

# PAST TIMES: STORIES FROM THE SHELDON'S PAST

## ***Recent Snowstorm Recalls the Biggest Blizzard of Them All: The Storm of 1888***

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Our recent Valentine's Day brush with blizzard greatness reminded me of a photograph in the Research Center collection at the Sheldon Museum. It is a view of Middlebury's Main Street after the biggest snowstorm ever recorded in Vermont, the Great Blizzard of 1888. The shot is strikingly close to the Trent Campbell photo that appeared on the front page of the *Addison Independent* last month—same huge piles of snow, same storm-battered human figures, even the same block of Main Street, only facing in the opposite direction.



**Main Street in Middlebury was snowed under in the biggest snowstorm ever recorded in Vermont, the Blizzard of 1888. Collection of the Henry Sheldon**

In the 1888 photo the snow is still blowing, but in the distance you can just about make out the triangle where South St. and South Main split. The sign on the right saying 'China Hall' was at the head of Mill St., going down to Frog Hollow. Most of the buildings on the left side were burned in a fire in 1903. On the right side, the long building still stands, but has lost its bay windows.

But the focus is not the street, but the snow itself—the sheer mass of its sodden whiteness, about to be tackled by grim-faced men in their woolens, armed with simple

shovels. They have the proud look of those who are grappling with a storm so out of the ordinary that they think they might spend the rest of their lives talking about it. They were right.

The 'Great White Hurricane,' as it came to be called, began quietly enough. There was no radar to warn that a massive amount of moist air moving north from the tropics was about to collide with a frigid anticyclone from Canada to spectacular effect. In the calm before the storm, March 11, 1888 was any old Sunday in Addison County, judging by the Museum's collection of diaries.

Henry Sheldon went to church as usual, then returned to his big, brick house and spent a quiet day, noting that, "It snowed a little in the evening." Out in Addison it was much the same, farmer Asa Willmarth making a typical Sabbath entry: "I went to church with E.K. Kingman & back to Edgars to tea." Middlebury hardware merchant, Charles Earl, went to church as usual, where the "Rev. Mr. E.C. Smith preached to us today from Salem, Mass. Gave us two very fine sermons." The visiting pastor got out just in time, leaving on the 8:30 pm train.

According to The Middlebury Register, "About 9 o'clock in the evening the storm began in earnest." By the next morning, weather conditions were increasingly ferocious. Earl made it in to his hardware store, writing about the storm in quick bursts: "at 6 am snowing & blowing wind north at 12 noon the storm & wind has increased & at 2 pm is a Blizzard & getting worse so at 4 pm I with much difficulty reached home & next morning the storm & wind kept up through the night with unabated furor."

The absence of trains seemed to strike everyone as particularly notable, for they had grown used to that link with the outside world. Henry Sheldon was one of many who noted that was it "snowing and drifting badly," there were "no mail trains, no [horse] teams in from the outside."

On the east side of Middlebury, housewife Susan Cushman took the time to write, "Terrible snowstorms & wind the worst of the season." A big snow did not turn the tough women of the 19th century from their usual industrious patterns: "I worked on Coat for father all day."

The blizzard seemed even wilder out in the country. On the flats in Addison, farmer Willmarth recorded that it, "Snows & blows all day, a cold storm & very hard one." He split his day between outdoor work and his duties as school clerk: "I helped to do the chores & done some writeing, fixing up school register & other things."

One of Vermont's wealthiest men had no intention of being stopped by a blizzard, no matter how dangerous it might be. Shelburne's Dr. W. Seward Webb was President of the Wagner Palace Car Co., a major manufacturer of train cars, and needed to get to an important meeting in New York. He hitched his private car to a train in Burlington on Monday afternoon and set out for the south. The Middlebury Register related what happened next. "They reached here about 8 o'clock, but were stalled three hours at the freight depot. He gave up, then, and the train stood at the passenger depot until Tuesday afternoon." Word of the Webb story crops up in a number of diaries, as the incident

reinforced the blizzard's importance in the public imagination. Imagine a storm so large it can stop a Webb!

