

## Ice storm 1973

We watched the flakes drifting into that Sunday afternoon with anticipation. It was the first snow of the winter, and coming a week before Christmas was perfect. Whenever there was snow, there was an instinctive hope of school cancelled! It was well below freezing, and the tiny flakes meant we were in for a few hours anyway, and the chance of sledding tomorrow.

"We" were my younger sister Kate, my younger brother Jon and myself. Perhaps our older brother Butch was pleased too, although that was hard to tell. He normally kept to himself in his basement lair, though he stood with us at that moment looking placidly out the big picture window in the living room, and drinking a glass of milk.

The gentle fall of snow heightened the excitement of Christmas approaching. Dad had chosen the tree, which we would fetch and decorate next weekend. The fridge was starting to fill with treats for the holidays including the huge beef joint Mom always got. The wood box was full of firewood; new decorations bought for the tree; most of the presents wrapped and ready to go underneath.

We woke up on Monday morning to something new, something more than the thick patterns the frost normally made on my upstairs bedroom window, and more than the usual cold that kept me under the covers until the last possible minute. Overnight the snow had turned to rain and sleet – but the air was still icy and the ground frozen hard. The lights weren't working, and I knew that power lines must be down somewhere.

I went into the bathroom to wash my face, and the water wouldn't run. We had our own well, with delicious water – and always turned our noses up at 'town water'. The down side is when the electricity goes the pump doesn't work! Nothing from the faucets, no baths or showers. While the outage lasted, water for cooking came from a spring in Manchester, and water for washing dishes and flushing the toilet came from a shallow pond in the back garden.

I went down for breakfast – no toast, of course. A sandwich would do, but we had to minimise how much we open the fridge. I had learned to like tea on my visit to England the previous summer – but no chance to boil water this morning! We were accustomed enough to blackouts, being out in the country, but this one looked like it was going to stay a while.

Then out to the mailbox in the hope of sending a letter, only to find out that the mailman had already come and collected the mail a couple hours ago – there were so many places in town he couldn't get to at all, he arrived at our box early. The driveway was empty which told me Dad and Butch had gone to work earlier in spite of the conditions.

I looked out at the woods across my road. Devastation was everywhere, that grey morning – large branches broken on the road, and the smaller branches stripped from the treetops. The big maple tree gleamed with its new armour, but ice had already crippled the old elm tree. Mom watched the huge cottonwood tree at the back, which overhangs the lounge roof, with some concern.

Electricity cables sagged precariously under the weight of ice, and were down across the lawn next door as well as the road. Paul from across the road claimed they were not "live", but someone else disputed that – said you can't tell. But it did mean that access to that half the street was cut off by the cable across the road, and anyone living down there parked their car in our driveway.

It hardly needed a radio report to tell us schools would not be open, but we got out an old transistor just to check. All the schools in three quarters of the State were closed. The news reported 35 live wires down in various places, and dead ones everywhere else. "A live wire in a pool of slush can kill for half a block," said the reporter.

I heard a branch crack from the lovely big maple tree, and every now and then would hear another branch somewhere else that had finally lost the battle to hang on.

We listened to the radio news on and off through the day. The capital Hartford (13 miles west of us) had declared a state of emergency, and strongly urged everyone to stay at home. The weathermen expected the situation to continue or get worse. The Authorities instructed all businesses to close by that afternoon so people could get home before dark, and my father and brother came home early.

Mom sent me to drive down to The Notch for some milk and other provisions – in case tomorrow was no better. I had learned to drive in snow, so it didn't worry me, and it meant I could post my letter while I was there. The roads were eerily empty. In spite of snow tires, I moved cautiously – especially down the long hill that led to The Notch.

Later that day I drove into Manchester to pick up some friends who had no heat or power. Their furnace needed electricity to work, even though ours didn't. Mom gave them Jon's room at the end of the hall. The Sobols took in an elderly couple Mr & Mrs Gove across the road, for a similar reason. I went over for a chat, and learned that, to make room for the Goves, Paul was going to stay next door at Amundsons, and Gary would be coming to join Jon on the floor of the living room in front of the big open fireplace.

Throughout the afternoon, a distant loud cracking sound would penetrate my consciousness, and another branch smashed its way to the ground and landed with a resonant thud. We lost one from the cottonwood and it made the house shake. Fortunately, it fell to the ground rather than through the roof.

