

OVERLOOKED ORLEANS

Looking back at the Blizzard of '77

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A couple of feet of snow, sub-zero temperatures, and 40-mile-per-hour wind gusts makes for an unbearable week of Western New York weather. Although for many longtime residents of Orleans County, these winter storms are dwarfed by the fierce Blizzard of '77. Growing up in Western New York, the "Great Blizzard" as I will call it, is the stuff of legend. Over 8 feet of snow accumulation in some areas, peak wind gusts topping out at 69 miles-per-hour, and snow drifts reaching 30 or 40 feet in height; it is likely that no winter storm will ever challenge the Blizzard of '77.

The brutal winter weather system hit Western New York on the morning of Jan. 28 and continued into Tuesday, Feb. 1. Frigid temperatures reaching minus 70 degrees Fahrenheit and excessive winds packed snow so tightly that road travel was impossible. Drivers found themselves stranded in cars along the road, snowdrifts blocked some families from leaving their homes, and others remained snowed in at work.

The best stories about the Blizzard of '77 are told by those that lived through it. Those events still exist within recent memory and without question, each person who lived in Orleans County during that terrible storm has a story to share. In 1997, the Medina Journal-Register printed some of those stories:

Don White, Orleans County sheriff, recalled camping



SUBMITTED PHOTO

A houghg100 Loader removes snow on East Shelby Road on Feb. 3, 1977. Peter Fleckenstein, who took the photo, was a member of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which was responsible for clearing a large portion of roads in Orleans County after the blizzard.

out in his office during the storm while deputies worked overtime to respond to the hundreds of phone calls from residents asking for help. "The ones that were in, were in. The ones that were out, were out," he said, referring to those deputies who could not travel to work. Some men accumulated over 100 hours of overtime over the course of five days.

Dennis Drought recalled returning to Albion with his wife along Route 31 when the road visibility dropped to zero. "We got as far as Dr. Glidden's home which was just west of Mount Albion Cemetery on the south side of the road...we were the first of what ended up being about eighty-six people to seek shelter in the Glidden home." He went on to write, "I got our

toboggan out and went to several of our neighbors getting lists of what they needed from the store. I then went to what was then Super Duper... for supplies. Dick Pilon saw what I was doing and told me I could get all I needed for the people and if I needed credit to open an account. I ended up with a bill of about \$500.00 which most of the neighbors helped pay."

Glenn Hill wrote about his trip to pick up a load of hay north of Route 18 before the storm started. "Returning home the sun disappeared and the sky was becoming black... As I approached the canal bridge on Bates Road things started to tear loose. The wind picked up to a gale force and the truck started to rock. I stopped in the middle of the bridge and at one time I could feel the truck being

lifted." Delivering the load to his barn, he "decided that anyone who would get a load of baled hay in a blizzard had to have been 'a brick short of a load' or been left out in the sun too long."

In one final story, Dorinne Prest recalled her efforts to get home from her shift at Lipton's in Albion. "... At our 2 o'clock break the weather was awful. You couldn't even see across the street... I called home and told my husband Ken I might not make it home. He said not to worry that he would come and get me."

Her husband borrowed a neighbor's snowmobile and trekked to Albion to pick her up.

"We headed out and got as far as the Old Folks Home and our snowmobile quit... My husband said grab the machine and we will toss it up in a snow bank so the plow won't run it over. Just then two young fellows pulled up and said get in the truck and we will take you back to town. To this day I don't know who they are but by god they saved our lives."

The couple stayed at Lipton's overnight and started out the next morning.

"We drove over cars and trucks...When we got to Knowlesville Agway we stopped on top of this huge snow pile. It was so high I could have touched the top of the telephone pole...Ken said hold on, we're going over. When we got to the other side of the pile there were two ten wheelers and a pay loader trying to dig through it."