

# November, 1921 storm puts town in dark 11-19-87 p.4

By June Kennedy  
Eagle staff

**T**he ice storm of Nov. 27, 28, and 29, 1921, stands out as one of the most disastrous on record in the territory affected. Even in the memory of the oldest Westford inhabitants, there had never been a storm of its character or its severity. (It makes our Nov. 10 and 11 nor'easter seem pretty mild!)

Fortunately for New England, the area over which it spread was large, only sections of southern New Hampshire, central and north eastern Massachusetts and northern Rhode Island and Connecticut being visited by the storm.

In the 72 hours during which the storm lasted, there was not only a series of changes in the temperature of the atmosphere near the ground, but almost opposite changes in the temperature far above the earth near the clouds. Variations in temperature in either belt of air are, of course, frequently occurring, but the sequence of changes and their duration which together were responsible for the severity of the storm, are fortunately rare.

On Sunday, Nov. 27, there was a fairly heavy fall of damp snow driven by a strong wind. This snow adhered to all objects it struck, particularly trees and poles. On Sunday evening, following a slight rise in temperature, the snow changed to a fine rain. There was not sufficient rain, however, to melt the snow which had previously fallen, although there was enough to saturate that part of the trees and poles.

During Sunday night the temperature near the ground dropped below freezing, but it still remained warm up in the clouds. The

saturated snow on the trees and poles was frozen where it lay.

Early Monday morning, Nov. 28, the rain began to fall heavier although the temperature of the belt of air nearest the earth still remained below the freezing point. For at least 48 hours the icy covering on tree limbs, poles and wires began to build up due to the rain which froze as it struck.

The equivalent amount of rainfall during the entire storm was nearly 4 inches. In one respect it may be fortunate that this was not all snow, for its equivalent in snow is about four feet. As if nature were trying to outdo herself, on Tuesday morning, Nov. 29, there was a thunderstorm.

In this narrow belt which included Westford and Lowell, branches laden with tons of ice were snapped off like pipe stems and in falling carried with them any poles, wires or structures that were underneath. (The wires were coated with ice, thus weighing over a pound per foot).

At 7:30 a.m. on Monday morning, Nov. 28, the first electric power feeder owned by the Lowell Electric Light Corporation showed the effects of the accumulated ice. By Monday night, every street light circuit in Lowell and surrounding towns with the exception of those in the central part of the city of Lowell was broken. It was estimated that on the night of Nov. 28, 7,000 customers were without electric service.

Linemen were recruited from every possible source. The first work to be done was to clear the streets of fallen wires and poles. Over four tons of wire were cut down and one hundred or more poles removed from the streets of Lowell.

Within the city of Lowell, the first work attempted was the restoration of service to hospitals and house lighting. It was not until Dec. 14, that the work on the various city feeders was sufficiently completed to permit crews to systematically push on beyond the city limits.

Among the very important installations that were affected was the pumping station supplying the town of Westford with water. The power feeder supplying the plant was the first one to be interrupted on the morning of Nov. 28. It was impossible to attempt any restoration work on that day, but on Tuesday morning, Nov. 29, a crew of eight men was assigned to the work of clearing lines to North Chelmsford, and by night had cleared through to that town.

The roads beyond North Chelmsford were almost impassable due not only to deep snow and ice, but to fallen trees. However by night of the following day, with a reinforced crew chopping away hundreds of fallen trees and branches, the party had pushed through to Forge Village. Most of the way, the electric power line follows the Lowell & Fitchburg St. Railroad track; the day's work included seven miles of travel on foot.

Word had been received that the stand pipe in Westford was rapidly emptying and the men were spurred on in their efforts to reach the pumping station before the supply of water was exhausted.

