

The Blizzard of '78

Boylston Remembrances

By Judy Haynes

February 6 - 7, 1978 the Northeastern U.S. was struck by a “catastrophic” Nor’easter which covered New England, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and New York City. One of the hardest hit areas was right here in Massachusetts where \$500 million in damage happened and the storm killed 29 people in this state alone. It was said that 73 lives were lost in the entire storm covered area.¹ The storm arrived when snow fell and blew relentlessly in hurricane force wind for 36 hours. Between the winds and coastal flooding causing so much damage, it was recorded that Boston received 27.1 inches of snow, while Worcester received 20.2 inches and winds clocked at 86 mph. Governor Michael Dukakis ordered all but the most essential workers to be off the roads and to close their offices. Everything pretty much stopped for a week. “Central New England became a vast desert of snow.” Many called it the worst snowstorm of the century. The story was told in pictures in a special Sunday Telegram.²

This was the big news in 1978, those February days when one usually looks forward to a winter school break and Valentine’s Day to bring warmth and special events to an otherwise cold wintry month. Snow clean-up took priority for at least a week or more. Snow removal in Worcester alone cost the city \$40 million.

Since part of the word February has roots in the meaning of purification it might cause one to speculate that it may have been a way of cleansing our earth. It certainly was a white world, the symbol of purity.

How and why did this storm come as such a shock?

After all, this was the twentieth century when the population had radios and televisions with meteorological weather reports given daily. Early morning weather forecasters expected the bitter cold that had been present would moderate with snow starting at 7:13 a.m. No one expected snow to continue to blow another 32-36 hours. It happened when two systems collided: Arctic air from Canada and low pressure over the Gulf Stream gave birth to the monster storm, a result when two different systems meet creating a ‘perfect storm.’

Those who didn’t leave by midday from Boston to Boylston on the 6th found themselves driving the highways as the snow blurred their vision slowing the traffic until the nonstop snow created a total loss of visual clarity. Cars came to a complete stop and couldn’t move. Route 128 was said to be a snow-covered parking lot. 17,000 Massachusetts people sought shelter and another 10,000 had to be evacuated. All schools and offices closed for six days.³



STREET BECOMES A PATHWAY

February 12, 1978

Sunday Telegram

¹ Wikipedia news articles and headlines from the Boston Globe and Worcester’s Telegram & Gazette.

² *Sunday Telegram*, February 12, 1978

³ Wikipedia news from the *Boston Globe*.

Community Spirit Heightened

Margot French recalled her husband “Norman made it home from Framingham that day, but Norm did end up being stuck at the little ditch at the end of the driveway. We shoveled a lot. Back in those days the town plow drivers would notice the driveway was packed at the road end, but they would scoop it out.” A lot of good deeds and fun happened while the natural forces were hitting hard. “Norm dug tunnels in the snowbanks so the boys could play. We were at home a week, but it was not a hardship.”⁴

Essential Workers Risk Health and Safety for the General Public

Deborah and Bill Richardson moved to Boylston in July of 1978, but in February they lived in nearby city of Worcester. Deb “made it home from the University of Massachusetts Medical Center where she worked on day one of the storm. On day 2 she was all bundled up and carrying a change of clothes as she walked from their apartment to Kelly Square ramp to get on 290 east, and stuck out her thumb, looking for a ride. She was picked up by another UMass employee and was there for a few days. Since Deb worked in the President’s Office at the UMass Medical Center, all the senior executive assistants were deemed ‘essential’ employees as were their bosses. “We were needed to answer the phones and take assignments. We stayed onsite for the next 3-4 days sleeping on mattresses on the floor; males in one area and females in the big conference room.”⁵



ESSENTIAL WORKERS STRIVE ROUND THE CLOCK TO HELP THE GENERAL PUBLIC

February 12, 1978

Sunday Telegram

Fun times

Gordon Hastings, author of Hastings family history and his experiences growing up in Boylston, was in New York City at the time. He recalls seeing people skiing down Second Avenue and how the snow turned the city into a “wonderland.”⁶



SNOWMOBILERS CRUISE MAIN STREET

WORCESTER, MASSACHUSETTS

February 12, 1978

Sunday Telegram

⁴ Margot French, oral memory sent via email, February, 2025.

⁵ Deborah Richardson, oral memory sent via email, February, 2025

⁶ Memories by Gordon Hastings of February 7, 1978, told via email, 1/29/2025.

Storm of 1717 proves Devastating to Town of Boylston

While researching Boylston history, Gordon remembered reading of massive storms of another two centuries. George Wright quoted Reverend Cotton Mather as follows: ⁷

“On the twenty-third and twenty-fourth of February, 1717 occurred the greatest snowstorm in the history of New England. Rev. Dr. Cotton Mather in a letter to a friend in England has preserved a full account of this storm. In this letter Dr. Mather says there had been a heavy body of snow covering the ground through the winter. A terrific snowstorm came on the 20th of February which was so violent that all communication was stopped and people for some hours could not cross from one side of a road to the other. On the 24th day of the month came another storm which almost buried the memory of the former. This storm came on a Sunday and no religious assemblies were held throughout the country. Indians there nearly one hundred years old, affirmed that their fathers had never told them of any stories that equaled it. Vast numbers of cattle, sheep, and swine perished; some of them were found standing at the bottom of snowdrifts weeks after the storm. One farmer who lost 1,100 sheep found two of them still alive twenty-eight days after the storm at the bottom of a snowbank sixteen feet high which had sustained themselves by eating the wool of their dead companions. Hogs were found alive even after being buried twenty-seven days. Hens were found alive after seven days, and turkeys after twenty-five days, in positions where they were utterly unable to obtain any food. Great damage was done to the orchards, the snow freezing to a crust as high as the branches broke and split them, and the cattle walking upon the crust greatly damaged them by browsing. Houses were completely covered with snow, not even the tops of chimneys being seen.”

Blizzard of 1888 Brings Boylston to a Standstill

According to George Wright’s history, another blizzard took place in February and March 1888 in New England where everything came to a standstill for weeks in Worcester and Boylston.⁸ Snowdrifts were ten to fifteen feet in height. From January through March, Wright notes that snowstorm followed snowstorm with temperatures in this and neighboring towns that “registered from twenty-eight to thirty degrees below zero and high winds prevailed on the fourth and fifth days of February.”⁹

Seeking Boylston Photographs and Memories

Storms of this size could happen again despite our advanced weather reports, and it could be just as unexpected as it was in 1978. As often happens with a climate catastrophe, it brings out not only stories of loss and hardship, but wonderful stories of people helping people and great humanitarian efforts. This is the positive side of such events.

If you have photographs of the snowfall in Boylston or some special memories to share, please do. You can email your story to info@boylstonhistory.org or stop by The Historical Society at 7 Central Street, Boylston. We welcome hearing from you. We are open Tuesdays and Saturdays mornings 9 a.m. – 12 noon.

⁷ *Historical Phenomena* in papers of George L. Wright, Wright collection, Boylston Historical Society.

⁸ Wikipedia news and pictures of the storm of 1888

⁹ Ms. of George L. Wright’s “Historical Phenomenon”: George L. Wright collection at Boylston Historical Society.

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