

Diary from Beech Hill, 1943

My mother Grace (Mrs. Paul M. Grigg), kept diaries for most of her fifty years of married life. Beginning sporadically in the 1930's, and continuing as such until 1942, she documented the terrible depression years on sheets of 8x11 paper in a ring binder notebook. Then in 1942 she began keeping her records in "store-bought" leather-bound five-year diaries. As she wrote in a very small, clear script, she was able to say a great deal in a relatively small space; hence there is a wealth of information concerning rural life before the coming of electricity well into the age of television.

The recent ice storm that visited our neck of the woods this past fall prompted me to seek out what she had written about the worst ice storm that I can remember, namely the one that occurred in the winter of 1942. The aftermath of that storm left hardly a tree or shrub unscathed, and by that I don't mean that they lost a branch here and there – for the most part trees consisted of long, tapering stumps with a large pile of limbs and branches surrounding the base of the bole. The noise of crashing limbs was truly deafening, and I remember staying awake most of the night with my parents; it really was not possible to go to sleep with the constant noise. With the first streaks of light at dawn, I remember standing in the kitchen doorway and crying. When every tree in your back yard as well as those that make up your familiar horizon are totally altered, it can be an un-nerving event, whether you are a child or an adult. Here are Grace Grigg's observations on what to me is "the ice storm of the century":

January first, 1943. All power and phone lines down due to the December 28-31 1942 ice storm. Roads clogged with fallen trees due to four days of ice accumulation.

Jan. 2 That was the worst ice storm ever recorded around here.

Jan. 3 Twenty-three out-of-town trucks & crews are working out of Winsted – cold weather. Some of the power trucks are from as far away as Pennsylvania.

Jan. 4 Thirty-two degrees this morning, eight degrees this afternoon. 34 phone trucks are working, but no service yet.

Jan. 5, 1943 Temperature 2 degrees above zero with high winds.

Jan. 6. Temperature still 2 above this morning. The day was clear, cold and windy.

Jan. 7 A little snow fell during the night.

Jan. 8 thru 10 fine, normal weather for January.

Jan. 11 Warmest day so far this month – 36 degrees in the afternoon.

Jan. 12 Snowing in the afternoon.

Jan. 13 Cold and overcast.

Jan. 14 Two degrees above this morning.

Jan. 15 Three inches of heavy snow during the night, but the temperature got up to 40 degrees in the afternoon.

Jan. 16 Temperature in the 20's all day with a mean snow.

Jan. 17 Sleet all day & road a glare of ice.

Jan. 18 Cold rain & sleet. School out early because of icy roads.

Jan. 19 Temperature was 28 at dawn. High winds all day. It is terribly icy. Temperature 34 in the afternoon, 17 degrees by 9:30 PM.

Jan. 20 Temperature zero – everything a mass of ice. Litchfield, which missed the brunt [of ice] earlier, getting it bad.

- Jan. 21 Zero at dawn, 10 highest, still icy.
- Jan. 22 Two below zero, highest temperature all day was 12 above. Cold and ice continues.
- Jan. 23 Raw, but a little warmer.
- Jan. 24 Morning temperature 19, high in the afternoon was 40.
- Jan. 25 Foggy in the AM, beautiful PM – temperature in the 50's.
- Jan. 26 Dark, with sleet and snow. The Casablanca Conference (Roosevelt & Churchill) ended.
- Jan. 27 Twenty degrees at dawn.
- Jan. 28 Began snowing again. The telephone & power crews from the December, 1942 ice storm finished up their work.

Now you can see why I gave every entry for what was nearly the entire month. Throughout that period, those crews worked day and night to restore phone service (which we had) and electrical service (which we were not to get until 1947). It is important to remember that all the clean up was done with axes and crosscut and bow saws, chain saws not having made their appearance as yet in these hills. Chain saws and hay bailers were probably the most important of the laborsaving devices that have made their appearance during the last 60 years, in my estimation.

In all of these observations that deal with weather, keep in mind that weather varies greatly over relatively short distances. Beech Hill Colebrook is generally between 1200 and 1400 feet, hence has a more severe climate than does areas in town such as Robertsville or even Colebrook Center. Colebrook does not, nor has it ever had an official weather station, as does Norfolk, hence our climatic observations must remain “unofficial”. All I can say is that our family’s thermometers have always been on the north side of the house, protected from the rain and snow, and that supposedly gave as accurate an accounting as could be hoped for. I have a rain gauge, a device my folks never had, and today my daughter’s and my homes are four tenths of a mile apart, both on Beech Hill, and the differences are sometimes dramatic, especially during summer showers. Therefore, any weather records must be viewed in context. The “official” Connecticut observations taken at Bradley Airport certainly don’t speak for Colebrook and Norfolk.

Hurricanes, such as the one that passed over us in 1938, leave uniform destruction, whether you lived on a hilltop or in a valley, but floods, such as the one in 1955 did far more damage in the valleys than elsewhere, although the entire region suffered from the loss of utilities and all other means of communication and transportation. The ice storm that visited this region last November 17 did more damage in areas just south of us such as Torrington, Thomaston and Litchfield than it did in Winsted, Colebrook and Norfolk, which is not to intimate that we weren’t impacted, only to the degree that we were.

Weather watching in New England will always be a source of comment and interest, partly due to the fact that one town or even section of a town will be able to point out that yesterday’s weather produced far more interesting wrinkles in their locality than it did in the other fellows. We probably won’t have long to wait before Old Man Winter surprises us with something different for the new year of 2003.