

Feeling Isolated? It's Happened Here Before by Alan Rumrill



Road clearing in Swanzey

The current demand for social distancing is not the first time residents of our region have felt isolated. Not all of the previous examples have resulted from medical concerns, however. One of the most memorable occasions was the result of severe weather – the famed Blizzard of 1888. Residents of southwest New Hampshire are familiar with extreme winter weather, but the blizzard that occurred in March of 1888 exceeded any storms in the memory of local residents. The snowstorm paralyzed Atlantic coast cities north of

Virginia before it arrived in New Hampshire on Sunday evening, March 11. By mid-morning on Monday travel was nearly impossible in the region. The heavy snowfall combined with gale force winds to create 12 to 15 foot snowdrifts.

Newton Reed of Surry and Emily Mark of Gilsum recorded the event in their diaries as it was happening. Farmer Reed penned: “Severe Snow Storm, Worst ever known. Severe Blizzard. Town Meeting Day, no meeting on acct. of storm. Deepest drifts ever known.”

Emily Mark wrote that it was “the toughest storm for a generation. No mail tonight... Snow all over one bedroom window & half way on the other... Snow in the back yard up to the eaves.” Her term for the imposed isolation was that people “storm staid,” meaning that they couldn’t get out even if they wanted to.



Hurricane Road snowdrifts in Keene

The residents of a farm in Richmond opened their front door to find a wall of snow on the other side. They had to tunnel through the drift to get out and it took them all day to shovel to the barn to care for their livestock. One farmer in Chesterfield jumped out his second-story window to get to his barn and some homes there were buried to their rooflines.

Needless to say all roads in Keene and throughout the county were impassable. This was a time when roads were cleared by hand before they could then be plowed or rolled. The telegraph lines were knocked down and all trains were stranded in the snow. Stagecoaches were unable to travel and the mail was delayed for several days. Schools and businesses were closed and town meetings were postponed on Tuesday because no one could get to the town halls.



Stranded train in Hinsdale

When the storm finally let up on Wednesday March 14th, Keene had 36 inches of snow, Chesterfield had 40 inches, and Dublin 42. These accumulations combined with the high winds resulted in many houses being buried to roof level. Many people were stranded for days, especially the elderly and those who were incapable of shoveling through the snowdrifts. In Bellows Falls, Vermont, where snow piles immobilized the downtown, the Bellows Falls Times summed up the situation across the region with the following report: “No paths, no streets, no sidewalks, no light, no roads, no guests, no calls, no teams, no hacks, no trains, no moon, no milk, no paper, no mails, no news, no thing – but snow.”