

A Light From The Window Is A Welcoming Sight

As I write this column the weather outside is one sloppy icy mess. I don't like rain at the best of times but when it comes in the winter and freezes, I just hate it. Right now our driveway is a skating rink and the roads are virtually impossible to walk or drive on. Earlier in the day I drove to the post office but that was before it started to freeze on. Now it looks like I'll be at home for a while.

In Southern Ontario freezing rain is one of those types of climate that one has to be prepared to endure. In particular the Great Lakes region has quite a storied history of these destructive and dangerous storms.

In the first week of January 1998 the 'Ice Storm of the Century' hit parts of southeastern Canada and the northeastern United States. The National Oceanic and Atmosphere Administration (NOAA) estimates the storm killed 44 people and was responsible for \$4 billion in damage. Although it was bad in the Erin area, we got off lucky when compared to other regions, particularly eastern Ontario and parts of Quebec. Losses included millions of trees, 130 transmission towers and 120,000 km of power and telephone lines. Power outages lasted from several hours to four weeks.

Another vicious ice storm struck southern Ontario in mid January 1968. Ice accumulation for that one was close to two inches in thickness in some regions snapping trees like toothpicks. It was particularly nasty.

There have been even greater accumulations of ice recorded in the Great Lakes region with the western New York area getting up to four inches in March of 1976. And on Dec 28th 1942, eastern Ontario was hit with a two-day storm that coated wires, trees and roads with ice described "as thick as a person's wrist". With Canada at war at the time, getting the manpower and equipment needed was difficult so parts of the area came to a standstill for several days. In Ottawa, an estimated 50,000 workers walked to work for five days as there was no public transit and vehicles could not negotiate the conditions.

The first encounter with a crippling ice storm that I remember was a day or two after Christmas in 1959. I was 17. We were out of school for the holidays and all was well with the world. The Pool Hall was open; there was ice on the back pond for shinny and gas for my 48 Ford Coupe was about 30 cents a gallon. With \$2.00 of gas in the tank I could visit a certain young miss on 17th Sideroad whenever I wanted. And then the rain started, freezing as it landed.

Before it was done there was a thick armour of wet perilous ice covering everything. Roads were impassable, hydro lines were down, trees were split apart and there was no telephone service. The power remained off for days.

To give an idea of the thickness of the ice, my brother Doug remembers that a small branch covered with ice was taken into Bush Hardware to be weighed. It topped out at 16

½ pounds. After the ice melted, the twig remaining, which was about a foot and a half long, weighed a measly 2 ½ ounces.

At the time we lived at 6 Water Street in Erin halfway up the hill. Both doors leading to the main level of the house were frozen shut. The only way out was through the door in the basement, which was partially protected from the rain.

I remember putting on skates and actually gliding downhill towards Main Street and then skating uptown to Meehan's and Lyon's to get some groceries for Mom. It was faster and safer than walking.

One advantage we had in the fifties over today during power outages was that stores could continue to operate with manual cash registers. No worries about computers being down and cash systems locked. Most storeowners on Main Street kept their shops open for the duration of the storm.

The biggest problem that we had was trying to get enough heat in the house with the power off for an extended period. We had an oil furnace in the basement but it didn't give off a lot of heat without the fan operating. We had no woodstove or fireplace as some of the more fortunate families had.

Doug and another brother Jack worked at the time for L.G. MacKenzie Plumbing and Heating which was located on Main Street right beside Mundell Lumber. I think Mundell's now use the building.

Somehow my brothers were able to negotiate with someone for a space heater. They hooked it up into our furnace chimney that went up through the kitchen. This gravity-fed oil stove wasn't very pretty and the fuel had a rather rancid odour but it worked and kept our kitchen warm and cozy. At night in bed we just bundled up with more blankets. I often think about how lucky we were that time to have heat because there were some families in the area that didn't have any.

Another recollection of this storm was how dark Main Street was at night with the power out. However there were always two places where one could count on a friendly light shining brightly into the street. The first was Jerome Hunter's large Victorian era house on Union Street. Jerome must have had a generator because there were always bright lights aglow from his windows; not the faint flickering of candles that twinkled from most homes.

The other was at Oscar's right across from Steen's Dairy. I've spoken of my friend and mentor many times before. Oscar had a lamp but not an ordinary coal oil lamp with a wick, which was a popular item at the time. His was an Aladdin lamp that boasted the unique mantle technology.

I have never quite understood how a mantle works but once fired, this fragile ash-like sheath burns white hot, creating an amazingly brilliant and welcoming light. Not only that, the heat that the lamp produces can warm up a small room.

We still have Oscar's lamp along with a matching one that was given to us by our niece Shelly. They've both been restored and are ready for action. If the power goes off with this storm, which is getting more threatening as I type, one thing is sure; we'll have a friendly light shining from our window.

"Harry Smith, a former resident of the Town of Erin, is a columnist for the Erin Advocate. Some of his weekly articles relating to the Town of Erin are reproduced here."