

Winter Road Conditions in Colebrook

I am going to cheat here a little, as this article appeared in this column a few years back, but I feel that it needs to be shown the light of day again at this time of year. I spoke with someone from a nearby city after the last large snowfall we had recently, and once again I heard the familiar old refrain of “My goodness, I just can’t get over how good your road conditions are here in Colebrook!” With that thought in mind, here are my observations on Colebrook road conditions during and after winter storms:

There has never been a winter season in these parts that you didn’t hear someone (usually from a large city such as New York or even Hartford) who speculates that we must have a limited social life around here during the winter due to our inability to get from one place to another over our roads. Nervousness when snow commences (or is forecast) sometimes approaches panic in part of the population, as any of us who have had to wait in a grocery line the day before a predicted “snow event” can attest.

Our Colebrook roads have always been well-maintained year around as far back as I can remember, which means the late thirties. As far as my observations go, the same can be said for our surrounding towns. However, things weren’t always so, as a little peek back into history will show.

As far as Colebrook is concerned, winter maintenance did not exist prior to 1877. Up until that time, a road was used by horses or oxen pulling wheeled vehicles on bare surfaces and ones having runners while the highway was snow covered. We don’t know what it was exactly that prompted some of our residents to stand up in town meeting and make demands on the selectmen that they had never made before, but they did.

At a meeting held September 24, 1877, it was voted “that the selectmen be instructed to keep the roads open and passable in the winter.” That sounds reasonable enough, doesn’t it? If you think so, then perhaps the vote taken and passed on the following year at the October 7, 1878 town meeting will surprise you. “Voted that the vote last year instructing the selectmen ‘to keep the roads open and passable in the winter’ be repealed.” They went on to vote “that the selectmen keep the mail route roads open during the winter, and the expenses thereof be in addition to the sum of \$1,200.00 voted for roads at our annual town meeting holden October 7, 1878.” This is what they did, and the situation did not change until 1926, when the subject once again came before the voters as to whether or not our roads should be kept open and passable during the snow season. It was pointed out that the town couldn’t very well do so, as we lacked equipment for snow removal. A proposal was immediately presented to the assembled voters and the result was that we would not purchase a snow plow and they voted to indefinitely postpone the question of opening roads for automobiles in winter. Finally, on October 8, 1929, it was voted that the selectmen be empowered to purchase a suitable tractor and snow equipment.

For years, Colebrook had only one town truck to keep our highways open. In emergencies outside contractors could be called in to help out, a policy still in place today. January and February 1945 presented us with some of the most severe snow conditions that any living person could recall since the blizzard of 1888. On January 25, deep snows, accompanied by high winds, which created severe drifting, caused both our town truck and tractor to break down. By the time repairs were made, some of the drifts had become as hard as cement, and our equipment was powerless against them. Finally,

on February 1st, Wyllys Smith, our first selectman, was able to secure a 14-ton bulldozer from Fort Devons in Massachusetts, which did the job. Snow continued to fall, however, and the wind did not let up; on February 2nd, there were 15 foot drifts across Rt.183 about one mile north of Colebrook Center, not far from the present location of Bob Seymour's Book Barn. We had a more severe drift problem years ago because there were many more open fields alongside the roads. Today many of these fields no longer exist, and there is usually brush and trees bordering our highways. This prevents the wind from being able to gain exceptional speed, thus creating drifts. The school buses (they were private cars, we hadn't yet seen our first real bus) couldn't reach the Center School, and all of us who were students there were dropped off at the top of the hill across from the Gray Barn with admonitions to keep to the right-hand side of where the road was supposed to be because the drifts were so high on the left-hand side below the parsonage, that a person could easily reach up and grab the telephone wires. These wires had low voltage electricity running through them, not enough to do any real damage, but still not to be touched.

On February 9 1945, we received an additional 14 inches of snow, and we on Beech Hill at least, found ourselves snow bound for the first time in our lifetimes. The weather bureau said that it was the most snow since 1904. Hartford had 57 inches on the level.

Today, continuing their tradition of providing the citizenry with excellent driving surfaces (at least since 1929), the highway departments and road crews of Colebrook and all surrounding towns do the job that we have all come to accept without giving it much thought; but really we all owe them a vote of gratitude for the job they do under difficult conditions, all the while continuing unceasingly for as long as it takes to complete the job.

Last winter, after a moderate snowstorm, I was in the checkout line at Stop and Shop and noticed that Rich Wilber, one of our road crew, was in the adjacent line. During a relative moment of silence, I said to my checkout clerk in an elevated voice calculated to carry as far as Rich's ears "I would have been here earlier, but our Colebrook roads were so deep in snow, I was lucky to have gotten out at all!" Rich slowly turned around and said in the same elevated voice: "They sell snow shovels in isle 14!"

Historic Bytes

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