

Lancaster in the Blizzard of 1888

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For many years the oldtimers from Maine to Virginia have venerated the Blizzard of 1888, but with their passing, the stories have almost ceased. It has been noted that no record has been compiled of the Lancaster area for that time. Here records and newspaper accounts of the blizzard and the days that followed it will be brought together.

“A blizzard, the most severe type of winter storm, is a combination of high wind, low temperature, poor visibility, and an abundance of snow in the air for an extended period.”¹ The “Great Blizzard”² of 1888 met each of these requirements, with average winds of twenty to thirty miles per hour (sometimes reaching from fifty to over seventy miles per hour) for four days. In some areas the snowfall totaled more than forty inches.³ (No official record of the snow depth in Lancaster could be obtained.) The blizzard covered an area from Maine to the Chesapeake Bay, paralyzing cities in the entire area. Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, New York, and Boston were each isolated unto itself. During this time Lancaster was the point farther-most east having communications with the rest of the world.⁴

The forecasts gave no advance warning that a blizzard was coming: the “weather indication”⁵ for the period 3 p.m. Saturday to 3 p.m. Sunday were. “light to fresh easterly winds, except fresh to brisk on the

coast, warmer, fair weather followed by light rain or snow."⁶ Those who relied on the almanac fared no better because Baer's admanac listed cold, changeable weather for March 11 and 12.⁷ The local indicators did not herald the impending blizzard in their usual way either: **The Daily New Era** noted that "There was not a single occupant in the station house either Saturday or Sunday night. Usually the approach of a storm drives a whole drove of tramps to the shelter of the station house."⁸

Rain started falling in Lancaster about 4 o'clock in the morning of Sunday, March 11, and continued until 7 o'clock that evening, when it changed to large, wet flakes of snow. The inlets at the corner of German and South Queen Streets and German and Christian Streets overflowed, sending water up over the sidewalks.⁹ The Conestoga Creek rose four feet, "overflowing its banks in some places, and stopping the water power pumps at the city water works."¹⁰

Snowflakes "as large as the palm of one's hand"¹¹ began to cover the ground and cling to the moistened trees, "creating a scene of rare beauty."¹² A high wind accompanied the snow most of the night, and by morning (Monday, March 12) there were deep drifts. It is usually possible to tell the direction from which a storm comes, but the wind blew in all directions that night, hurling the snow against all sides of the buildings.¹³ The snow presented a beautiful scene on Monday morning: every limb and twig was covered so deeply with snow that it resembled moss growing on them. Some of the evergreens "looked just like cats' tails."¹⁴ The snow clung on doors, was piled around the knobs, and had sifted into every crevice. The courthouse clock had stopped at 2:30 o'clock under the weight of the snow on the hands.¹⁵

Everything was not beauty, however; "there was more or less confusion everywhere."¹⁶ Limbs had broken under the weight of the snow, the street cars were unable to run, milkmen had a hard time getting into town, and the letter carriers went on their rounds without the morning mail because the **News Express** (the train carrying the mail, the Philadelphia and the New York newspapers) due at 6:27 a.m. didn't arrive.¹⁷ A group seeming to come out of nowhere after every snow, and dubbed "the Snow Shovel Brigade,"¹⁸ was at work early. The soft, slushy snow had been tramped solid and frozen into ice; so their work was not entirely successful. High wind blew until noon and shortly thereafter blew with gale force, blowing the blinding snow into drifts which had not existed before; and as fast as the snow was removed from the street and car tracks, it blew back.

