

MAHANOHY CITY CHRONICLES

October 1, 1988

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'88 BLIZZARD HAD NOTHING ON '99

THE WINTER of 1988 will soon be upon us, which is a reminder that this year marks the 100th anniversary of the so-called grand-daddy of all blizzards, the great storm of March 1888.

There's no doubt that the big snow of a century ago was a monster, but in truth it had nothing on the great storm that hit the Mahanoy Valley eleven years later. By all accounts in the local newspapers, the stormy spell of February 1899 was the worst to hit the region, in terms of impact it had on the population.

The Mahanoy Record presented a vivid account of prevailing conditions during that second week of February 89 years ago.

The wintry assault began Wednesday, Feb 8, when the temperature started to fall. Thursday morning found the mercury at 12 below zero, and Friday morning found the ground whitened by a heavy snowfall.

The news reported:

"THE KLONDIKE snap that is sweeping over this part of the country staggers the weather prophets. None can recall when the temperature lowered to within several degrees of the figures recorded during the morning hours today.

"Few people realized and many refused to credit the statement that the temperature was at 22 degrees below zero at 6 a.m. It was a fact, nevertheless, and few were more convinced of the real situation than the poor wage earner who went out to work this morning only to be disappointed as none of the colliers were able to start up work on account of Jack Frost having placed an unrelenting hand upon the various parts of the machinery in which water is used.

"Many of the disappointed workers presented a pitiable sight when wending their way homeward. Their appearances were distressing and their sufferings demonstrated beyond doubt that the weather was of extreme severity unparalleled in the history of this region.

"The condition of the breaker and driver boys was particularly distressing, many of them being inadequately attired to breast such remarkably cold weather. The instances where men were obliged to help boys on their homeward journey were many, and some boys were so much overcome that they had to be carried.

"There is great suffering among the poor people. When one considers the difficulty experienced by those more generously blessed to keep themselves comfortably warm, it is surprising that the poor families manage to survive the ordeal."

FEW PLACES in town had running water. Pipes were frozen and the plumbers couldn't keep up with the demand. The collieries, usually not bothered by snow and cold, were at a near-standstill. Only five cars of prepared coal were loaded at Mahanoy City Colliery, a small fraction of a normal day's production.

A man named John Felko walked down the railroad from Buck Mountain and by the time he reached the sanctuary of an end saloon he was suffering severely from frozen face and ears. Professor Albert Wright, the theatre musician, had to make a trip to Delano and suffered a frozen right ear despite the protection of woolen cap and scarf. At Tunnel Ridge Colliery at the west end of town, Thomas Dengler, Richard Friel and Irving Pflueger suffered frozen fingers and toes while working to help the colliery supply the demand for coal.

Few trolley cars were running, and one of the two that managed to complete the trip between Mahanoy City and Shenandoah by way of Jacksons required four hours to cover a distance normally run in less than half an hour. Snow and ice on tracks caused derailments. One car between Robinsons and Jacksons was thrown from the track and slid down an embankment. No one was injured but a crew of men worked six hours to get the car back on the rails and they suffered greatly from the weather.

Farmers arriving from the valley reported drifts up to eight feet blocking the roads in many places.

But the worst was yet to come.

ON SUNDAY, the 12th, the wind began whipping up the valley and soon it was snowing again. From Sunday morning until Monday night the white stuff came down. Every street in town was buried under two to three feet of snow.

With all the roads blocked, no delivery wagons could enter or leave town. Even in town it was almost impossible to move on streets blocked by drifts up to 12 feet.

The Lehigh Valley Railroad refused to handle any freight, so the Kaier Brewery had to use double teams to provide horse power to make deliveries by wagons. In response to an order for beer placed by its agent in Shenandoah, Kaier put together three teams with four horses each and sent them over the ridge with instructions to stay close together.

The railroads used three locomotives on passenger trains but still couldn't stay anywhere near the normal schedule. The Lehigh Valley cut at Elmwood Colliery north of Coles Patch was filled with packed snow to a height of 37 feet. No locomotive or combination of locomotives could break through, which meant that any train coming into town from the Delano-Shenandoah-Mount Carmel main line had to come and go via Park Place, and even then they barely got through snow banks higher than the cars.

NO COAL of any size was in the chute at Mahanoy City Colliery, and it became necessary to run steamboat, egg and other large sizes through the monkey rollers to produce a supply of smaller sizes for local use.

The electric generating plant on North Main street had one day's supply of coal and Superintendent Reddy Haldeman said he would use stove coal if necessary to keep the town supplied with light.

The Kaier people were using stove coal to fire their boilers to heat the brewery as well as the patrons of their steam heat lines.

Milkmen from the valleys who had left their farms at 4 a.m. didn't get to town until noon.

Butchers began to run out of meat when a carload scheduled on Saturday still hadn't arrived by Monday afternoon.

Among the loudest complainants were the saloon keepers. With many of the collieries shut down, the bars had an opportunity for more business, but as the local newspaper notes: "The man who wanted liquid refreshment had to take it in a block and suck it. If the present snap lasted much longer, signs reading 'Beer in blocks' may become conspicuous."