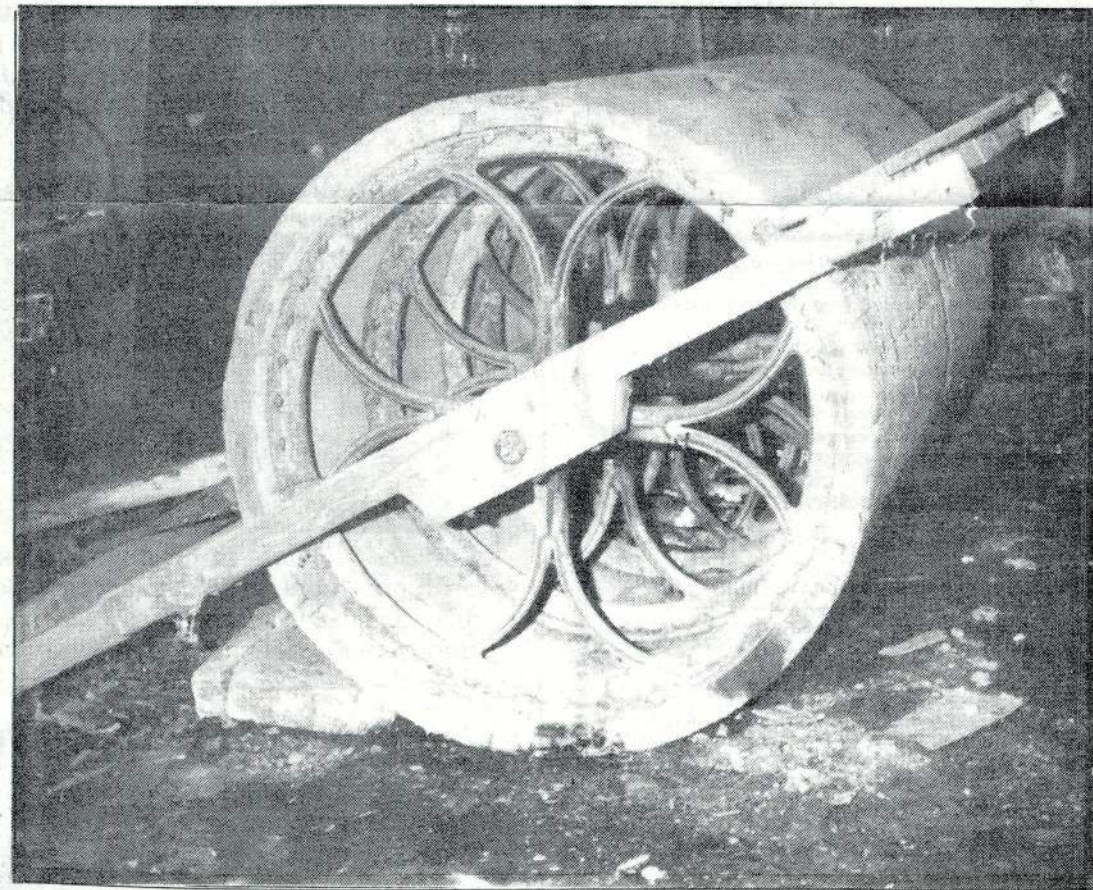
Leaving the city way before daybreak on Thursday, Dec. 1, the crew arrived in Forge Village early in the morning intent upon clearing the last section of the line before dark. For practically the entire distance from this town to the pumping station the wires were completely covered with fallen branches and in many places wires and poles were on the ground. Late in the afternoon, the line was cleared and electric current sent through to the pumping station.

Investigation showed that there were only a few inches of water left in the stand pipe. The electric driven pumps were started in time to avert a serious condition resulting from a short age of water.

It had been hoped that by Christmas eve the work of restoring lighting would be completed. Although most homes in the outlying areas did have electricity for that holiday, it was New Year's Day before the lighting system was back to normal.

A first hand impression was given by Mrs. Alice Day, who vividly remembers the cracking and snapping of limbs and the ruts in the roads, as this was before the days of snow plows. And, she said, "the coasting was great!"

June W. Kennedy is a Westford resident whose book, "Westford Recollections," highlights the town's history.



## Snow rolling

In an era when a plow was something used by a farmer in his field, snow-covered roads had to rely on Mother Nature's warming trend to be cleared. In the meantime, Westford residents packed down the accumulations with wooden rollers to ensure smooth transportation. Resident Bob Spinner recalled his mother dressing him up to see the wooden roller, which he described as being 'as wide as our road and pulled by four to six horses.'

(Photo from 'Westford Recollections' courtesy of June Kennedy)