It soon became evident that Lancaster was practically isolated from the rest of the East; trains were not arriving from Philadelphia, and no information "as to the location of particular trains"¹⁹ could be received. The telephone lines in the city were in working order, but outside Lancaster only three lines were standing, those to Columbia, Quarryville, and Lititz. Stage coach mails were slow coming in, or didn't arrive at all, for on the country roads the snow had "drifted almost as high as the fence tops."²⁰ Mr. A. K. Mann, in a recent interview at his home, told me that he remembers the snow drifting high as the fence tops at his farm near Washington Boro, and in all his life he has "never seen another winter like it."²¹ With one exception the daily newspapers carried feature articles telling of

the beauties and hardships resulting from the unusual storm. The exception was the **Lancaster Freie Presse**, a newspaper written entirely in German for the German population of the city. Kaiser Wilhelm I had died on Friday, March 9; and on Monday, March 12, the front page was filled with this news. A five inch column at the bottom of page one titled "**Schneesturm**"²² was the only mention made of the local weather conditions. Because of the high winds, new blockades on the roads and railroads were constantly being reported, and efforts to clear them were futile.

Oldtimers on the Pennsylvania Railroad said they had never known the company to have as much trouble as it had then, the worst blockade locally being at Leaman Place. The hundred men the company had shoveling snow there made little progress as the snow blew back almost as quickly as they shoveled it out.²³ The passengers on at least one train, stuck there overnight, were given breakfast at the company's expense.²⁴ Sandwiches and coffee were sent out from Lancaster on Monday evening to feed the cold and hungry workmen. One two-engine train coming into Lancaster plowed through frozen drifts, broke every pane of glass in the cabins and damaged the engines to some extent.²⁵ The men at the Pennsylvania Station refused to sell tickets to any place other than Columbia, and all the freight traffic was entirely suspended. The station, filled with people waiting to get to their homes, was kept open all night; many people slept on the benches. The restaurants and hotels in the neighborhood did a thriving business. Some of those waiting put in time by drinking rather large "loads of rum,"²⁶ which seemed to keep them warm and happy. Probably "the most disgusted people . . . besides the railroaders, were the hackmen, newsdealers, and hotel porters."²⁷ They had waited around the station all day; the horses, used to pull the cabs, stood shivering in the cold, piercing wind. Finally in the late evening most of them gave up and went home.²⁸

On the Quarryville branch of the Reading Railroad the trains were delayed by snowdrifts in a cut north of New Providence.²⁹ A train that left Quarryville for Lancaster at 6:30 Monday morning stuck there, and despite efforts of three or four engines working to free it, remained until Tuesday when a train from Columbia brought 125 men to shovel it out. The train finally reached Lancaster at 9:30 Tuesday night.³⁰

Over five hundred telegraph poles were down between Philadelphia and Washington, and almost as many in other directions. There were so many down in the vicinity of Coatesville that only one wire was in use between Lancaster and Philadelphia, with none beyond that point. About noon on Monday the wire from here failed, leaving Lancaster the closest city to Philadelphia with telegraph facilities. Because of this, over two thousand telegrams and cablegrams came into this office from all over the world. These were private business coming through New Orleans, Galveston, and Baltimore, from Mexico, Lima, Guayaquil, and various points in Europe. The telegraph operator did the best he could; he took them and sent them on to Philadelphia by mail.³¹ The first train to get through in that direction was sometime on Wednesday.

Local mail service was interrupted since it was impossible for the mail stages to get to Lancaster. Two mails were brought in on Monday, one from Lampeter on horesback, and the other from Strasburg by buggy.³²

On Tuesday the Strasburg stage arrived in the city about 10 A.M. with the driver relating that at some places between Lampeter and Strasburg snow was drifted in such "heaps" that a horse could walk on them without breaking through.³³ The Millersville mail came in by horseback about noon on Tuesday, this being the first time since the storm.³⁴ One of the most unusual mail deliveries was made by Messrs. Walter K. Wolf and Thad. S. Bare, who walked in from West Earl and Monday. They left Brownstown at 10:30 A.M. and arrived in Lancaster about 1:30 P.M. They had encountered drifts up to ten feet high and in the entire distance of ten miles, had walked only about a mile on the road. The two were to carry the mail for West Earl back with them; however, for some unexplained reason, it was denied them, and they had to return empty-handed, with only half of their mission completed. The following are excerpts of a letter written to the editor of **The Daily New Era** later in the week.

