

"1902 Ice Storm"

Carroll County Times article for 5 March 2000

By Jay A. Graybeal

As many local residents well know, Carroll County is frequently visited by severe ice storms. The March 1, 1902 issue of the Westminster Democratic Advocate newspaper briefly described one of the worst storms of the last century:

"On Friday of last week about two inches of hail fell and this was succeeded by a steady rain, which froze as it fell, covering everything with ice. The ice accumulated so heavily on wires, particularly on telephone lines, that heavy poles snapped off like pipe stems, and limbs five and six inches in diameter were broken from trees. The wreck of the system in this city of the Western Maryland Telephone Company was nearly complete. Two-thirds of the poles were down, cross-arms broken off and wires snapped and tangled all over the city, particularly from the railroad east. The Chesapeake and Potomac line suffered severely also, but nothing to compare with the home company, as its lines were few in comparison. The wreckage closed the alleys, and access to stables was blocked for full twenty-four hours. The electric light company suffered some damage and for three nights the city was without street lamps. Little inconvenience was suffered from this, however, as the white mantle of snow and ice and a full moon made it light enough. Families dependent upon electric lights had to go back to coal oil lamps and tallow dips, and these had to be used at the Westminster Hotel also.

The work of clearing up the debris was begun at once. Telephone workmen continued the work all day Sunday, and the Chesapeake and Potomac Company opened its line to Baltimore by Tuesday. The latter company will have its lines in this city in good order this week, but it may be two weeks before Western Maryland Telephone Company has its connections restored.

The storm of the snow, hail and rain, forming sleet was general from Washington D.C., north in the Atlantic States. Telegraph and telephonic communication was interrupted, and only a few lines were in operation. From Boston and New York messages were sent to Chicago, thence South and thence to Washington and Baltimore. In the latter city much damage was done telephone, telegraph and electric lines, and some cars were laid up. In some sections of the streets were flooded and in many cellars. Several horses were killed by falling electric wires. In Wilmington, Delaware, four men were killed by electric wires and some horses. At Chester, Pa., great destruction was wrought to all telephone and electric wires.

A dispatch from New York, Saturday night, the 23d, says: - 'After 24 hours of snow, sleet and rain and a night of high winds, New York had all of today the worst weather conditions it has faced all winter.

Telegraph and telephone wires were down in all directions. Train service in and out of the city is delayed and irregular and suburban trolley service throughout the adjacent portions of New Jersey and Long Island is practically at a standstill. A cold rain turned the snow to semi-frozen slush, impeding traffic and flooding low-lying streets.

The high wind continued to play havoc with ice-coated trees and wires. Miles of electric light, telephone and telegraph wires are down, making a heavy task for the army of linemen who are attempting to restore the systems.

The telegraph companies have restored limited communication with the rest of the country, except directly south of New York, which is still isolated. The heaviest damage resulted between this city and Philadelphia. Telegraph poles were carried down by the immense weight of the sleet-burdened wires. This caused a delay of from one to five hours in the passenger train service of the Pennsylvania lines between this city and Baltimore.

The main trouble as reported by passengers from the South was in the district between Chester, Pa., and Trenton, N.J. At Chester the entire telephone, telegraph and electric light system was a wreck, the town was in darkness and trains on the Philadelphia, Wilmington and Baltimore division were run without the aid of the telegraph, necessitating slow progress.

The worst of the wreck among the wires was between Bristol and Trenton, N.J. In the 11 miles between those two places more than 100 telegraph poles were broke. There were reports of burned trolley cars in different sections. The weight of the ice on the wires caused them to break, and the loose ends encountering cars, set them on fire.

The greatest damage was sustained in Brooklyn, where scores of horses were killed by the contact with live wires, which were everywhere prostrated. In Prospect Park and in many of the avenues hundreds of trees were denuded of ice-laden branches."

The article also contained unusual features. It appeared on the front page, the usual location for advertising, a literary piece and poetry. More unusual was the inclusion of five photographic images of the storm damage in Westminster taken by J. D. Mitchell. The images were amongst the first ever to appear in a local newspaper and subsequent issues of the Advocate only contained familiar woodcuts for many months.

Photo caption: Originally captioned Main Street, near Court, looking East, this image showed ice storm damage in 1902. Historical Society of Carroll County. J. Leland Jordan Collection, gift of the Commissioners of Carroll County, 1954.