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The great ice storm of '21

(Editor's note: Local historian George Parkhurst has regaled readers throughout the year with tales of old Chelmsford. Here is his latest, recounting how Chelmsfordites faced the New Year in 1922.)

By **GEORGE ADAMS PARKHURST**

"Lowell Area Crippled by Ice Storm." That was the headline that greeted Chelmsford residents when they picked up their morning paper on November 28, 1921. Even if the paper boy hadn't been able to make the delivery that day, there was no doubt about what the lead story would be. As far as the eye could see, tree limbs were bowed down and wires sagged under the weight of the ice that had built up overnight. Sleet and ice are no strangers to New England but this was no ordinary storm that covered central Massachusetts and southern New Hampshire.

On Sunday, November 27, there had been a fairly heavy fall of damp snow driven by a high wind. That evening, following a slight rise in temperature, the snow had changed to a fine rain although it was not sufficient to melt the snow that adhered to the trees and wires. During Sunday night, the temperature near the earth's surface dropped to below the freezing point while it still remained relatively warm in the upper atmosphere.

Rain became heavy early on Monday morning and continued for nearly 48 hours, building up an increasingly thick coating of ice wherever it landed. As the ice-encased wires and limbs became greater in diameter, they presented a larger surface for the accumulation of even more ice. Tree limbs snapped like pipe stems, bringing down wires and poles. Wires in unexposed areas sagged and finally broke under the weight of the ice, producing an unbalanced load on the poles, causing many to be toppled.

The Lowell Electric Corporation (now Massachusetts Electric), which would sustain the greatest loss due to the storm, reported its first major feeder line down at 7:30 on Monday morning. This was the line that supplied electricity to Westford and Forge Village. During the next two days, five clerks assigned to the storm desk had all they could do to keep up with the reports of storm damage. By Monday night every street light circuit in Lowell and the surrounding towns, except in the central part of the city, were broken.

While the storm itself lasted only about 48 hours, cleaning up and repairing the damage was going to continue for the next seven weeks. Priority was, of course, given to the hospitals and other installations concerned with public health and the distribution of food. The line to Forge Village fell into this category since it supplied power for the Westford Water Company's pumping station. With the Westford standpipe rapidly emptying, every effort had to be made to restore service as quickly as possible.

By Tuesday night a crew had worked its way from the power plant in Lowell to North Chelmsford and 24 hours later an augmented crew had chopped its way through the tangle of hundreds of fallen trees and had finally reached Forge Village. Because the power line followed the Lowell & Fitchburg Street Railway track cross country instead of along the highway, the day's work included seven miles of travel on foot. The work crew set out from Lowell long before daylight on Thursday, December 1, and late that afternoon the pumps were started, just in the nick of time as only a few inches of water remained in the standpipe.

The Chelmsford Water District fared better since its pumps on Warren Avenue (the only pumping station



Ice and snow create a sculpture on a modern day basketball net. (Photo by Mick Hilliard)

at that time) were driven by gas engines. However, no residence or commercial establishment had any electricity for many days. The present writer recalls that his family went back to the use of illuminating gas for lighting for a protracted period. Electricity having replaced the former gas lights only a short time before, it was only necessary to uncap the pipes and reinstall the gas fixtures. Many people did this.

It was not until December 14, more than two weeks after the storm, that feeder lines in Lowell were sufficiently repaired so that the crews could systematically push beyond the city limits even though emergency crews had responded on the day of the storm from other Massachusetts cities outside the area. The Light company had hoped to complete the restoration of service to all its customers by Christmas and while they nearly reached their goal, the complete lighting system was not back to normal until New Year's Day. Even then there were still poles to be set and other work that would require about three weeks more.

The power company was not the only ones affected by the storm. Some businesses had to shut down temporarily and, to the delight of the small fry, schools were closed until December 5th. Organizations planning activities had to reschedule them almost from day to day. Newspaper announcements cautioned that a particular meeting, or dance, or entertainment would be held as planned providing there were lights at the town hall. On December 14th a candlelight meeting was held at the high school with each person asked to bring his own candle.

Admittedly there have been many ice storms in the area during the past 59 years but none have created such widespread destruction or inconvenienced the whole community for so long.