They carried an order to the postmaster . . . to deliver the mail of the undersigned to bearer . . . each party so requesting signing in his own hand . . . The order was in pursuance to a ruling of the Post-Office department which provides in case of delay of mails by accident . . . for the delivery of the same . . . to the party addressed or on written request from the same to another party.

The writer went on to state that when the two men presented the order, they were first told that the mail was locked up in a sack, and then that they had no right to it. He then asked, "why didn't they get the mail?"³⁵ The Paradise stage arrived about noon Wednesday after a five hour effort, the driver reporting drifts up to ten feet in that section also. Perhaps most effort was put forth by Mr. J. M. Cooney, driver of the stage from Buck. He arrived on Thursday after traveling most of the way through fields, cutting fences as he went.³⁶ With the arrival of the New Holland stage on Friday, the Post Office was able to return to near-normal operations. The mail from New York had arrived late Wednesday night.

The stores were open as usual in downtown Lancaster; Mr. John S. Givler had to postpone the opening of his new store due to the delay in freight shipping,³⁷ but there was no record of any store being closed. One enterprising merchant listed blankets and comforters that he would "Sell At Less Than Cost."³⁸ The farmers' markets were hardest hit, the stands being nearly deserted on Tuesday, "as a consequence butter was very scarce and sold readily at 40 and in some instances, 45 cents . . . Only those who came early were fortunate enough to secure the coveted article [eggs]."³⁹ The story was told of one farmer who decided to walk four miles to Lancaster to take forty pounds of butter to market. With the roads impassable, he decided to walk through the fields, carrying the butter. He slipped and fell many times, and in one of the falls, lost all forty pounds of butter. After digging around in the snow he found it and finally completed his trip to the city, where he readily sold all of it for 45 cents a pound.⁴⁰ By Friday almost all of the farmers were able to get to market, which was extremely busy: "butter stood waiting at twenty-five cents a pound, and eggs were abundant at fourteen and sixteen cents according to size."⁴¹

Theater-goers were deprived of three shows that had been scheduled at the Fulton Opera House for the early part of the week. The billing for



(Top) West side of Penn Square in 1888, showing Old City Hall with its telephone exchange on top floor.

(Bottom) East King Street from the Square in 1888.



the first is shown here as it appeared in the advertisement page of **The Daily New Era** on Monday, March 12, 1888:

Fulton Opera House

Monday March 12

Engagement of America's Greatest Soubrette

MATTIE VICKERS

(comment unnecessary)

In Her New Creation

"CHERUB"

The Pearl of Serpent Mountain

Pronounced by Press and Public

Her Greatest Success

12 — A Metropolitan Company — 12

supports Miss Vickers and she meets

with crowded houses everywhere.

Prices: 25, 50,

The farewell appearance of Madam Modjeska, accompanied by Mr. Eban Plymptom, in Shakespeare's **As You Like It** was snowed out on Tuesday evening. She left Allentown for Reading on Monday, but the train "stuck in a drift" in the country between the two places and remained there until late Tuesday night.⁴² She reached Reading at 5 A.M. Wednesday. The third big attraction which failed to get there on Wednesday was "Survival Of The Fittest" starring "Lilly Clay's Colossal Gaiety Company" featuring "30 lovely ladies," and described as "The Grandest Galaxy of Features Under The Sun — Novelty's Crowning Diadem."⁴³ Miss Clay had failed to reach York and Reading that week also, and one communication from Reading expressed "ghoulish glee over the fact that Lancaster was not likely to have the pleasure of enjoying what Reading had missed."⁴⁴

As the week wore on, many stories emerged from the strange situation. The body of Timothy Farrell, old sexton of St. Mary's Church, being returned here for burial, was somewhere between Philadelphia and Lancaster on a snowbound train. Later in the week it arrived and was interred at St. Mary's Cemetery.⁴⁵ The sheriff who walked from Landisville to Lancaster almost freezing his ears; the man whose sleigh upset with one of his blankets being blown from sight by the blowing, blinding snow;⁴⁶ Mr. John Rebman, well known auctioneer, who made an unsuccessful attempt

to walk from his home in Eden;⁴⁷ the twenty men who dug the Bird-in-Hand road open of their own free will, each receiving two free meals from a local tavern for doing it;⁴⁸ the group near Reading who, in the blinding snow, cut away the ice on the Schuylkill River so new members of the church could be baptized — these stories and uncounted others have been told over and over with the passing of the years, leaving those who heard them doubtful of the severity of the "Great Blizzard."⁵⁰

