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Some Unusual Weather

Lilian Sargent, who lived for many years on the corner of Court and Pleasant Streets, compiled two books of clippings which she titled "Some Unusual Weather" and "Unusual Weather". Mrs. Sargent gave the books to Ellenore Doudiet, they are now in the Wilson Museum and provide the material for this article.

The summers of 1811 through 1817 were unusually cold; 1812 and 1816 being the coldest. 1816 is still known as the-year-without-a-summer or as eighteen-hundred-and-froze-to-death; near the coast it was sometimes called mackerel summer as mackerel was substituted for scarce meat, grain and garden produce. The temperature of the year as a whole was almost normal and the summer was hot at times but, in the northeast, snow fell every month of the year. In Maine the ground was frozen hard in June, corn and potatoes were killed, there was frost in July and August was colder with a killing frost as far south as Massachusetts. Many farmers believed the climate had changed and 1817 was the beginning of the movement to settle in the west.

The winters of 1843-44 and 1856-57 were very cold, Boston Harbor was closed to shipping both winters. In 1844 the Cunard liner *Britannia* left through a channel a hundred feet wide and seven miles long cut by hand through the ice.

The winter of 1874-75 was another cold one. George H. Witherle of Castine wrote of it twenty-eight years later; excerpts follow. *During ... January and February [to the 20th] there has been an uncommon continuance of steady cold weather, the thermometer frequently falling to zero and below (the lowest being about ten below). There have been only two or three thaws, and these very short. The ground is well covered, but not deeply with snow. Ice began to make early [in the harbor].*

Jan. 26th, schooner Mentora arrived from Boston, having left the previous day, with a cargo of a variety of merchandise for Castine and Bucksport. The same night the drift ice in the bay consolidated

and the harbor froze, and was crossed the next day, the 27th. The 30th was wet and thawing, and the ice partly broke up, and two or three vessels went out and came in. One went over to Belfast, landing on the ice some distance from the city.

Feb. 7th, the ice in the bay again solidified and the harbor froze and was crossed on foot the 8th, and during the following week by sleighs.

Feb. 17th, Capt. H. Hodsdon and Jere P. Hatch rode to Belfast in a sleigh. They started from Wadsworth's Cove on the western side of the peninsula. The same day a team went out of the entrance of the harbor and returned the same way, hauling a load of about a ton. This is the first time of which there is any record or other tradition, as far as I know, of such things having been done. Many teams, some of them loaded, have since crossed from Castine and Brooksville to Belfast, Searsport, Islesboro, etc.

Feb. 19th was damp and rainy, thermometer 37 degrees. Ice in the center of the harbor channel 10½ inches thick.

Feb. 23. Very warm. Thermometer 46 degrees. Thickness of ice in harbor diminished to 8½ inches.

Feb. 24th, thawy and rainy.

Feb. 25th, thawing still. A few persons came on foot from Brooksville. One hauled back a barrel of flour on a hand-sled.

Feb. 27th pleasant. Thermometer 15 degrees; ice still solid; teams crossed to Brooksville and many persons on foot.

March 3. Teams went to Belfast and back without trouble, except having to bridge a crack near Turtle Head with short planks.

March 4. Snow during night and forenoon. Strong northeast wind. Thermometer 14 degrees at 9 a.m.

March 5. Ice in harbor about seven inches thick. Five or six inches of snow on ice.

March 8. Ice covered with slosh, but solid underneath.

March 13. The open water down the bay, which began to be visible about the 7th, has extended several miles up. Moderate weather all this week. Ice in harbor broken and adrift up to foot of Main Street.

March 19. Ice in harbor from Nautilus Island to Wasson's wharf broken up and adrift. Bar outside of entrance to harbor still two or three miles wide. Weather moderate for some days until yesterday. Cold and windy then and this morning. Thermometer 15 degrees.

March 20. Thermometer 15 degrees. Ice adrift, jammed in harbor below Steamboat wharf and was crossed on foot today.

March 22. Thermometer 11 degrees. Ice quite firm in middle of harbor. People crossed on foot, first hauling a boat and afterwards without any. At 3:10 p.m. started on foot from Trask's rock on the northern shore, for Brigadier [Sears] Island, taking hatchet and stout pole. About a mile out cut into the ice 17½ inches without striking water . . . Had a little trouble in landing on the rough shore there but there was no danger, except of wetting feet . . . A splendidly clear afternoon - sun warm, and with but little wind.

March 25. A warm southerly wind sprang up early in the morning and continued during the day. An attempt made to cut a passage through the bar in part of the harbor. A channel three feet wide and about 2000 feet long from the lower edge of the ice was cut during the day.

March 26. Thermometer 20 degrees in the morning. During the storm yesterday about three-fourths of a mile in width of the ice broke off the lower edge and went adrift . . . Steamer Lewiston her first trip from Portland to Machias came up the bay to within about a mile of the bar, then turned back and went east outside of the islands.

