



Dennis Historical Society Newsletter

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Send letters & stories to Lura Crowell, Editor-in-Chief, Box 607, S. Dennis 02660 or to sesuelfarm@verizon.net

January 2008

A NOTE FROM LU

Dear Friends,

I sit surrounded by light from the windows which overlook the fields. Amazingly, I saw a rather large hawk swooping over the field. What is he doing this cold and damp wintry day? I am also surrounded by color from the beautiful poinsettias given to the Dennis Union Church in memory of loved ones. One in particular touches my heart as it was given in memory of Joshua Crowell*.

But, there's another source of light and color that surrounds me—all the many cards and notes and well-wishes from near and far from DHS members. I've enjoyed these greetings times three. Once when they were received, once when they were hung around my inside doorframes—instant and colorful Christmas decorations, and now as I take them down and read again the messages of caring support. Thank you for all your kindness. May you have good health and happy days in 2008!
Lura

(*Josh Crowell was the long time DHS Treasurer from its beginning until his death in 1997....Ed.)

WINTER WEATHER

While casting about for a subject for this newsletter the temperature went from a low of 13 degrees to a high of 50 three days later! Is this strange or unusual? Not so for the Cape. My two grandfathers had a stock answer for anyone who complained about the weather...“Well, if you don't like it just wait a few minutes. It's bound to change”...and it usually did. Weather forecasters have said that New England weather and, particularly on the Cape, was the most difficult to predict.

The Pilgrims started recording terrible winters when they "first arrived in Plymouth. “That's close, but not really the Cape. The first recorded storm on Cape Cod was December 17, 1627 when the *Sparrowhawk* was shipwrecked off Nauset. When the first settlers moved from Plymouth to the Cape their weather didn't improve. In some cases it was worse. The Cape settlers were spread so far apart by their large land grants that they weren't much help to each other when the great blizzards appeared. Every family had to be completely self-sufficient. The winter of 1697/8 was named the severest winter of the century. Dennis was settled in 1639 as part of Yarmouth, so our ancestors certainly had to deal with it.

DHS has a note in the files that tells of “The Great Snow of 1717 when Grandmother Howes was born. People had to be removed from their buildings and many cattle perished. It commenced snowing the 21st of February and snowed 21 days. This statement made to me by my mother September 22nd, 1848 and many times previous. (Signed) Obed Howes”. The Grandmother Howes mentioned was Jerusha Sturgis

who married Samuel Howes, commonly referred to as “Great Sam”. He owned the Howes Tavern built in 1700 and still standing on the corner of New Boston Road and Beach Street. It seems there were four storms, two major and two minor, but on the Cape each one ran into the other.

It has been recorded that in some of those immense storms people had to burn their furniture as there was no way to get out for firewood. The house stayed fairly comfortable as it was insulated by being covered with snow. Most houses had a root cellar under the floor that could provide them with vegetables. They could melt snow for water, but there must have been a definite lack of protein in their diet. It makes you wonder how long it took that much snow to melt when the storm was over.

The winter of 1740/1 was thought to be more severe than the one of 1697/8 with major blizzards and cold at the end of November, the first part of January and the end of February. Boston Harbor was completely frozen for 30 days. Again, in January and February of 1780 all the harbors were frozen for almost two months. They called it the Great Freeze Up.

“On November 23rd, 1848 one of the severest northeast gales that has been experienced in this vicinity for several years commenced on Saturday last and continued with unabated fury until Monday night.” Said the Yarmouth Register. It must have been all rain because on December 7th they reported “The weather has been extremely mild and spring like for the last three or four weeks. We have as yet had little or no snow and the meadows look green as in summer.” That reporter must have had a touch of spring fever. By my reckoning it was two weeks at best between the two news articles.

1856 must have been a tough one. On St. Patrick’s Day it was reported, “In our times we do not ever recollect having seen our coast environed with such a girdle of ice. Most of our harbors are closed up.” In a month it apparently had not warmed up much as they said, “Don’t leave off your flannels yet. The East wind has its usual number of victims.”

A two-day northeaster on January 18th and 19th 1857 struck our area which was followed by extreme cold. Nantucket recorded a minus 11 degrees on the 23rd. Nantucket Harbor was frozen solid for 31 days, as were the Cape harbors. On February 10th it was reported that severe freshets resulted from a very warm February following the severe January.

In 1874 it snowed every Saturday in April.

