

1912: When Seneca froze solid

Some local folks remember it well

By GLENDA GEPHART

WATKINS GLEN — Imagine living along the shores of Seneca Lake — a lake known for not freezing over — and waking up one morning to a vast expanse of ice as far as the eye can see.

Imagine driving a car across a layer of ice topping water depths of over 600 feet.

Imagine strapping on a pair of ice skates and heading 40 miles due north to Geneva.

Imagine.

For some people, those thoughts are not just flights of fantasy. They don't need to imagine. They were there.

The year was 1912. The month, February. One night the temperature fell to 10 degrees below zero, following 10 days of zero or below readings. It was the night the wind stopped blowing, allowing a rare occurrence.

On Feb. 10, 1912, Seneca Lake began to freeze solid from end to end and side to side. It would remain frozen for over a month.

For those not around 70 years ago at this time when the most noted freezing of the lake occurred, there are countless newspaper and diary accounts to read.

Some local residents, however, have something better. They have their memories.

"That was a great year," said Nick Paradiso of Watkins Glen, who was seven the year of the historic freeze. Paradiso was among the hundreds of children and adults who donned skates, mounted sleds or ice boats or got into one of the few cars around to take advantage of the event.

Paradiso, like many others, also has some soggy memories of the 1912 freezing. He took a dunking in the frigid waters, and so did Carl King of Moreland.

King was 16 that year, and with two friends turned the freeze into an adventure by skating from Watkins Glen to Geneva. Their return trip was abruptly halted, however, when they fell through thin ice near Dresden and were rescued by boat.

King's adventure, with the late John Sullivan of Dundee and the late John Rarrick of Watkins Glen, was reported widely because they came so close to tragedy. In fact, the only death due to the lake's condition happened the same day the boys skated north.

On Feb. 18, 22-year-old Robert H. Holdridge of Pine Valley was skating to his railway telegrapher's job at Starkey Station when he went



Photo courtesy of Schuyler County Historian Barbara Bell

Valois automobile dealer John Townsend (at wheel) and passenger pose in Maxwell roadster ...after driving onto a frozen Seneca Lake during the historic 1912 freeze

through thin ice just off Salt Point and drowned.

King's mishap ended without misfortune, however, because some people were along the shore at Dresden watching ducks gathered in a small area of water free of ice. The boys had not noticed they were getting onto the dangerous area and King was the first one through.

King said he and Mr. Sullivan had a rope tied between them on their wrists. When King fell through, Mr. Sullivan followed.

But King said he was able to get a hold on firmer ice and roll himself out of the water.

"John, all he did was pray," King said. But he soon calmed Mr. Sullivan and convinced him to do as he had done and they were soon both out.

Mr. Rarrick went through the thin ice when he was getting into the boat brought out by the people on shore.

King explained that the mishap occurred on their trip back to Watkins Glen. The boys had left the village at 10 a.m. and arrived in Geneva only an hour and 45 minutes later. He attributed their speed to a south wind at their backs.

But going south, heading into the wind, meant a

slower trip. They left Geneva at 1 p.m. and they had reached only Dresden, and that thin ice, by 4:20 p.m., he said.

Once the trio was rescued, they were taken to a store in Dresden where they dried off before getting trains back to Watkins. King said there was a large crowd of people waiting for them at the station when they arrived at home, for word of what had happened had somehow preceded them.

It was at the Watkins Glen railroad station that Paradiso dried out after his own unexpected dip into Seneca Lake.

Paradiso recalled that because he was so young, he could only tag along after an older brother and his friends. The older boys were skating ahead of him and easily jumped a trench that had been dug into the ice near the former electrical plant, now the water plant, so that a line could be laid to a lighthouse.

But for a seven-year-old, the almost two-foot-wide gap was quite a challenge, and Paradiso didn't make

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it, he said.

"I got up to it and I just glided right in," he said.

He was quick enough, however, to grab the edge of the trench and hang on until the older boys noticed his problem and pulled him out, he said.



King

"My brother chased me back. Of course, by then I was ready to go back," he said.

Both Paradiso and King said that after getting out of the water it was exceptionally cold and that their clothes immediately froze on them.

Paradiso used the pot-bellied stove at the railroad station to dry his frozen clothes. "I stayed in there and got dried off before I dared go home," he said.

Both men have good memories of the lake freeze and said they'd like to see it happen again.

"I'd like to see it again, but I don't know if I'd go skating. Maybe I'd walk," said King.

The chances of seeing a solid freeze of the lake are minimal, looking at recorded history of freezings in the past.

