



Remembering the Blizzard of '77

For those Buffalonians who are old enough to remember it, the Blizzard of 1977 is a memory that has been frozen into their consciousness. January 28th, 1977 began as a normal day in the city of Buffalo, but by twelve noon the wind picked up, snow began to fall, and visibility became dangerously limited. As the wind began to intensify out of the west and sweep across the frozen wasteland of Lake Erie, it carried with it the lightly packed snow that had blanketed the frozen lake. An event of historic proportions was beginning to unfold in rapid time right in front of people's eyes. Meteorologist David Zaff observed the scene, "the heavy sustained winds 'took all the snow off the lake and dumped it into the Greater Buffalo area, from St. Catharines all the way to Buffalo.'" Hurricane force winds that created subarctic wind chills, and large amounts of snowfall coupled with unusually cold temperatures, culminated to create the proverbial perfect storm. The statistics speak to how horrible the storm really was. In the end it resulted in 300 million dollars damage and 29 deaths across the greater Buffalo and Niagara Falls area.

Punishing the city of Buffalo with 46 mph sustained winds and gusts that reached 75 mph at the Niagara Falls Airport, the storm officially lasted four days, but its effects were felt much longer than that. With actual temperatures plummeting to negative seven, and the wind chill bringing it down to -50 to -60 degrees, the dangers brought by the storm had grown beyond snow drifts and zero visibility. The devastating effects-both in terms of temperature and snow accumulation-brought on by the Blizzard of 1977 were enough for President Jimmy Carter to declare all of Western New York a federal disaster area. According to the National Weather Service, this was the first time in the history of the United States that a snowstorm had been



An unidentified woman walks on a snow bank only feet from an interchange sign for I-190.

declared a federal disaster. On the night the storm arrived an estimated 10,000 to 15,000 people were stranded somewhere in the Greater Buffalo area, due to its harsh conditions and rapid onset. The inability to travel due to impassable roads became a great concern for the City of Buffalo.

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Snow bands and depth hindered travel. Channel 4 news reported that up to 250,000 people were out of work in the days following the storm due to the travel bands and the depths of the snow. Knowing that people would be running short on supplies like food and water, the government called in the National Guard as well as the United States Army to help clear snow and transport supplies.

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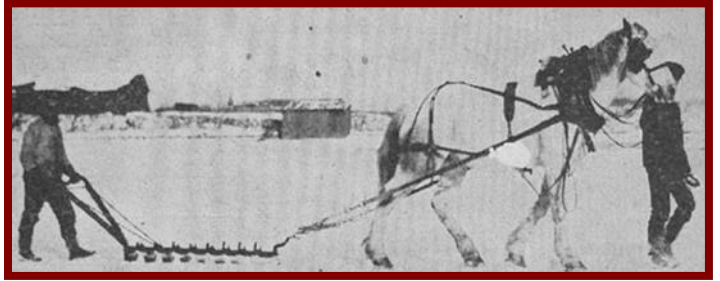
Your Local Ice House

Today we are lucky enough to have the refrigerator, all of its technological derivatives, and all of the benefits that accompany the modern technology. This means cold drinks, ice cream and air conditioning. To create heat is quite simple, and we have had the capability to do so for thousands of years, to remove heat and create a cold environment however, is much more difficult.

There was no eureka moment that birthed the modern refrigerator, instead there was a gradual process that through increasing technological innovations and processes, gave us ice cold drinks on demand right in our own homes. Prior to mechanical or chemical refrigeration, the only way we could keep things cold during the summer months was to use ice stored in an ice house. These specially engineered structures are designed to use multiple layers, and varieties of insulation, to keep ice from melting. Fredric Tutor, a man from Boston had an idea that, despite nearly bankrupting him, changed the world in more ways than he could have ever imagined. Tutor had the idea to ship ice from New England to warm areas around the globe. In one of his first attempts to ship ice long distances, Tutor shipped ice from Boston, to the Caribbean island of Martinique, a distance of over 1900 miles. Due to a lack of knowledge of how to insulate his cargo, nearly all the ice melted, losing Tutor the modern equivalent of about one million dollars. We have now reached a point where ice in a drink is no longer a luxury. However since we now have the ability to create, and store ice, ice carving and the creation of art from blocks of ice has become a common practice.



Bert Haywood, an ice carver, and the grandfather of Judi Stanley, one of our volunteers at the Black Rock Historical Society, created art from blocks of ice at the City Ice and Fuel Co. on Amherst Street.



Men working in the Buffalo Harbor with horses to cut ice out of the frozen lake for commercial sale.

Once the ability to ship and store ice was attained, urban areas were no longer dependent on the immediate surrounding area to supply them with food preservation aids. The result was urban populations were given the ability of achieving exponential growth. years later this played a central role in the rapid industrialization of American cities like Buffalo. The old technology of ice houses was accompanied by many tools which are now considered relics of the past. Even though today ice picks and tongs are seen as obsolete tools, at one time they were essential to the business of the ice trade. In our museum we have an ice pick from The City Ice and Fuel Company which was formerly located on Amherst Street. Yet another proprietor selling ice was Niemiec

Builders Supplies. Now known for selling lumber, at one time they were one of the many places you could go in the Black Rock Riverside area if you needed ice.



Ice picks like this were used to break ice into chunks for drinks.

Even though the New England area was most famous for its ice output, the western New York area, and the city of Buffalo, had ice harvesting operations of their own. By 1894, the ice trade had developed into a worldwide market. By repeatedly dragging a blade behind the horse and using it like a plow, grooves were cut into the ice which were later used as guides to break it into individual slabs to be shipped and sold. The Buffalo area had six commercial ice companies which sold to local distributors. Even the Queen of England would have likely been enjoying her food and drink with ice harvested from the US North East.