On Thanksgiving morning Capt. E.E. Knowles across the line in Brewster picked raspberry blossoms and ripe berries for the family breakfast. That night commenced the Portland Gale that did such great destruction to all of coastal New England. The *S.S. Portland* sank off Provincetown with the loss of all hands and crew. The Schooner *James B. Pace* of West Dennis, under command of Capt. John D. Garfield of West Dennis, collided with another ship off Montauk Point, NY and went to the bottom with all hands, all from the south side of Dennis. Many other ships were lost in that blizzard. Some were wrecked on shore, but many were pulled apart by the wind and waves and went down.

1905 was called a “Four-quilt winter”. A blizzard on January 25th caused the 5-masted coal schooner *Harwood Palmer* to go aground off Yarmouth and the 4-masted *Alice May Davenport* came ashore at Dennis. Train service to the Cape came to a halt and the mail team from Dennis to Yarmouth was overturned by the wind in Yarmouth. Horses with scoops dug channels out to deep water and the *Davenport* was floated free March 21st and the *Palmer*, after some problems, on May 30. Yet, a year later, in March 1906 it was declared that the ice crop was a failure. The ponds had not frozen that year and ice plants were the only hope of ice for the summer.

In February 1918, a great freeze up occurred that had the Cape and Islands completely surrounded by pack ice. The U.S. Light Ship *Cross Rip* was on station between Dennis Port and Nantucket frozen into the ice. After a few days it became apparent that the ship's anchor cables had broken and the ship was free-floating, at the mercy of the wind and ice. The First Mate went over the ice to Nantucket asking for the crew to be relieved from duty and it was denied. The last sighting of the vessel was when it floated past Great Point, Nantucket, still locked in the ice and flying the distress flag, carrying Dennis men to their death.

An April 1923 issue of the Register said, "Two degrees above zero on the 28th of March and 10 degrees above on April 1st are not temperatures to encourage farmers to start gardens." However in January 1924 Mr. E. W. Sears of West Dennis cut 20 heads of lettuce from his garden on New Year's Day, which concluded a banner year for climate.

On January 12, 1934 it was -16 in Dennis Port. Dr. Harold Rowley's car froze up in front of our house while he was inside delivering my brother, Alton. It was -17 in February. Those were the coldest two months since 1857.

On February 18th, 1952 a gale sank the *Pendleton* and *Fort Mercer* off Monomoy - both broke in two in 62 mph gusts. The *Pendleton* crew was rescued by Coast Guard boat *CG 36500* from Chatham Station. Nine days later the Cape Blizzard struck with 70 mph winds leaving 18" of snow behind. Cape & Vineyard Electric Co. reported 10,000 homes with no power. (In 1952 that was most of the homes on the Cape...Ed.) Enormous drifts were everywhere. Rotary trucks from western Massachusetts were brought in to help clear the main roads, as most of the local DPW trucks were not large enough to get through them. A complaint from some residents was that the ice chunks hurled by the rotary plow broke some windows. However, they were glad to be plowed out. Mill Street in Dennis Port was completely blocked by huge drifts on both ends of the street. My sister, Mary, was just home from the hospital with her new daughter, Sharon. She looked out the window after the storm and saw our father coming across the fields on his horse, Blaze, delivering milk.

The Storm of February 12, 1978 did a lot of damage to the Outer Cape. It washed Henry Beston's Outermost House away along with several other buildings including a Coast Guard boathouse. The Cape was lucky. We had rain, but on the mainland they had snow, tons of snow. They were still digging out in April.

Count your blessings that you live on the Cape in Dennis. In every storm we've had for some years now our DPW has done a good job of clearing our roads. Some years back every man was responsible for clearing the road in front of his property. When you hear the snow plow go by in the middle of the night you can give a big sigh of relief that that's one job you don't have to face in the morning!

Sources for this article were: The Register, Harwich Independent, Cape Cod Times, Old Time Cape Codders and my family.

PRH

**Dennis Historical Society
P.O. Box 607
South Dennis, MA 02990-0607**

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Christmas Open House at the Manse December 9, 2007

Colonial hospitality at its finest was appreciated by nearly 300 visitors as they included the Rev. Dennis' home on their Village Stroll.

Docents Mary Raycraft and Jean Twiss who are pictured here served Punch and cookies. Other docents greeted visitors throughout the home.



Thank you to all who left contributions for the Manse Repair & Preservation Fund