

BACK IN THE DAY

January 31, 2023 thru February 8, 2023

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THE GROUNDHOG DAY BLIZZARD OF 1883 **Snow, sleet, hail, thunder and lighting**

A winter storm – the kind people compare to the worst they can remember – can still sneak in like a thief in the night. In the twenty-first century we can be warned several days before adverse weather strikes. Our great-grandparents weren't so lucky.



A Midwest home after the blizzard of 1978, which some internet list-makers place among the worst winter storms ever in the U.S. (Editor photo.)

Bloomington and Normal were just emerging from a cold snap as the sun rose (somewhere else) on Ground Hog Day. Sub-zero temperatures dominated late January, with local thermometers showing minus 20 degrees on the 22nd day of the month.

But central Illinoisans hadn't seen anything yet. At about sunset on February 1 a blizzard struck and didn't let up until about midnight the next day: a total of 31 hours. The *Pantagraph* called it **"A VARIETY SHOW: AN ASTONISHING PERFORMANCE ON THE PART OF THE WEATHER DEPARTMENT."**

Weeding through the flowery language and total lack of graphics, we are left with this picture:

First came the snow and wind. Then during the night snow became sleet, hail and eventually rain as temperatures rose. It was three degrees at midnight on February 1 and 33 when the storm moved out of the area. On the evening of February 2 there was an amazing display of lightning and a resounding symphony of thunder.

There was no report of whether this storm was a nor'easter or pushed in from elsewhere. The amount of snowfall and wind speed weren't mentioned but clearly they were substantial. The rising temperatures suggest a disturbance from the south or southwest. In keeping with the theme of a variety show, the storm was cast as "Mr. Blizzard." And Mr. Groundhog went totally unmentioned in the first accounts.

Saturday, February 3, revealed this was no variety show. It was billed as the grandest and most destructive sleet storm of the decade. Trains were delayed and some were wrecked; trees and utility poles were down; and fruit trees were destroyed. Yet the beauty of ice was almost everywhere amid the destruction. It was both beautiful and appalling at the same time. Beautiful as the scene was, the skies remained gloomy all day. No one in McLean County saw the sun that day.

A gale-force wind was still blowing at 2 a.m. Saturday; the clock in the McLean County courthouse dome had ice in its works, and froze to a halt at 1:35 a.m. The ground was covered with slush in some places. In other spots the ice was crusted so thick on the streets that it would support the weight of a man or even a horse without cracking.

Fruit trees around the city were arched and bent. And throughout central Illinois, reports of damage and destruction to orchards poured in.

Telephone and telegraph wires were snapped off under the weight of ice on the wires. Bloomington had about 225 to 230 telephone lines at the time, and an estimated 150 were out of order. Communication with small towns went silent. At about noon Saturday telegraphic contact was re-established with Chicago. But other points along the lines had to wait.

Streetcar service was reestablished on Saturday. But other railroads serving Bloomington and Normal suffered derailments as ice formed in the switches. The Chicago and Alton and Illinois Central both had derailments in Normal; the IC also had a wreck at Randolph; the Indianapolis, Bloomington and Western's passenger train wrecked at Danvers. And the roof collapsed on the old foundry building at the C&A's Bloomington shops.

Sunshine returned Sunday, making for improved walking, sleighing and mop-up. But reports of rural damage still filtered in for days to come. A week later the mess thawed, exposing leaky roofs and causing Sugar Creek to flood. But thankfully, the storm killed no one in Bloomington or Normal.

Today the blizzard of 1883 ranks somewhere among the forgotten weather events of central Illinois. But five years later, the Great Blizzard of 1888 would be longer-remembered for its severity in the northeastern United States.

100 years ago

Jan. 31, 1923: Rev. Frederick Hawley, formerly of Second Presbyterian Church, is now president of Park College in Parkville, Missouri. It's a self-help school, where students who can't afford college work their way through. They must put in three hours' work each day.

75 years ago

Jan. 31, 1948: Parks Air Lines is starting up an east-west air service that will include four flights a day into Bloomington. But first the city has to make \$400,000 in improvements to the airport, or the arrangement is off. The city will begin work on the improvement program this summer.

50 years ago

Jan. 31, 1973: The McLean County Zoning Board of Appeals denied the application of a prospective gravel pit west of Shirley. Brokaw Hospital owns the land, and Martin-Marietta Aggregates would operate the pit. The denial came after neighbors lodged several objections.

25 years ago

Jan. 31, 1998: The new Shell/Apollo Mart will open in two days at the corner of East Oakland and Four Seasons Road. A branch of Magna Bank will be inside the store: it's a pioneer move that Magna officials say puts the convenience of banking where the people already are.

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100 years ago

Feb. 1, 1923: The Illinois Central and Chicago & Alton railroads will build a new station in Normal. Construction will start this spring, weather permitting. Residents are surprised at news that the depot matter has moved past the guessing stage. They've agitated for a new station for years.