The Weather Bureau records indicate that there have been blizzards and severe snow storms both before and after the blizzard of 1888.⁵¹ The oldtimers of that blizzard had their own memories of a great blizzard in 1857,⁵² and many of us recall the heavy March snowstorm of 1958 which, while not officially a blizzard, was one of the costliest snowstorms on record. Regardless of other storms, exaggerated memories, or the doubts of men however, the printed record attests that the Blizzard Of 1888 was one of the most severe that Lancaster has had.

NOTES

1. Weather Bureau. "Some Outstanding Blizzards, 1857-1962." October 1963.
2. "The Great Blizzard," *The Daily New Era*. March 16, 1888
3. Weather Bureau, *loc. cit.*
4. "The Great Storm," *The Daily New Era*. March 13, 1888
5. "Weather Indications," *The Daily New Era*. March 10, 1888
6. "Weather Indications," *loc. cit.*
7. John Baer, *Pennsylvania Calendar Of The Year Of Our Lord Jesus Christ, 1888, Leap Year 366 Days*. Lancaster, 1888. Translated from the original German by John W. W. Loose, May 2, 1964.
8. "The Great Storm," *loc. cit.*
9. "Ground Hog Weather," *The Lancaster Intelligencer*. March 12, 1888.
10. "A March Storm," *loc. cit.*
11. *Loc. cit.*
12. *Loc. cit.*
13. "Ground Hog Weather," *loc. cit.*
14. "A March Storm," *loc. cit.*
15. *Loc. cit.*
16. *Loc. Cit.*
17. "Ground Hog Weather," *loc. cit.*
18. "The Great Storm," *loc. cit.*
19. *Loc. cit.*
20. A. K. Mann, centenarian. Interview at his home, April 29, 1964.
21. "Schneesturm," *Lancaster Freie Presse*, March 12, 1888. Translated from the original German by John W. W. Loose, May 2, 1964.
22. "A Furious Blizzard," *The Lancaster Intelligencer*. March 12, 1888.
23. "The Great Storm," *loc. cit.*
24. "A Furious Blizzard," *loc. cit.*
25. *Loc. cit.*
26. *Loc. cit.*
27. "Ground Hog Weather," *loc. cit.*
28. "The Blizzard At Home," *The Daily New Era*. March 14, 1888.
29. "The Great Storm," *loc. cit.*
30. *Loc. cit.*
31. *Loc. cit.*
32. *Loc. cit.*
33. "Why Didn't They Get The Mail?" *The Daily New Era*. March 15, 1888.
34. "A Stage Driver's Narrow Escape," *The Daily New Era*. March 15, 1888.
35. "Advertisements" *The Daily New Era*. March 13, 1888.

38. **Loc. cit.**
39. "The Great Storm," **loc. cit.**
40. "The Blizzard At Home," **loc. cit.**
41. **The Daily New Era**, March 17, 1888.
42. "Blizzard Aftermath," **The Daily New Era**. March 15, 1888.
43. "Advertisements," **The Daily New Era**. March 12, 1888.
44. "Reading Fenced In," **The Daily New Era**. March 13, 1888.
45. "The Blizzard At Home," **loc. cit.**
46. "The Great Storm," **loc. cit.**
47. **Loc. cit.**
48. "The Blizzard At Home," **loc. cit.**
49. "Baptized In A Blizzard," **The Daily New Era**. March 14, 1888.
50. "The Great Blizzard," **loc. cit.**
51. Weather Bureau, **loc. cit.**
52. "The Great Storm," **loc. cit.**

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