

BACK IN TIME

A BLIZZARD FOR THE AGES

By **DICK SHEARER**

This has been our winter of discontent. We've had it all: Snow, wind, rain, freezing rain, sleet, zero temperatures, a polar vortex or two, more than a dozen storms of various intensities.

Forecasters have been taken to task for ill-advised predictions, even with their storm models and super-doooper Doppler radar. Our driving skills have been tested. Where once we searched for bread and milk the hunt is now for solar salt. Hundreds of thousands learned to live without electricity for days, not hours, as the mercury plunged.

Yes, we've just gone through a tough stretch and this will go down as a season for the ages. But before we rehearse tales of Winter of 2014 to tell our grandchildren in a few years, let's go back to the Blizzard of 1888, the storm that some of *our* grandparents described to us.

Our first inclination is that stories about the '88 blizzard were greatly exaggerated, but the numbers speak for themselves.

* The storm lasted five days starting on Sunday, March 11 as rain in these parts which changed to heavy snow overnight.

* It stretched from the Chesapeake Bay to Maine and the Canadian Maritimes.

* As much as 60 inches of snow fell over a wide stretch of this storm belt.

* Winds were sustained at 45 mph with gusts to 65.

* More than 400 deaths were attributed to the storm.

* Approximately 200 ships were wrecked.

* Temperatures fell to the single digits.

* Some snow drifts exceeded 50 feet high and a mile long.

Likely there were other winter storms with some of

these characteristics but none that combined them all. Yet it wasn't strictly statistics that made the Blizzard of '88 legendary; it was the era.

By 1888, the nation was tied together by trains, the telegraph and telephone. The isolationism of communities a half-century earlier had been replaced by the ability to travel and communicate at will.

This storm buried that security blanket in a blanket of white. Mighty locomotives were knocked off the tracks by unyielding snowdrifts. Telegraph poles and

their wires succumbed to the wind and weight of the snow. For a week or more, it was every town for itself.

The North Penn area was right in the middle of this mess. The first post-storm issue of the *Lansdale Reporter* was published a day late but it provided plenty of details of what happened around here. This is a sample.

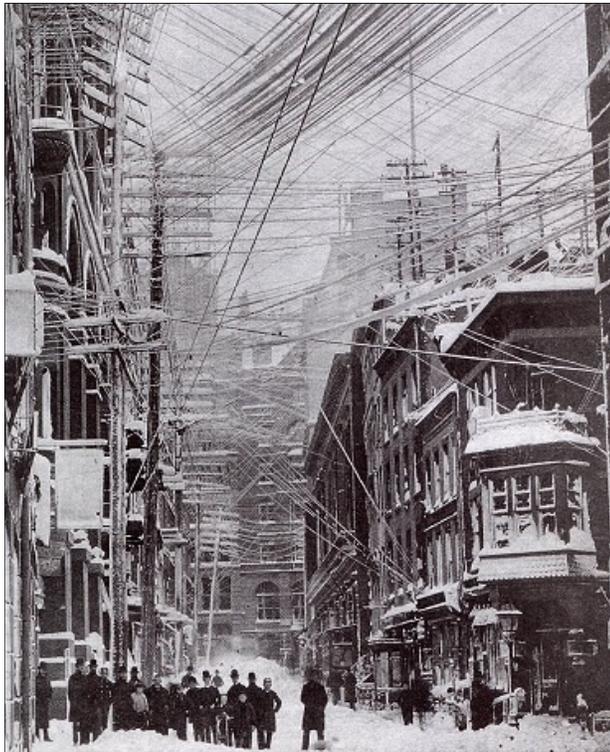
--Montgomery County was completely snowed under and it will be some days before roads will be opened and remote localities relieved. The only communication the Reporter has had has been by telephone and this office has

been besieged by inquiries from North Wales, Colmar, Line Lexington, Kulpsville, Harleysville and Hatfield asking for information.

--At this writing (Thursday noon) the Stony Creek Railroad and the Doylestown branch are still blockaded. Doylestown is in a particularly isolated condition and the only messages the people there can get is by telephone from Lansdale.