March 29. Schooners Union, D. F. Patchin, Clarissa Ferson and White Foam ran into the ice, and with considerable help from the town undertook to cut through, but it is doubtful if they would have succeeded until the next day without help. About 3:30 p.m. the Lewiston came along on her return from Machias and after feeling of the drift ice worked her way into the fast portion of it, going through the whole in about 20 minutes, starting a little copper and somewhat roughing up her stern. This released the vessels and finally removed the obstruction.

April 1. William T. Hooper drove to Belfast and back on the ice - twice - going from Wadsworth's Cove, first in the forenoon, returning at 1 p.m.; second, starting at 4 p.m. and returning about 7, having another person with him on three of the four trips.

April 4. Ice went out of western bay as far as a line running from Perkins' point to somewhere below Turtle head.

April 8. Ice in western bay about the same as on the 4th. Saw two persons - minute black dots, on the ice near Brigadiers' Island. One of them I found was Edward Tilden of Castine, who skated from Perkins' Point, North Castine to Searsport and back.

April 13. Last night the ice between Fort Point and Bucksport went out.

April 15. Steamer Cambridge made first trip from Boston. Could not get into Belfast or Searsport, but went to Bucksport and Winterport.

April 16. Ice left Penobscot River below Bangor.

April 17. Cambridge came down river and broke into Belfast and Searsport, opening both harbors. Katahdin had been frozen in at Belfast about 12 weeks.

It will be observed that after February 20 there was no extremely cold weather - and that there were several partial thaws. These strengthened the ice by freshening it and making it practically fresh-water ice on top. During the period of through freezing there was a great deal of travel across the bay . . . One day it was said that 75 teams came from Belfast and Searsport.

The winter of 1917-18 will also be long remembered. Snow fell on October 11 and on December 30th records for cold were broken in Boston, New York and Portland, which had a temperature of 21 below zero. On January 3rd Ice conditions on Belfast and Penobscot Bays were the most serious of the season . . . The ice was so heavy at Searsport and Belfast that the steamer Belfast, Winterport for Boston, did not make landings at either place, running direct from Bucksport to Camden. The steamer for Islesboro and Castine did not make her trips . . . and Islesboro was cut off from the outside world except by telephone . . . At sunset the harbor [Belfast] and bay were frozen over as far as could be seen.

On January 16 heavy snow stopped or delayed rail traffic, some cities were without coal and the cold continued.

A report from Rockland, February 21 - The government ice breaker, which left here with 90 tons of provisions for the isolated people of Islesboro succeeded in reaching Dark Harbor late Wednesday night and was received with cheers. There had been no boat since January 1 and supplies were very short. The vessel was forced to fight her way through half a mile of ice and slush driven into the middle of the bay and averaging six to eight feet in thickness and a stretch of solid ice, eight inches thick

On February 22 - For the first time in the history of Penobscot Bay an automobile under its own power has crossed on the ice . . . the men who successfully carried out this feat, are the grandsons of the first man ever known to cross the bay with a team, and that was 43 years ago.

Washington's Birthday, the people of Belfast were astonished to see crossing the ice a Ford car, fully equipped and carrying three passengers. The

car sped into the harbor, ran up alongside of Lewis' wharf and its passengers alighted. The machine was driven by its owner, Albert A. Gray, who was accompanied by his brother Jasper and cousin J. M. Veague all of Brooksville, 12 miles across the bay. They had made the trip in just 25 minutes.

"We decided that we would make a try," said J. M. Veague . . . We were a little anxious when we first started, and cut a hole in the ice now and then to get the thickness, but after finding from 10 to 14 inches of good ice we opened her up and let 'er go, for Turtle Head . . . Just before crossing the channel cut a week ago by the Favorite, the big Great Lakes ice breaker, we did a little more scouting and found the ice six inches thick. Then it was plain sailing and no dust to Belfast . . . When we got ready to go back there was a thick snow storm and being sailors from childhood, we bought a compass and decided to chance it, although it was then so thick that you could see only



a few lengths of the car. By the time we were ready to start, however, it cleared and all was plain sailing."

. . . After the first trip it was an easy matter and on Saturday the same car made four round trips between Brooksville and Belfast, towing a horse-sled on which 2500 pounds of grain and provisions were carried each trip . . . Encouraged by the good luck of the first car, several Fords and an Overland made the trip to Belfast from Castine. Harry Butler rode over from Castine on a bicycle and many others skated across. Monday a horse and sled was driven over after grain and the ice bridge will undoubtedly last for several weeks.

On Sunday some four or five hundred people spread themselves over the surface of the bay, skating, ice boating, strolling, playing golf on an improvised course . . . The ice is perfectly safe, save for that

near the shore where the tide in its rise and fall causes it to break up and freeze again each time the tide goes out.

For the past few days the bay has been a glare of ice and ice-boats and skaters skim over it in every direction running from Searsport to Castine and all over the bay.

March remained cold with a blizzard on the tenth. More cold is related in Mrs. Sargent's own hand writing - June 21, 1918. Heavy frost last night does much damage in our region. Beans, squash, cucumbers, and sometimes potatoes suffer. Aug. 17, 1918. Frost reported in Orland last night. Sept. 11, 1918. Heavy frost last night in some places . . .

Since 1918 many winters have been excessively cold but none has produced ice thick enough to bear the traffic of 1875 and 1918.



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