It seemed to me a very romantic old-fashioned feeling, as I sat at my desk in a long housecoat over my clothes for warmth, writing a letter by the light of candle and oil lamp. I watched the snow, which had come to replace the sleet and blurred the previous ice. It didn't seem too cold at first – 61° F. The hot air fans weren't working, of course, so very little warmth drifted up from the basement furnace and I soon chilled and retreated to bed under four or five blankets.

I had to get up early Tuesday to take our guest to his car so he could go to work, and was able to watch as the sun rose brilliantly over the blanket of ice and snow from the previous couple of days. The light glittered through the glazed trees, silver and diamonds against the white velvet of the snow. I didn't see a single tree that wasn't either bowed or broken.

That morning's no-school announcements gave an additional note about Bolton, saying that so many power lines were down in the area they would probably close the schools tomorrow too. Connecticut was the worst hit of the affected states, and the Governor had asked the President to declare the State a Major Disaster Area. More storm weather was expected, so the National Guard and electricity men from nearby states were drafted in to help deal with downed lines and trees, working around the clock. Yet most of the state still had no power.

Bolton is a small and insignificant town, so we expected to be way down the priority list. Winter seemed a long while coming, but it was sure making up for lost time!

I went out in the car again, to take the rest of the visiting family home as they had electricity back in their part of the Manchester. My father let me borrow his 35mm

camera – my first ever chance to use it – and while I was out I went hunting for pictures in the crisp clear air, visiting some of my favourite parks and woodlands. I think half the day was gone before I realised I had left the lens cap on! So only a few photos came out of that day.

We expected more snow that night, and deeper cold – by suppertime it was 10°F and was due to drop overnight to below zero F. Mom told Kate and I we had to sleep in the living room that night so we could close the upstairs heating vents and perhaps allow a little more warmth to drift into the main floor. We went out to dinner that night to a family steak house in Manchester, as cooking for a family is a struggle with only a hibachi grill sat in the dining room fireplace.

I was making a velvet jacket for a school friend. Being velvet, there was a lot of tacking and hand sewing required, so I was able to continue in the light of the oil lamps. Kate was reading *Pitcairn's Island* by the light of coconut shells on the fire.

Wednesday dawned, and still no power, no school. The forecast for the coming night was more sleet and snow, just like Sunday. The newspapers called it the worst storm in 20 years, but for us younger ones it was still good fun. We walked a mile up the road to the farm up the hill, and spend the afternoon whizzing down the long, straight hill on our sleds.

I woke up Thursday morning in the lounge again, still enjoying the change from normality. Forecasts told us it would get a bit warmer today, possibly nearly up to freezing. But I didn't worry about sensible things like no electricity, or whether a tree will crash on the house. Just little things, like not getting a letter from my boyfriend in England for 10 whole days!

Manchester High School opened its locker rooms to the public that day, bring your own soap and towels and have a hot shower. Oh, the appeal of that, after no running water since Sunday! Then I found out that they were communal showers, and decided I could manage another couple of days or so.

With no power, most of the gas stations were closed, and the very few that were open had very long lines and rationing people to \$2 worth per car (50¢ per gallon).

I felt like quite the pioneer, what with keeping the lounge fire going, heating water on the hibachi, and the like. Jon made an experimental batch of bread pretzels, and tried to cook one wrapped in foil in the coals of the fireplace. Inventive, at least! He was frustrated about being unable to get an even heat, and the way they would tend to stick to the foil. It was more successful than it might have been.

As Thursday wore on, the temperature rose gradually and the rain that fell was less solid. The forecast said it would get above freezing on Friday. My parents had some friends round for a candle-lit dinner party that night – I guess it must have been a one-pot meal!

Friday morning and still no power. The rain was steady, washing away all of the ice and snow. The linemen had fixed the cables out front, ready for when electricity was available – I felt sorry for the way they had to be out day and night, in all weathers. Now there were flash flood warnings! With the temperature up in the 50s, people couldn't store food outside any more and the National Guard distributed dry ice for people to use for refrigeration. The gallon of fresh cider that was stored on the porch had turned to hard cider.

Saturday afternoon finally brought restoration of electricity. What a relief! Not so much the lights, food, or even the warmth, but finally being back in my own room, my own space. I could feel myself blossoming in the solitude, getting back on my emotional feet, in spite of still being cold.

Dad and Butch went out to get a pizza from the terrific Italian pizza place over in Hebron. Over dinner we planned the next day's excursion to cut down the Christmas tree. It began to look like we were not going to get a white Christmas after all... but we were OK with that this year!

*Photo by the Chronicle's Harold Hanka on Fisk Street in Hampton*