Described by one writer as "the only lake north of the Mason-Dixon line that has the reputation of 'the lake that never freezes,'" Seneca Lake has frozen very few times in recorded history, and

there is even some dispute among historians about those times.

Some report five freezings and some say there were only three. The dispute concerns, apparently, the duration of the freeze and the range of it, depending on the number of open spots remaining.

Interestingly, all of the freezes were in February and March.

The dates, using the higher number, were Feb. 24-March 15, 1855; Feb. 9-March 14, 1875; Feb. 24-March 6, 1885; Feb. 10-March 19, 1912; and in February 1934.

Because it was so recent, the partial freeze of 1977 is not yet listed in the history books, but on Feb. 10 that year, the lake was frozen long enough for three Hector-area men to make a somewhat treacherous walk across the lake's width and back from Peach Orchard Point. Their return trip required the use of a boat in parts.

The reason for the rarity of the lake freezing is that at a depth of about 200 feet, the water keeps steady temperature of about 40 degrees. Continued severe cold weather and no wind are the ingredients for a solid freeze, experts say.

The wind is the key, because the lake's usual winds keep any ice from building up.

The history books do tell of another strange trick of nature when a thin layer of ice formed on the lake five times in the month of May and once in April. Those dates were May 7, 1829; May 4, 1836; May 6, 1861; May 15, 1872; May 6, 1873, and April 26, 1884.



Nick Paradiso of Watkins Glen

...70 years after he fell through a trench dug in the Seneca ice



INTREPID TRAVELERS —Three Hector men, Lake at a tavern in Valois Wednesday night. The James Hazlitt (left), Dave Kendall (center) and trio wore lifejackets and dragged a rowboat Guy Schamel, celebrate their crossing of Seneca behind them as they became the first men in 42 years to cross the lake on foot.

3 men take tricky trip across icy Seneca Lake

By KEN SCHACHTER

VALOIS —Sir Edmund Hillary climbed Mt. Everest, Adm. Robert Peary reached the North Pole and now "The Disciples" have crossed Seneca Lake on foot for the first time in 42 years.

The three intrepid explorers from Hector made the crossing Wednesday morning.

The trio, James Hazlitt, 40, Dave Kendall, 39, and Guy Schamel, 38, had been itching to cross the lake for a long time.

"We'd been talking about it for two or three months," said James. On that chilly morning, Guy, a contractor, woke up and told his wife this would be the day.

He then met Dave and James, both of whom work in the grape industry, to complete the expedition.

The troop then gathered some gear: lifejackets, an aluminum rowboat, a 12-foot ladder and a gallon jug of homemade wine.

And so, at 11:45 a.m. at Peach Orchard Point, the adventurers took their first tenuous steps on the not-too-thick ice as James' brother, Jerry, looked on.

The trio spread 100 feet apart for fear that the ice would not take the

weight. Still, as they walked, the ice creaked beneath them.

"Every step you took, the ice was cracking around you," said Guy. "The guys on shore heard it. I didn't feel safe until I was halfway across the lake."

"The Disciples," as they were dubbed after the historic crossing, had to shuffle along the ice to avoid opening cracks. From time to time, they slid the wine jug to each other on the mirror-like ice.

They completed the two-mile trek to Idiewild, on the west side of the lake, in about 50 minutes.

Just as they reached the opposite side of the lake, Jerry, who remained at the Peach Orchard Point, saw the ice begin to break up rapidly.

Frantically, he tried to signal them not to make the return trip. He turned on the headlights of his car and began making telephone calls across the lake to warn them.

The explorers, meanwhile, were blissfully ignorant of the danger as they began to journey back.

After shuffling about one quarter of the way across, James put on his ice skates and began gliding across the lake and Guy took out his camera and began taking pictures.

It was then that they heard the booming sound of Jerry firing his shotgun to warn them.

It wasn't until they were about half-way across, however, that they saw the ice had broken apart with some floes undercutting other patches of ice.

James said the break-up was "just like rivers going through the ice."

The trio used the ladder to bridge the first two rivers, but then Guy put his leg into water almost knee-deep.

"Then we knew we were in trouble," said Guy. "It was a little spooky. I'll tell you that," added James.

Then they took a circuitous route to avoid the rivers and for part of the return trip they crowded into the rowboat.

They arrived in Valois, more than two miles north of their departure point.

They celebrated their victory over high winds, snow, buckling ice, and the deepest and largest of the Finger Lakes at Sheik's Oasis, a Valois tavern.

"It's just like climbing a mountain," said James. "It's just something you have to do. It happens once in your lifetime."