--The more remote localities in Montgomery and Bucks counties are still in utter ignorance of all news of the storm and must remain so until they dig them-

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THE BLIZZARD of 1888 brought down thousands of overhead wires in New York City. As a result, the city began the practice of placing the cables under ground.

1888 BLIZZARD: ONE FOR AGES

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selves out.*

We complain about weather forecasting today but according to *The Reporter*, "On Sunday the rain fell steadily all day, flooding the streets and gutters, and when the inhabitants sought their beds Sunday night, it was with a disagreeableness that was only relieved by the belief that the morning would bring sunshine and pleasant weather."

Surprise!

As the snow fell and the winds whipped the world as folks knew it then ground to a halt. Lansdale, a town used to seeing about 85 trains a day pass through it, suddenly became a place of refuge for stranded passengers and train crews – those that were lucky enough to get here. Some were stranded in their cold, stalled passenger cars out in the countryside where farmers tried to help out as much as possible.

By late Monday, Lansdale was almost as isolated as every other town. A single phone line to Jenkintown was still operating but information from there provided little comfort and no valuable news about the storm.

The combination of wind and snow not only stymied communication between towns but even within Lansdale itself. The drifts along Main and Broad streets were so high that shoveling teams abandoned the sidewalks and cut pedestrian walks through the center of the streets where the walls of white stuff were a bit lower. No worry about being run over – no self-respecting horse would be out in a storm like this. Food was scarce. Families shared milk for babies. Merchants went out of their way to try to make home deliveries to families that couldn't brave the elements.

Rail crews from down the line were responsible for opening the tracks to Lansdale but north to Souderton and Perkasie the work had to start here. Tuesday, with the storm still blasting away, 200 men were enlisted to start opening the tracks north of town.

Apparently there was no train plow in the rail yard so the most powerful locomotive on hand was backed up below the Lansdale station with a trailing car loaded with shovelers. It was sent full speed into a huge snow drift which stopped it dead in its tracks, causing some damage to the engine's front end. The crew cleared away the debris and on the second try made it through and continued on to Hatfield and Souderton, freeing a Niagara Falls-bound excursion train along the way.

By Thursday, the winds had subsided and

although it was still snowing from time to time, crews of several hundred shovelers finally opened one track to Philadelphia. The first train north brought a large supply of city newspapers with stories about the blizzard's impact along the East Coast. At last a sense of normalcy was returning to Lansdale although it was weeks before it was business as usual.

Among the details that cannot be omitted from this story is *Reporter* Editor Bill Woodmansee's tongue-in-cheek commentary about his fellow citizens during this monumental event: Here is a sample:

** The Junction House was crowded with snow-bound strangers, and Landlord Longaker is said to have cleared a sufficient amount of money to pay for the entire repairs recently made to his hotel. The only thing that provoked him was that the Niagara express (train) was stuck at Souderton instead of this point.*

** Milkman Scher forsook his customers entirely on Monday and Tuesday. They thought he was dead.*

** The school house bell rang with commendable regularity, but there were only two teachers out of five present and the high and grammar schools averaged four students each.*

** Ike Tyson wanted the weather postponed on account of his horse sale but finally postponed his sale on account of the weather.*

** Hiram Effrig at one time had three snow shovels on his shoulder but no one saw him attempt to a single shovelful of snow.*

** The engineer on the snow engine was stuck 25 cents for an egg at Souderton and as soon as he reached Lansdale he went to the Junction House and ate six eggs for supper for which he paid 85 cents to even things up.*

** It is said they charged 75 cents for a meal in Souderton and 25 cents for a slice of bread in Jenkintown.*

** Grocer Koffel in a moment of absentmindedness took a snow shovel to bed with him Tuesday night.*

** I.D. Heebner never fully realized how many square feet of pavement he possessed until he undertook to shovel it off three times a day.*

** Confectioner Zane shoveled his own snow and paid himself 15 cents an hour.*

** William Eckfelt had his whiskers adjusted in such a manner that nothing but operatic airs could be heard when the wind whistled through them.*

The Great White Blizzard of 1888 was a single tremendous snowstorm. This winter we've been hit by many smaller ones, so it's a little like comparing icicles to snowballs. Too bad that Woodmansee and some of his contemporaries are no longer