75 years ago

Feb. 1, 1948: FM radio, still new to Bloomington, will see a major programming change. WJBC will air its entire schedule on both its AM and FM stations at the same time. (The practice is called simulcasting.) Until now, some programs had been available only on FM.

50 years ago

Feb. 1, 1973: The weather station at ISU reports that January was the warmest since 1964. The mean temperature for that January was 31.4

degrees; it was 28 in 1973. The mild weather of the month just ended was welcomed by utility firms, especially those facing a fuel shortage.

25 years ago

Feb. 1, 1998: Verna Edwards, retired teacher, was working her Pantagraph route in Downs when she found one customer hadn't picked up yesterday's paper. Peering through a window, she found him on the floor, and he was rushed to the hospital. This is her second such incident this month.

100 years ago

Feb. 2, 1923: Radio stations are springing up all over the country, making the airwaves chaotic. Now there's a bill in Congress to require federal licensing of all commercial stations. Monopolies would be illegal, and amateur stations will be allowed on their own frequencies.

75 years ago

Feb. 2, 1948: Spring term registration at ISNU stands at 1,935, and officials expect it to top out at 1,950. That includes 63 graduate students and 577 veterans. At Illinois Wesleyan, second-semester registration stands at 1,283, including 76 students who have enrolled for the first time.

50 years ago

Feb. 2, 1973: State police are investigating whether an economic interest form disclosure of county treasurer James Boylan was filed on time. Under Illinois law, Boylan could be removed from office and go to jail if he is convicted of back-dating the form to show he didn't miss the deadline.

25 years ago

Feb. 2, 1998: We have enjoyed spring-like weather leading up to this Groundhog Day, not like winter at all. But in Pennsylvania, Punxutawney Phil saw his shadow, which predicts six more weeks of winter for all of mankind. Coincidentally, any calendar on the wall predicts the same.

100 years ago

Feb. 3, 1923: Bloomington city commissioners rejected any notion of spending \$230,000 to replace Withers Public Library with a new building. Opponents thought the price tag was too high and that the timing was wrong. (The new library building was finally opened in 1976, and is still open under the name Bloomington Public Library.)

75 years ago

Feb. 3, 1948: Fire destroyed the Hackler Drug Store and some offices over the Farmers' Bank building in downtown Pekin. For a while the blaze threatened the entire downtown block, but it was brought under control after five hours. Three fire departments assisted the Pekin firemen.

50 years ago

Feb. 3, 1973: Shirk Products, the Beer Nuts people, have begun construction on a two-story addition to the building housing Dale Color, Inc. When it's done, Shirk will move its production plant into the building and Dale Color will relocate. The building is the old Prairie Farms creamery at 103 North Robinson Street.

25 years ago

Feb. 3, 1998: From the headlines: Wendy Briggs, Normal deputy city clerk, will take over for the retiring clerk Marianne Edwards. Also, Lighthouse Services celebrates 25 years of treating people with addictions. And the alternative paper Post-Amerikan has been publishing here for 25 years.

100 years ago

Feb. 4, 1923: The Illinois Central will spend over \$1 million in Paxton and Champaign. In Paxton, the railroad will be leveled to run through the city in a cut. But in Champaign a new depot will be built and the track elevated through the city, eliminating many grade crossings.

75 years ago

Feb. 4, 1948: Normal volunteer fireman Sherman Dennis has been chasing fires since 1912. Now he's retiring to do some serious fishing, and his fire-house pals gave him a lantern to use on fishing trips. Dennis says he'll still visit the firehouse to help start the old 1923 fire engine which is still in service.

50 years ago

Feb. 4, 1973: Lyle Smith, songwriter and musician, has died at age 72. He was well known in Bloomington, leading local bands and later working with big name bands in Chicago and New York. He was active in the March of Dimes, and often played the piano to raise money for charity.

25 years ago

Feb. 4, 1998: Bloomington traffic accidents are up for the fourth straight year, and reached an all-time high in 1997. The corner that saw the most

accidents was Veterans Parkway and Empire with 42. Six of the seven worst crash intersections in town involved Veterans Parkway.

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100 years ago

Feb. 5, 1923: A \$200,000 fire destroyed the Kennedy Carliner & Bag Co. in Shelbyville Friday. The blaze, possibly of electrical origin, left 250 men and girls out of work until the plant can be rebuilt. The wife of the company president is the former Carrie Hougham of Bloomington.

75 years ago

Feb. 5, 1948: There were 1,773 births and 819 deaths recorded in McLean County for 1947, according to records in the county clerk's office. Statewide, the Illinois birth rate has grown to 24 per 1,000 people, with a death rate of eleven. (Figures like these heralded the Baby Boom.)

