

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

"The Great Sleet Storm"

Carroll County Times article for 20 February 1994

By Joe Getty

"The rain of Friday crystalized upon trees and shrubbery until they were loaded and bent to the earth. The snow on Saturday frosted these crystals to a beauty beyond description. Standing upon the summit of Main street and looking north and south was like a dream in fairyland. At many places branches almost met; at other places fallen limbs and trees lay in miscellaneous masses across the street. The entanglement was so great as to obstruct any view of the houses and when the sun burst forth on Sunday morning the scene in woods and field was sublime. This panorama of beauty was expensive. Fruit and forest trees have suffered at places almost to ruin. Washington's 170th anniversary will be one of local history in the ice belt." Manchester correspondent, American Sentinel, March 1, 1902. This year, a major chapter has been written of "local history in the ice belt." While the words of the Manchester correspondent could be used to describe many scenes of the recent ice storms in Carroll County, they actually were written 92 years ago.

On February 21, 1902, a rain and sleet storm occurred that the American Sentinel newspaper hailed as "The Great Sleet Storm." The storm was so impressive that the Democratic Advocate newspaper featured five photographic views of the storm at a time when the use of photographs was still relatively rare in local newspapers.

These photographs were taken by Mitchell's Gallery of Westminster. An original of one of the views is in the Historical Society collection and shows Main Street at the intersection of Court Street. The covered porch of the Main Court Inn is shown across the street from the Sherman-Fisher-Shellman House. In addition to tree limbs and branches, numerous lines are shown strewn through the photographs displaying the havoc wreaked by the storm on the young industries of telephone, telegraph and electric power in Carroll County. The Democratic Advocate proclaimed: "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 American Sentinel coverage of the storm included the following:

The Great Sleet Storm

"It would take more space than the columns of the SENTINEL afford to give a minute and detailed account of the great sleet storm which began in this locality on Friday last and speedily culminated in the destruction of a large amount of certain kinds of property. The storm began in the early morning with hail and snow, turning to rain, which froze as it fell, about day-dawn. By noon every object touched by the falling rain was encrusted with an icy covering which, a few hours later, increased to such proportions as to make telegraph, telephone and electric light wires present the appearance of great cables of ice, while trees appeared almost like solid masses of frozen water. The ice on the wires reached a diameter of an inch to an inch and a quarter. Then the effect of the great weight upon the objects spoken of began to be felt severely. Telephone wires broke in every direction; telephone poles snapped off like pipe-stems; great branches of trees fell crashing to the earth and the alleys in this city were blockaded by the debris. Even the wide Main street was covered with piles of broken tree limbs and obstructed to some extent by the wires of the several electric systems in the place.

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

The Western Maryland Telephone company of Carroll County suffered most severely in the destruction of property. Many of the poles, which carried between 200 and 300 wires, gave way under the tremendous strain and went down with cross-arms broken and lines torn, twisted and piled in great masses on the earth. The Chesapeake and Potomac Telephone Company's plant was also very much damaged, some poles broken down and many wires severed. Even the heavy wires of the Electric Light company could not stand the strain and were broken in a number of places.

The damage to ornamental, fruit and forest trees was very great. Ornamental and fruit trees were in many instances so rent and defaced as to have been practically destroyed. The beautiful trees in Belle Grove Square present an ugly sight with the many jagged and unsightly snags left by their broken limbs. Pretty much the same condition resulted in the grounds of St. John's Catholic Church, and of Messrs. John L. Reifsnider and Wm A. Cunningham, where the many ornamental trees were badly broken and defaced. Few trees anywhere in this section escaped damage to a greater or less extent. Many apple, peach, pear and other fruit trees, in orchards and elsewhere, were utterly ruined and most of the remainder of them badly damaged.

The storm was widespread, but in this county, this city and the country along Parr's Ridge appears to have felt it most severely. West of Avondale its force seems to have been considerably diminished as far up as the mountain. Toward Taneytown a good many of the poles of the Western Maryland Telephone company were broken, carrying down and practically destroying the wires for short distances. The lines to Union Bridge and Sykesville were not badly damaged. The lines of the Chesapeake and Potomac Company, in the country, also suffered considerably. Both companies are repairing damages as rapidly as possible, but full communications will not be restored immediately. At this time - Thursday - neither company is providing local service to any extent. It is said the Western Maryland contemplates the practical rebuilding of a considerable portion of its lines, upon a more substantial basis than heretofore and with a better service. The Electric Light Company had its plant partially in operation on Monday night, supplying light to private and business houses. The street lights were in operation on Wednesday night. The Western Union Telegraph Company's lines eastward were broken and not in operation until Sunday, when railroad service was reestablished by temporary repairs to a single wire. On Monday a wire for commercial business was in operation.

The sleet did not disappear until late Sunday afternoon. In fact some of it remained a day or two longer. The scene on Sunday morning, after sunrise, was surpassingly, indescribably, beautiful. But it afforded little compensation for the immense damage inflicted by the icy visitation. It was evanescent, too, and soon changed from the appearance of a world of sparkling, glittering gems to the dull and sombre hues of leafless winter.

Cutline: Mitchell's Art Gallery of Westminster took this view of "The Great Sleet Storm" facing east on Main Street at the intersection with Court Street. The storm occurred on February 21, 1902, and five of Mitchell's photographs appeared on the front page of the March 1st edition of the Democratic Advocate newspaper. Photograph from the Historical Society of Carroll County collection, Mrs. Robert K. Billingslea, Sr., donor.