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ACROSS THE ISLAND

148 Inches Snow Fell In 1922-23

By NEIL A. MATHESON

THERE WAS an unusual depth of snow fell during the winter of 1923, or really the winter of 1922-23. I checked it out Thursday afternoon at the Research Station here, through the kindness and co-operation of Hector Arsenault, who is weather observer on the station.

I know, as most of you do, that the depth of snow that snarls traffic and causes huge banks is caused partly by the severity of the wind, but the total snowfall also has a bearing on the winter's difficulties.

Well there was 148.4 inches of snow fell that winter. The snowfall started with seven inches in November 1922, there were 42 inches in December, there were 40 inches in January 1923. There were only 5.5 inches fell in February but March storms brought 47.2 inches of snow, and April brought an additional 6.7 inches for a total of 12.3 feet of snow.

Many remember the winter of 1939-40 was a heavy snow year. That was my own recollection, but a search through the weather records at the Station indicates total snowfall of 108 inches and a very small fraction. That was the first winter the RAF was here.

Somebody suggested the winter of 1959-60 was a bad snow year. So we checked that one out too. We found total snowfall of only 83 inches. The biggest month was March with 34 ½ inches.

60-year Average 108.5 Inches

THE RECORDS there go back to 1909 and the average snowfall over the 60 years is 108.5 inches.

Recalling that the last two winters, immediately preceding this one, had little snowfall, we looked up the figures.

In the winter of 1968-69 there were 69.7 inches of snow, and there were 75.4 inches of snowfall in the winter of 1969-70.

Unfortunately we could not check the snowfall officially for the year 1905-06, the one most old-timers say was the daddy of them all.

But Dan MacDonald – he was known as “Taxi Dan” prior to his retirement – called to tell me the winter of 1903 was really the “daddy of them all” so far as snow winters are concerned.

“I was 12 years old at the time, and I used to take my little sleigh up on the roof of the house that was banked by snow up to 15 feet deep, and coast down the roof and far into the field by the house”, Mr. MacDonald tells me.

Many Cattle Perished

THAT WINTER feed was scarce and many cattle perished, he told me.

THE Minto and Stanley – these were ice breakers that plied between Georgetown, P.E.I. and Pictou in Nova Scotia – transported hay from Quebec for the starving cattle in this province.

Because of the feed shortage and the loss of many cattle a cannery was opened at Montague, Mr. MacDonald tells me and many of the animals that could not be carried through the winter, were slaughtered and canned. The beef was sold to the cannery and I'd like to know what price was paid for the meat.

I have more about 1923 and also more about the stormy winter of 1905-06, the winter that most old-timers say was the worst. I'll try to complete the story based on information I have on hand.

Mr. MacDonald is sure it was the winter of 1903 he recalls, though he says he might be out one year. Mr. MacDonald also remembered the winter of 1923, he tells me.

Field Kitchen At Emerald

ALYRE ARSENAULT, Summerside tells me something I had never heard previously about the 1923 storm that held a train snowbound at Emerald for more than a week. Several letters say it was for nine days, one says the time was eight days.

Mr. Arsenault writes in part as follows:

"I was one of many snow-bound in Emerald for nine days. It was quite an experience.

"The special train in question left Charlottetown for a hockey game in Summerside. After the game we attended a dance at the Olympic Hall until 11:30 p.m. when the train crew told us to board the train as snow was coming; and snow it was, for nine days at Emerald."

Continuing Mr. Arsenault explains, "A field kitchen was installed in an old building and it was very much like the Army, line up for your meals.

"The last few days there wasn't much to eat, there were no cigarettes left, nor were there any razor blades."

This is the first time I have heard about the field kitchen being set up.

Windows Broken, No Heat

MR. ARSENAULT explains "I believe all the girls found rooms in the farm houses. People were very good to us," he adds.

"On our way to Charlottetown", Mr. Arsenault adds, "we had no heat, and the balance of the train going through cuts broke mostly all of the windows, so you see, Mr. Matheson, we had quite an ordeal."

For the many who have grown up since that far-off period, and for the newcomers to the province, I want to explain that the special hockey trains to Summerside were common and Summerside also came here on special trains to cheer their team.

Charlottetown had the Abegweits, Summerside had the Crystals and there was great rivalry between the two centres.

The Abegweits had played in Summerside on the night the train stuck at Emerald. That is how the story originated.

Apparently forgotten now, "Abegweit" was an old Indian name given to this Island which is translated as "Cradled on the wave". For many years the name was used by some of the best Charlottetown teams in most all sports.

The Abegweit hockey team was at its peak in that period as they boasted of having not lost a single game for two complete seasons 1921-22 and 1922-23.

Final Game At Moncton

THERE WAS tremendous rivalry between the two teams and the centres they called home. The period I have been talking about was before I came to Charlottetown – I lived in Rose Valley then – but I recall that in the early months of 1931, the rivalry and the feeling among the fans, became so hot that the two clubs played their Island final game at Moncton in the stadium that was crushed by snow this winter.

The final game, however, failed to live up to the record of close competition of the games that had gone before, for the Crystals won it convincingly. I think the score was 6 to 1. I believe a special train took supporters to Moncton as well.

Crystals took their share of Island titles during the period of keen rivalry – I have never heard just what the score was on the number of Island titles won by each club. If there is a sports historian with a scrapbook on that part of our hockey history, I would be appreciative of some information.

One thing Summerside had always been able to boast about is that one of their stars was the first Island man to make the National Hockey League. Indeed it was only last year that the name of Charlie Cahill was added to the P.E.I. Sports Hall of Fame. His widow, Mrs. Cahill, accepted the plaque.

I have gotten away from the bad snow years of the past, but I'll come back to that story next week.

A letter from my friend, Norman Nicholson, Charlottetown had some information on the 1905-06 winter, also the 1923 winter; he also was a passenger on that snow-bound train at Emerald. And Dan MacDonald also gave me more information than I have used this week.

"MY THANKS to the many people who wrote or called about that "Whale swallowing the man" story. A special thank you to two people who sent copies of Moby Dick. One came from the office of the President of the UPEI, R. J. Baker, the other from a man who never will allow me to use his name. Another telephone call also offered me a copy of Moby Dick. The name was Wendell MacDonald.

My warmest thanks and appreciation.