On Tuesday, March 13, the sun barely seemed to rise as the snow kept falling. Henry Sheldon wrote that, "The blizzard continued with no abatement till 11 am, the hardest of the season...no teams came in, a complete blockade. Drifts as high as small buildings." He took advantage of being snowbound to work on his historical documents. "I smoothed old letters of VT public men from Simley collection...I placed letters in scrapbook."

Charles Earl does not seem to have tried to open his shop on the 13th, for "The wind is still blowing as hard as ever." The railway was still affected, its proprietors determined to get it moving again. Earl saw "a large force at the RR with shovels pass here going north at 4 p.m." in what was already being called, "The worst storm in the memory of the oldest inhabitants."

Susan Cushman found it was, "Still storming perfectly awful no travel on streets nor Cars today." She hunkered down and "worked on patchwork some."

Out in Addison, Asa Willmarth was also taking advantage of the indoor time, "Snows & Blows again all day & very cold wind...set in the house doing some writing, &c."

The storm finally blew itself out by Wednesday morning, March 14. The Middlebury Register described downtown as we see it in the old photograph, "Here in the village the sidewalks were heaped up. The village authorities looked them over Wednesday morning, and, after trying in vain to get horses for the snow-plow, decided to let the people shovel out in front of their premises. The selectmen had teams and men out early on Wednesday and by night some of the main roads were passable. In places drifts eight, 10, and even 15 feet deep had to be cut through."

Outsiders were still finding it hard to get into Middlebury. The paper said, "The stage drivers had a hard time of it. Mr. Howard, who brings the Bridport mail, has not been seen since Saturday...Mr. Bingham, the West Cornwall driver...had to abandon his sleigh in the middle of the road."

All over Vermont, the railroads continued to be blocked until Thursday, March 15. Those trains that tried to make it were finding themselves trapped in the drifts. "The relief train from Rutland got stuck by the cuts north of New Haven on its way up to Shelburne." No telegrams could be sent, either, because, "the severity of the wind was such as to prostrate almost all the telegraph lines in New England and down the Hudson Valley."

As people got out to talk to their neighbors, everyone had a storm story to share. The Register's "Local News" columnist reported "The man who has the biggest drift in his premises has not been found. Almost every one can tell an astonishing story in this line. Fourteen feet is the most altitudinous yet reported; but the returns are not all in."

Snow usually meant that people had the fun and smooth comfort of sleighing open to them, but not this time. "The wind took the snow off many large spots in the village

roads, making the sleighing poor; and the drifts in other places render it impossible to get around on wheels.”

By the time it was done, the Blizzard of 1888 had wreaked havoc on the East Coast from New York through New England. The snow totals were impressive: Brooklyn 26 inches, Albany 4 feet, Worcester 32 inches.

Here in Vermont, Bennington was hit hardest, with 48 inches of snow, the whole southern tier third of the state getting three feet or more. The Champlain Valley had totals ranging from 18 to 30 inches. It was enough to make it a storm we are still talking about nearly 120 years later.

How does it compare with our own great Valentine’s Day Blizzard of 2007? Depends where you live. Bennington got 28 inches, a lot of snow but less than the four feet it had in 1888. (But Stowe had four feet this time). Burlington had more this year—23 inches in 1888, 25.3 inches in 2007.

What about here in Addison County? The nineteenth century snow totals ranged from 18 to 30 inches, compared to 24 inches in New Haven to three feet in Goshen this year. And Middlebury? The town got around 24 inches in each storm.

The earlier storm left over 400 people dead on the East Coast, mostly from exposure. The recent blizzard saw six die here in Vermont, all from heart attacks as the victims were shoveling out. That’s some progress, but in many other ways the effects of a big blizzard haven’t changed very much. Travel stopped and families stayed inside together. It took about three days to dig out. And when the stir-crazy inhabitants finally saw their neighbors, everyone had a story to tell. A hundred years from now, they may still be talking about the Valentine’s Day Blizzard of 2007. It sure was fun to be here.