50 years ago

Feb. 5, 1973: Work began on the new Pizza Hut building at 1406 East Empire. The former building was destroyed by a fire believed set by a burglar last March. A Pizza Hut official apologized for leaving the burned-out eyesore standing for so long, citing insurance carrier red tape.

25 years ago

Feb. 5, 1998: Here's a twist: local gasoline prices are averaging 25 cents below last year's prices. In some cities they have dipped below a dollar, but not in B-N. Gas wars are behind the price drops elsewhere, but there's no such conflict here. Crude oil is priced as \$16 a barrel.

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100 years ago

Feb. 6, 1923: The Bloomington Fire Department answered six alarms, five in just one hour. As far as anyone knows, five calls in an hour is a new record. One of them was an auto accident downtown. The other four were roof fires: two on Market Street, one on Mill Street and another on Olive.

75 years ago

Feb. 6, 1948: Frank Hinshaw had recently bought the old farm house known as the Patton homestead west of Hudson. But this past weekend it burned to the ground, possibly the result of sparks from the chimney. Neighbors pitched in to save most of the household goods.

50 years ago

Feb. 6, 1973: State police have collared two more speeding legislators on Route 66. Airborne cops clocked one of them at 114 mph just south of Chenoa. In January they nailed the other guy for doing 90 but didn't charge him until he failed to appear in court. Both are from Chicago.

25 years ago

Feb. 6, 1998: Central Catholic High School will raffle off a house to raise scholarship funds. This is an annual affair but with a new feature this year. Extra drawings for first, second and third prizes (\$1,000; \$500; and \$100) have been added for people who sign up early.

100 years ago

Feb. 7, 1923: Three needles of radium have disappeared from St. Clara's Hospital in Lincoln. A specialist has come in from Pittsburgh to search the hospital from top to bottom. Radium is both rare and expensive. (It turned up the next day in an ash pile, carelessly discarded by an employee.)

75 years ago

Feb. 7, 1948: It was ten degrees and windy Friday night as three Boy Scouts and their assistant scoutmaster pitched tents and camped out on the court house lawn. It was part of National Boy Scout week. The scouts were Fred Williams, Stanley Drumhiller and Richard Wachter.

50 years ago

Feb. 7, 1973: Tragedy struck on the west side when a 47-year old worker fell 120 feet to his death. He and his crew were taking down an old smokestack at the former GM&O rail yard. The worker, Harold Perrault, from Georgia, had scheduled this to be his last climb.

25 years ago

Feb. 7, 1998: Mid-Illini Credit Union will open in Monday in its new location at Eastland Drive and Gettysburg. It had been on Empire Street, doing business from a former dairy store building. With 19,000 square feet, space was cramped. The new facility has 47,000 square feet.

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100 years ago

Feb. 8, 1923: Good roads enthusiasts from Tazewell and McLean Counties chose a route from Pekin to Bloomington for the new state highway. Four plans were suggested, but the winner was the one that connected Pekin, Tremont, Mackinaw, and Danvers with Bloomington.

75 years ago

Feb. 8, 1948: Normal police will sponsor the Police Athletic League, a club designed to help boys stay off the track to delinquency. The twelve boys will have a meeting room in the Odd Fellows building but they must clean it up first. Normal businesses gave \$57 toward the project.

50 years ago

Feb. 8, 1973: Missing: one piece of heavy equipment from the McLean County Highway Dept. The road conveyor, used to patch highways, turned up missing in a recent audit and Highway Superintendent Berkmeier can't account for its whereabouts. The machine is valued at \$15,000.

25 years ago

Feb. 8, 1998: A reception is scheduled today for Jack and Thelma Bailen at the Bloomington Public Library. Both are recognized for their civic activities. Jack was a pediatrician before he retired; Thelma served on the library board for years. The Bailens have three grown children.

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MORE ABOUT 19TH CENTURY BLIZZARDS: Pantagraph reporting of 1883 identifies the sleet storms of 1867 and 1871, both in January, as perhaps the most memorable to residents.

A LOCAL HISTORY READ: *Turpin Time*, by Jim Turpin, is the autobiography of the former long-time voice of the University of Illinois' football and basketball teams. Now deceased, Turpin left great memoirs of Illinois sports coaches, players and games. He also gave insights into his growing-up years in Olney, Illinois, his military service, and his career at WDWS Radio in Champaign.

BOOK SIGNING REMINDER: your editor will be signing copies of his book, *Echoes of Purple and Gold*, on February 11 2-3pm at the McLean County Museum of History; and February 17, 10-11am, at the ARC, 600 East Willow, Normal.

NEXT ISSUE: FEBRUARY 15, 2023 with more local history but in the slightly different format previously discussed. It is likely to be a work in progress as we settle on a new approach moving forward. Thank you again for your readership.