population 500, residents were more concerned with staying warm than setting records on Wednesday. At Sulu’s Espresso Café, Joan Broten, who works at the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, chuckled at the competition with Embarrass.

“I don’t think we need to rival about it anymore because both places are so cold,” said Ms. Broten, 50. But if Embarrass had won years ago, she said, “I might have a different opinion on that.”



A readout of Tower’s Wednesday low. PHOTO: ERIN AILWORTH/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Views in Embarrass were more hard-nosed. “Embarrass won,” said Travis Erickson, 28, who loads trains for an iron-ore mining company. “When you break a thermometer, that should be an automatic win. I’m sure they had the same thermometer. If ours broke, we obviously won.”

Mr. Fowler retired last year and Jack La Mar, 57, is watching Embarrass’s official thermometer. He acknowledged some people were still stinging from the broken thermometer.

“If you know anything about Minnesotans, you know they love to talk about weather,” said Mr. La Mar, who works in building maintenance at [Delta Air Lines](#) .

On cold days, he rises early and dons moose-hide mittens to feed his chickens. Then he transmits temperature readings to the National Weather Service while drinking coffee in his kitchen. There’s no chance of a mercury mishap because the thermometer is now digital.



Jack La Mar checks the snow level in Embarrass Wednesday morning. PHOTO: ERICKA LA MAR

“I try not to take it personally or as a competition,” said Mr. La Mar. “The temperature is what it is. I just report it.”



Braving the polar vortex in Embarrass, Minn., from left, Jennifer Boese, Tanaya Wills and Travis Erickson. 'Embarrass won,' says Mr. Erickson of a 1996 incident that gave the coldest-temperature crown to a neighboring town. 'When you break a thermometer, that should be an automatic win.' PHOTOS:ERIN AILWORTH/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL(3)





Schools in Embarrass closed three days this week, a rarity. Wednesday, the U.S. Postal Service halted deliveries in Minnesota and other states across the Midwest, something Jennifer Boese, Embarrass's postal clerk and town clerk, couldn't recall happening in more than 20 years.

"It's darn cold," she said. "Good call on the USPS's part."

In Embarrass, there is also a credit union and the Trapline Liquor & Convenience store, which normally does a brisk business in beer and frozen pizzas, said owner Tanaya Wills.

Ms. Wills, 43, said she didn't expect the rivalry to thaw between Embarrass and Tower soon. "I think both towns want to be the one to say we're the toughest," she said. "It is kind of neat to be known as the coldest spot."

Ms. Wills now dresses Nuppa, her Shih Tzu Maltese mix, in a fleece sweater and booties when she lets her outside.

She kept her store open Wednesday and made deliveries to customers. "It's just a normal day around here."

Others were taking precautions for pets. Rob Taylor, 48, a maintenance worker for Embarrass, dresses his tea cup Yorkie named Dude in a sweater and jacket when they brave the cold to take care of business. "I pick him up and we go flying back in and he sits there and shakes before he warms up."

On Tuesday, when the wind chill hovered around minus 40, Mr. Taylor spent three hours clearing snow off the town's skating rink with a plow, snowblower and the Finnboni. He took breaks whenever his eyelashes froze and stuck to his hat. "For some reason," he said, "nobody stopped by."

Mr. Taylor said he was OK ceding the temperature mantle. "It's not like, 'Ha, ha, we're colder.' It's more like, 'Hey, you can have it.'"

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