

BACK IN TIME-2

A very White Christmas

By DICK SHEARER

Bing Crosby's timeless classic "White Christmas" continues to evoke visions of an unblemished winter wonderland where the world's worries are buried under a fresh blanket of white. Time stands still – at least for a few days – giving people time to take a deep breath, relax and reflect.

At least that's what the romantics want us to believe. But residents of the North Penn area probably felt differently about the events of Dec. 25, 1909, the day a 23-inch snowstorm wrecked holiday plans and left days of heavy lifting in its wake.

A hundred years later, the Blizzard of 1909 holds the record for the deepest snowfall on Christmas, yet it has been all but forgotten in recent decades. By contrast, the 1966 Christmas Eve storm that dumped a foot of wind-drawn snow is still well-remembered today because it clogged roads and paralyzed public transportation and forced many folks to stay home the next day. But in terms of snowfall, it was a mere foot deep.

Then there was the Blizzard of 1888, with a legend passed down from generation to generation as the worst ever along the East Coast. In truth, only 10.5 inches of snow fell during this late-winter storm, but it was soft and wind-whipped - creating drifts that trapped some people in the upper floors of their houses.

According to *The Reporter*, the 1909 storm was a wet snow that traveled across the mid-section of the country then reformed along the Atlantic Coast, drawing in

A CHRISTMAS BLIZZARD!

Steam and Trolley Roads Blocked For Several Days

An Unexpected Storm From the West Paralyzes Traffic, Blocks Country Roads and Storm-Strays Hundreds of Holiday Visitors—A Reminder of the Blizzard of 1888.

warmer ocean moisture. Despite a 35 m.p.h. wind, drifting was not the primary problem, clearing the heavy snow was.

Flakes began falling early on Christmas morning (a Saturday) and continued for more than 24 hours. Public transportation was brought to a halt, but remarkably Reading Railroad service from Philadelphia to Lansdale was resumed in short order thanks to constant plowing during the height of the storm.

That in itself was a problem. Once travelers got to Lansdale, there was nowhere to go. The Bethlehem branch was blocked by a derailment east of Telford. The Doylestown line was impassible as was the Stony Creek branch to Norristown.

The Reporter stated that many passengers found themselves stranded in Lansdale for the holiday. Local hotels did a big business and "no vacancy" signs were out all over town. Some of the captive visitors were put up in private homes.

For others, the storm could have been a life-of-death proposition. A group of Lansdale

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young people took the train bound for a Christmas party at Menlo Park in Perkasio. Instead, they were stranded in Souderton and had to sleep in the depot. Trolley passengers fared even worse. Many were stranded in remote parts of the rural countryside and had to battle blinding snow and drifts to find shelter in widely-scattered farmhouses.

Down in Gwynedd Valley, a party of four was walking home from the train station at night and became stranded in the wet snowdrifts. They nearly froze to death but a stroke of good luck saved them. A brief glimmer of moonlight broke through the clouds just as a homeowner looked out his window and spotted them staggering about in the distance.

He summoned help from other members of his family. They grabbed snow shovels

and rescued the quartet just in the nick of time because two of the four passed out from exhaustion just as help arrived. They recovered quickly after they were taken indoors.

Life slowly returned to normal after the storm passed. The railroad dispatched a plow train from Norristown, but it required the force of five locomotives to push through to Lansdale and eventually to Doylestown. The Bethlehem branch took longer to clear because of the derailment and the fact that several other trains were stuck in snowdrifts behind it.

The Christmas Blizzard of 1909 was a topic of conversation for many years, but now it is just another footnote in history. Those who were old enough to remember the storm are now gone, leaving us with little more than some yellowed newspaper clippings.