Buffalo on Ice

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At one point the situation was so dire that emergency medical supplies were airlifted from the Niagara Falls military base to St. James Mercy Hospital because there was no other way to get them there. In all, thirty loads of snow clearing equipment and close to 1000 service members were flown in from Ft. Bragg, North Carolina, to help Buffalo dig itself out.

In addition to the assistance provided by the National Government, nearly forty private companies worked alongside the US Army Corps of Engineers throughout the Greater Buffalo Area. For all of the hardship and tragedy that occurred, there were glimmers of light that did shine out of it. It is true that nothing brings a community or group together like tragedy, and although it is unfortunate it occurred, the storm showed maybe the best feature that Buffalo has to offer. The strong sense of community and brotherhood that exists with one's neighbor. This was no more evident than on Ashland Avenue in the city. Neighbors who had grown tired of not being able to access their vehicles due to their street being filled with snow teamed up into a group of about twenty five people to clear the road. The able bodied cleared the street with shovels and pick axes and those people who were unable to contribute with physical labor, provided the fuel for those who could. A table in the center of the road was set up to serve hot coffee and sandwiches to those who were shoveling. Although the storm only produced twelve inches of snow, it is regarded by most as the worst winter storm to hit the Greater Buffalo Area and today is used as a measuring stick to rank all other storms.



Tonawanda Street along Riverside Park was buried in snow. That's a car headlight peeking out of the snow in the foreground.

There are two sports that are most associated with the city of Buffalo. Perpetuated and made popular by professional organizations like the NFL and NHL, professional ice hockey and football have major advantages over less publicized sports. As a result, Buffalonians overlook some of our best athletes because they are not playing one of the main-stream sports. In this city, a city many people would call a



Groups of ice skaters in Delaware Park in February of 1963 enjoying time out of the house during the long winter

hockey town, it is not well known that Buffalo has a history of speedskating and figure skating. Multiple people who were born and raised in the City of Buffalo went on to win national titles and even skate for our nation in the Olympics in speedskating or figure skating. With a history that predates not just the Bills and the Sabers, but also the NFL and NHL organizations as we know them today, figure skating and speedskating have long, and untold stories regarding their place in Buffalo's sports history.

Dating back to 1921, the Buffalo Skating Club had very humble origins. In what began as a group of skaters who frequently skated on Delaware Park Lake, the group has evolved into the Buffalo Skating Club, which today has become large and prosperous enough to host national, and even international events at its rinks. The level of professionalism that the Skating Club has helped produce is of world class quality. Joseph Druar, a Buffalo native, was a member of the Buffalo Skating Club. He went on to skate in the Olympics in 1988, and was the US Champion for singles from 1988 to 1990 when he won two straight national championships.

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Catharine 'Kit' Kline pioneered winter sports at the Olympics for women.



Black rock Historical Society

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Museum Winter Hours

Friday 10:00am-4:00pm
Saturday 10:00am-2:00pm

For any inquiries please contact us at

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Find us online!

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Origin of information

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Like figure skating, speedskating has been neglected in the credit it has been given in Buffalo sports history. Katherine "Kit" Klein was born in Buffalo, New York in 1910 and by the time she was 22 years old, she was competing for her nation in the Winter Olympics at Lake Placid. The 1932 Winter Olympics were the first to offer Women's Speedskating as an event, and in the first year Kit took first place in the 1500 meter event, and third in the 500 meter event. Unfortunately for her, the sport had not yet been given full recognition by the Olympic Committee and at the time it was only a "demonstration event" designed to determine whether or not it was deserving of becoming an official event for the games. Although it would be another twenty eight years until women's speedskating would become an official event in the Winter Games, the delay was no fault of Kit's.

Kit's success is well documented, even beyond her accomplishments in Lake Placid and in some ways she was a celebrity of her time. In 1931, it is reported that more than 12,000 people showed up in Delaware Park to watch her defend her 440-yard and 660-yard city speedskating championships. Klein was a winner in every sense of the word. She was the first women's overall world championship in speedskating, and was one of only two Americans to accomplish that achievement in the 20th century. Her credentials are more than enough to win her praise, but even if they aren't enough to convince you, then you should also know that she was the third female athlete ever to be featured on the Wheaties Cereal Box, placing amongst, or even above the ranks of female athletes such as Mia Hamm and Althea Gibson.

Downhill Skiing in July



The Ski Deck Center formerly located on Tonawanda Street.

Don't you just wish the winters in Buffalo lasted a little bit longer? If you're a sensible person, your obvious answer would be a resounding no. However if you are someone who enjoys skiing, you might have a different answer than most of your neighbors. In the City of Buffalo at one time you would have been able to ski in July. The Riverside Theater, formally located at 824 Tonawanda Street was converted to an indoor ski deck in the early 1960s. A ski deck, in effect, is a giant conveyor belt that, due to its angle of around twenty degrees, and its slippery nylon

surface, acts as a mountain slope. If this wacky device is hard to imagine, try to picture a large treadmill that instead of running, you ski on. This ski deck had belts, or tracks, running at anywhere from three, to twenty two miles per hour and was said to be capable of accommodating upwards of 2,500 people a day. Although indoor ski decks have remained a popular destination for avid skiers, there are no longer any in the Buffalo area. So unfortunately we will just have to wait out our long summer before we can once again enjoy our snow filled winters.



Community members celebrating the opening of the Ski Deck in January of 1962.