MONDAY NIGHT found the snow still descending and the weather getting meaner as a gale force wind began to howl. The W. H. Powers theatrical company playing "The Ivy Leaf" was scheduled to appear at the Kaier Grand Opera House Monday night but the Philadelphia and Reading train stalled in a 12-foot drift at East Mahanoy Junction. Three He(?)er engines were sent to pull the train back to Tamaqua

Four locomotives were badly snowed in at Folweiler's cut near Barnesville, and all traffic on the P&R's main line between Shamokin and Port Clinton was halted.

A Pennsylvania Railroad train left Pottsville for Delano and managed to get around a stalled train at New Boston Junction but reached only as far as Pine Junction, a half mile outside Delano, where the two locomotives ran into a snowbank and couldn't move. The passengers walked to Delano and had to spend the day there.

A Lehigh Valley freight crew that left Mount Carmel Monday didn't reach Mahanoy City until late Tuesday and had to put up for the night.

SNOW WAS drifted 15 feet under the North Main street bridge and pedestrians walking to and from that direction were limited to a narrow foot path at the bottom of the drift. The entrance to the E.S. Silliman residence was blocked by an eight-foot drift.

On Water (Market) street, the north side passage along the creek was completely blocked by 12-foot drifts. On Pine street the sidewalks and porches were covered under six-foot drifts.

Men and boys were in great demand to serve as snow shovelers for the collieries, trolley line and railroads.

A Lehigh Valley train left the Mahanoy City station at 8:02 a.m. Tuesday carrying 60 people who had business to transact at the Pottsville courthouse. The train got only as far as Delano and spent the day there waiting for the tracks to be opened over the Broad Mountain to New Boston, Morea and down through the Mill Creek gorge to Darkwater. It wasn't until two o'clock the next afternoon the train was able to make its way back to Mahanoy with travelers who never reached their destinations. They reported that they couldn't see anything but snow outside the train car windows, as the drifts were higher than the cars all the way down the line. The engine crews said the snow was so deep it fell down the smoke stack and almost put out the fires. The crew members were drenched with perspiration from the strenuous labor required to keep the locomotive moving.

The local fire department took special precautions to be prepared for emergencies. Since it was impossible to move wagons through the streets, the firemen placed hose and equipment on sleighs and posted men on 24-hour duty at each fire house.

MOST SOCIAL events were snowed out but a few shindigs went on as scheduled, apparently all the merrier because the weather outside was frightful and the party was so delightful.

Two of the events reported by the papers were:

- "Notwithstanding the blizzard that raged last night, over 200 people attended the ball of the German American Hose Company. At an early hour this morning, after the ladies had left the hall, some of the firemen became involved in a fracas and a lively fight ensued for some time. There were many big heads as a result."

- "The Hungarian residents of Trenton, near Park Place, celebrated the wedding of Mary Trock and Jacob Tobacco on Sunday and Monday, and if the reports are true, they broke the record for consumption of intoxicants. The boarding boss ordered 32 quarter-barrels of beer, eight gallons of whiskey and eight cases of cider. This supply gave out early and a messenger was sent to Mahanoy City for 10 more quarter-barrels of beer and a supply of 'wash-down.' The celebration is still in progress from last accounts.

AFTER THE winds subsided, shovel crews went to work on the rail lines and labored through the night to clear tracks. By Wednesday morning most lines were back in operation, but the P&R's Catawissa Branch remained closed by huge drifts across the Ringtown Valley. A train carrying a consignment of western horses became stalled on this branch and several of the animals died from the effects of the brutal weather.

In an effort to reopen the tightly packed Elmwood cut near Coles, the Lehigh Valley dispatched two locomotives to ram thru the 37 foot drift. Repeated thrusts into the snow resulted in the lead engine being buried and retrieved only with great difficulty. On one thrust, a rush of snow came in through the cab window and shoved the engineer, William Rhoads, back through the cab door.

DESPITE the severity of the weather, only one death was reported, as most folks stayed close to home. The lone victim was a Mahanoy City man, Louis Karofski, 26, an immigrant from Russia, whose frozen body was found Tuesday evening near the Elmwood cut north of Coles where he collapsed while attempting to walk home from work.

He was employed as a laborer at the Ellangowen Colliery and worked Monday during the height of the blizzard. At quitting time he and John Vitok began walking across the hollow to Mahanoy City, a distance of two miles. They were soon exhausted by the laborious tramping through the deep snow, having to take circuitous paths to get around drifts. Karofski was poorly clad and fell behind, complaining that his feet were cold and numb. Finally he sat down in a daze and would not respond to Vitok's urging to continue.

Vitok continued alone through the raging blizzard, hoping that Karofski would eventually follow. However, on Tuesday morning when Vitok checked at the Karofski's boarding house, he learned that Karofski never reached there. A search party backtracked and found his body at the spot where Vitok left him.

BACK IN 1899 the science of weather predicting a guessing game. That's all changed today, thanks to orbiting satellites and radar to keep the public informed.

But one thing hasn't changed - man is still at the mercy of the weather. The words of the old sage still ring true: Everybody complains about the weather but nobody does anything about it.