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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Could Snow Plows Fight Real Winter

By NEIL A. MATHESON

“IF WE ever get a real old-fashioned winter, the government snow plows will never keep the roads open. They’ll be blocked solid.”

Readers will note I have the statement in quotation marks, which indicates I am quoting someone else. I met a sturdy veteran of 80 years, or more, and he was dead serious about his statement.

I was glad I met him and heard him say that, for I’ll confess I’ve often said the same thing myself. But lately I got to wondering about those old-time storms. I remember them vividly, but I’m wondering if December of any of those “really bad” winters, as we call them, brought any more snow than the 89 inches dumped on us in December of this winter.

The Old, Really Bad Winters

I CAN go back as far as 1923 – that’s the old, bad winter I have often talked of in this column – and compare its December with December 1970. Unfortunately I can’t go back for a real comparison with 1905-06, the winter the real old-timers talk about as being the Daddy of them all. But I am going to see a friend of mine who, I am told, has some good newspaper clippings of that winter and its storms.

I remember the 1923 winter mainly for two things. The snow was too deep to get a horse and sleigh into the woods, and just about every farmer got his winter fuel in the woods in those years.

The other memory is of the train being stuck for a week to 10 days – I’ve forgotten the exact number of days – and I was living that winter in Middleton where I was teaching school for January and February for my sister Marion, now Mrs. John A. MacLeod, Charlottetown.

Snow means little to a young man who is healthy, and strong and active and all three fitted me at that time. I was 18, going on 19 at the time and difficulties were a challenge and little more.

If Middleton is two miles west of Kinkora, as memory tells me it is, then I walked five and one-half miles to Rose Valley each Friday evening, and the same distance back to Middleton on Monday morning, arriving in time for school.

That’s a long time ago and memory fades a bit in details but I recall that I helped the Bradshaw boys, Wallace and Neil who were close to my own age, cut trees in the line fence, haul them across to the farmyard, then saw the trees into blocks and split the blocks and chop the branches into firewood.

Set Pattern For Present Columns

I'M PARTAIL to that winter of long ago, for many reasons. One of the most important to me is that a flash back to the rigors of 1923 was responsible for getting this column on the sort of formula it has followed ever since.

I may have told you before about this, but it started out as a column on current events, but the last day of March 1960 was a Thursday (that date may be out one day) and I sat down to write a column for Friday, the day it appeared on at the time, and I could not find anything current to write about.

So in desperation my mind went back to 1923 and I started to recall on paper the events of that winter. To be honest, I felt just a bit ashamed of going back so far for my column, but next day people talked to me on the street and they called on the telephone and by other means let me know they liked it, and I learned that was true. So I developed, as best I could, the "old-time" approach to "Across The Island" which has been going on that way ever since.

And that reminds me that I owe the success of this column in large measure to you, good people, who come to me with ideas, and suggestions for future column stories.

On New Year's Eve a man came up to me in one of our supermarkets and started to recall the Step Dancing contests of 10 to 15 years ago. We talked so long as I kept asking him questions, and he very kindly answered them, that I fear that his good wife was annoyed that I was keeping her husband so long in conversation.

At any rate I got the makings of a really good column piece, and my thanks to the gentleman for his most helpful part in it.

May Be Really Good Comparisons

AND NOW if I may get back to those "Terrible Old Fashioned" winters old timers like to talk about – I do myself too at times – I hope to tell you next week, but this winter to date compares with the real bad winters of old.

Wouldn't it be interesting if I can predict, or at least suggest that this winter may be as bad as any of them, if the snow keeps tumbling out of the skies, through this month, February and part of March as it did in December.

Harry Taylor recalls the winter of 1939-40 when he came here with the RAF from England. There was a lot of snow that winter – memory tells me it was 144 inches or more though that may not be accurate. Another man tells me the winter of 1960 was really bad as well.

The Two Best Winters Ever

I'LL CHALLENGE anyone to point to two better snow winters than the last two winters I lived on the Langley Road, Southport, two winters ago and recall there was only one morning that I couldn't have come to Charlottetown without a plow.

And last year I lived at Mt. Stewart and recall I did come to Charlottetown the worst day of the winter, the visibility was really bad, but there wasn't really enough snow down to make travelling difficult.

I figured after two such winters, I couldn't expect a third in a row. So Mrs. Matheson and I moved to town for the winter, and by now we're glad that we did.

Whale Column Reaction Good

THAT “WHALE swallowing a man” column last month stirred unusual comment. Some of the calls were most interesting.

Reg MacDonald, Souris told me, for example, of being on a whaling ship once for an afternoon – he was not crew.

As I suspected, though I knew nothing about whales, some are big enough to swallow a man, at least one whale is.

Reg spoke of the Blue or fin whale that “could easily swallow a man”.

The Sperm whale, he said, has teeth, and a narrow jaw. Reg has two teeth at home that were taken from such a whale. They are four inches and six inches long, respectively.

The whaling ship he boarded had come from Greenland. It had perhaps 700 men aboard her. They want only young men on the whalers. The job is rough, hard and tough.

Supervises Insane Cage

THE OLDEST man aboard was 32 years and he looked after the “insane cage” which houses men who go insane. Reg tells me the ship is out a year, and sometimes longer, at one time. This, plus the monotonous sameness of the work probably causes insanity, he suggested.

Mr. McDonald’s son, Jim, once went on the Antarctic trip. Known as the Dr. Fukes expedition, it went to the Antarctic. Mr. MacDonald’s group was carrying supplies for the expedition. Sir Edmund Hilary was with the expedition. And he’s the New Zealander that had previously climbed Mt. Everest, a feat which had been previously attempted by many skillful climbers, without success. This will be interesting to older residents, particularly the ladies. The Greenland whale has on the roof of its mouth something that might be described as bristles, through which it “strains” its food, Reg was told. They are called Baleens.

The interesting part is that this material is sometimes called whalebone, though incorrectly, and was used in other years to make stays for ladies corsets.

Swallow, Or Throat, Is Small

THE GREENLAND whale is small, and one that might be choked by the fist of the Breadalbane man of whom I wrote last month. The throat, or swallow of this whale is only about one and one-half inches in diameter, the Souris man told me.

Reg was descriptive when he said the “baleens” looked to him something like the bristles on a street sweeper.

If anyone is interested in reading further on whales, I suggest he read Moby Dick. The tip came to me from a friend, Gordon White.

I tried for the book in the library but it was out when I called. I am going to read it though when it does become available.

