

# 100 years ago, sleighs made it through drifts

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A good old New England blizzard years ago meant main highways were blocked by eight- to ten-foot drifts and secondary roads were impassable for a week.

This situation is all but unknown today, thanks to the heavy equipment available and the prompt action of our highway department.

But, that was not the case years ago.

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## The way it was

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Actually, most of the streets were not impassable as long as you could break a path to the barn and harness up the dependable old mare to the family sleigh.

The highway department didn't have to worry about autos, trucks, or busses because there weren't any.

Instead of plowing, the snow on the roads was packed with huge horse-drawn rollers. This not only made them passable, but provided a surface on which sleighs could be used. Bare roads were not desired in those days.

The 1985 *Old Farmers Almanac* lists the Great East Coast Blizzard of March 11-14, 1888 as the most destructive snowstorm and yet the local correspondent of the *Lowell Weekly Journal* didn't consider it to be newsworthy.

His only comment was: "Everybody has a copy of 'Snow Bound,' and the latest edition is profusely illustrated with cuts — through

the drifts."

He probably felt that those who made their way to the barns to care for the livestock, as well as anyone who had waded out to the "outside plumbing," were well aware of the storm.

Trucks were fitted with snow plows when motor vehicles came into vogue but this writer can remember horse drawn sidewalk plows in the mid 1920's.

The sidewalks were just gravel paths but they were plowed after each storm. The plows were made of wooden planks and were pulled by a single horse that plodded through the snow while his driver followed the plow enjoying the luxury of the newly made path.

Sleigh rides were popular before World War II.

A local farmer would put wooden sides on his biggest sled and cover the floor with hay. The music of the sleigh bells and the exhilarating night air always seemed to produce a happy, singing, cheering crowd snuggled in the hay to keep warm or hopping off and running behind the sleigh throwing snowballs.

The destination of the sleigh ride parties was always a private home or a hall where hot food and beverage was awaiting them, by then, chilled travelers.

Sleds aren't usable on bare ground, so it became increasingly difficult to have sleigh ride parties after the roads had been plowed. This writer recalls organizing a

sleigh ride in the late 1930's. About the time the snow started falling in the forenoon, calls went out to friends, inviting them to a sleigh ride that evening — before the roads would have been cleared.

A horse and sled were engaged and arrangements were made for hot refreshments at the Oxbow Tearoom, located in what is now the American Legion Hall on Warren Avenue.

The party was a success but would not have been possible 24 hours later, thanks to the efficiency of the highway department.

Another winter sport that was popular with the young people but has long since become history was "hopping pungs." This was just a case of grabbing a ride on a passing sleigh that was heading out of the village and hoping that it would be return-

ing. (One of the favorites was the low bed sled used by the local grain company with its load of feed to be dropped off at the various farms.)

Sometimes a sleigh coming in the opposite direction would provide the return trip.

Even at the relatively slow speeds, "hopping pungs" could result in injuries if the horse became frightened and bolted or stopped suddenly, so it is understandable that the practice was frowned upon by many parents.

At least that's one problem parents don't have to face today.

Times have changed.

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