

It Was One Of The Worst

ST. MARYS, ONTARIO, WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 1, 1978

BY LEIGH ROBINSON

Thursday morning, January 26th, 1978 - a morning to remember. A day that will without question go down in the history of great Ontario blizzards.

It all started out innocently enough. When St. Marys and area residents tucked themselves into bed Wednesday night the temperature outside was relatively mild for this time of year and the weather forecasters had predicted nothing more troublesome than some overnight rain, maybe turning to snow later in the day.

Turn to snow it did. Then the wicked wind came,

emanating from some dark source to the south, deep in the Ohio Valley. It was stronger in velocity than anyone could have imagined (128 kmh). Not to be completely outdone, the north sent down some strange weather of its own creation and mixed well with the hurricane forces to render southern Ontario in a state of havoc for the next 48 hours.

It became one of the most severe winter storms in this region on record. Weather gazers could not believe their eyes or their gauges as barometric readings reached new record lows.

And through it all, St. Marys and area residents grinned and bore it in the fashion that they have become all too accustomed to in the last two or three years.

AWESOME SCHEDULE

The town's roads crew worked an awesome schedule in the worst of conditions. Already plagued with sleepless nights because of snowfalls earlier in the week, the boys found rest even harder to come by once the full weight of Thursday's blizzard began to settle on their machines.

Even after the wind died

down that evening, the snow continued to fall and roads which had been plowed for the umpteenth time quickly filled in again.

Fortunately the storm had already begun to hit before Perth County's schoolchildren had been picked up by buses and announcements of school closings prevented others from walking. Schools in Perth, Middlesex, Oxford, Huron, and Elgin remained closed for both Thursday and Friday along with many area businesses and industries. People stayed at home, listening to reports and open-line programs on their radios.

St. Marys Police reported a surprisingly calm situation in St. Marys during the critical period. There were no major accidents on either Thursday or Friday, due at least partially to the fact that few drivers could get their vehicles to go anywhere.

EMERGENCY

The police received one emergency call from the Forty Winks Motel located just outside of town near Highway 7. A man who had been stranded in the storm put a severe gash in his arm when he broke through a window at the motel to get in out of the cold.

St. Marys Police were called and requested to come out and get the man to hospital via snowmobile. It was determined, however, that the man could not ride on a snowmobile because he could not use both hands to hold on to the vehicle.

The police got in touch with Dr. Don Munro who was able to deliver a successful first-aid treatment message for the cut over the telephone. Later when the storm had subsided somewhat, an emergency vehicle was able to be driven to the motel and the man was taken to St. Marys Memorial Hospital.

But it was clearly not the disaster in this area as it was elsewhere. There were no storm-related deaths and aside from the couple of times that the lights began to flicker in homes both in town and out in the country - the hydro remained on and homes remained heated. In a few instances, Union Gas sent men with snowmobiles out to fix stalled furnaces.

The strong wind did have some effects, however, knocking down tree limbs, signs, and tearing away at shingled roofs. Downtown, the store front window in the A and N Store was knocked out in sudden fury by the hurricane-like winds. Some residents reported windows in their homes had suffered the same fate.

And when it was all over, the landscape looked like something ultra-real as if out of a Salvador Dali painting. Snowdrifts were as high as buildings out in the country. But the country folks didn't care too much. They still had food, their homes were warm, and in the distance the steady hum of snow plows could be heard



And Worse Was Yet To Come

Downtown St. Marys on Monday morning had that real wintry look but more snow was to come later in the day and even more throughout Monday night. This is a view looking west from the corner of Wellington and Queen Sts.