

## BLOWING SNOW - -AN UNSUSPECTED DANGER

### Oscar Tenenbaum's Own Story of a Harrowing Ride

Driving home recently from the Eastern Snow Conference in Quebec, Oscar Tenenbaum, meteorologist in charge of the Boston Weather Bureau, had a harrowing experience. He, his wife and a climatologist was marooned by blowing snow in zero temperatures with winds blowing at 40 to 50 miles an hour.

Their progress was slow - nine miles in a day. Snow obscured highway signs and they lost their way. The climatologist, Robert Lautzenheiser, left the car to find assistance but had to return when his hat froze to his head. They feared for a while that if the car heater failed they might freeze to death.

Tenenbaum was asked to write of his experience. Aware that he would become the butt of jokes from misguided individuals who find humor when a weatherman is laid low by the weather, he never-the-less consented as a public service. He hopes that others will learn from his experience.

His conclusion: "Horizontal (blowing) snow can be more dangerous than vertical snow."

The end seemed to be at hand. Here we were, my wife, my associate Robert Lautzenheiser, and I, shivering in our drafty convertible, with the outside temperature well below zero despite the sun high in the blue sky.

The visibility was practically down to zero as the wind-driven snow, propelled by blustery northerly winds of 40 to 50 miles per hour, enveloped our vehicle. Some of the snow was sifting into the automobile.

The powdery snow had clogged the roads, making it impossible for us to go forward despite our snow tires. By fits and starts we had managed to this point on Rte. 24 in the southern portion of the Province of Quebec, a few miles east of the town of St. Rose. But we had been forced to halt on the road which had been plowed the width of only one car, when we perceived another automobile with lights ablaze despite the bright sunshine, bearing down upon us a few hundred feet away.

The two cars stopped almost simultaneously. The other car tried to back up, but I dared not go forward, because the blowing snow made it impossible to see more than a few yards ahead.

As we sat there with the motor going in order to keep the balky heater operating, snow filtering in under the hood would cause a "short", and the motor would die. Desperately, I would start the motor again, knowing that if the motor were permitted to expire for more than a few minutes, it might not start again and we might freeze to death.

For a brief period, the wind would subside, and we could see a house about a mile away. Then it would vanish, and our fearful thoughts returned. My wife told me later that my face had turned ashen gray. I dared not tell her at the time, but passing through my mind was the recollection of the tragedy which had befallen the 18-year-old daughter of a very dear friend in the month of July, 1958. Unaware of the rigors of mountain climbing, she and her boy friend had hiked up Mt. Washington in Summer clothing, and both had died of exposure. The same thought was going through my wife's mind; in addition, she worried about the possibility of carbon monoxide poisoning from a possibly leaky exhaust system.

What were we doing on that snowbound road in Quebec on that Saturday morning in the middle of February? We were returning home from the 20th annual Eastern Snow Conference, which had been held in the City of Quebec at Laval University during the preceding two days.

We were anxious to arrive home in Newton before Sunday, to celebrate our 28th wedding anniversary with our two sons. Therefore, as soon as the final farewell reception at the university ended late Friday afternoon, we decided to drive to the United States border. As we drove away from the campus, the temperature was about 10 degrees below zero and the wind about 25 miles per hour. But the sky was clear, and the latest weather forecast said nothing about snow.

Our plan was to follow Rte. 23 out of Quebec City to St. Georges de Beauce, have dinner there, then drive on to Jackman, Me., where we would stop for the night.

As we drove along, we noted that the brisk wind was blowing snow across the road, but the road was passable. The sun was soon down, and we drove steadily along. After an hour or so, we became aware that our Rte. 23 had become 53, and the highway signs pointed to Lake Etchemin at Ste. Germaine. We recalled neither of these places when we had driven to Quebec City two days earlier.

"I'm afraid we're on the wrong road," I admitted to my companions, as we drew up to a service station. From the station operator, who spoke no English (and I spoke no French) I managed to confirm that we were indeed on the wrong road. A close study of our road map revealed that we had failed to make a right turn at St. Henri, some 25 miles behind us.

Rather than retrace our steps, we decided to go ahead on Rte. 53, which would end 20 miles later at Rte. 24, where a right turn on Rte. 24 would take us back to Rte. 23. The extra distance would thus be only 15 miles, as against 50 if we returned to St. Henri.

By this time we were getting hungry, so we stopped at a small lunchroom in the next town. Again, language problems made it difficult to make our wants known. Two girls in their early teens waited on us. With the aid of hand-drawn pictures, my wife finally was able to inform them that omelettes and toast would make us happy.

As we prepared to leave, a delivery truck drew up to the store. We asked the driver about the road to St. Georges. Speaking some English, he advised us that although that town was only 30 miles away, parts of the road were blocked by snow. "Stop at the next hotel," he recommended. It was only a few miles away, and we checked in for the night.

We rose early the following morning, Saturday, impatient to be on our way. The sun was shining brightly, and there seemed to be no reason for delay. Several people were in the lobby, and we noted that they were keeping the one telephone busy. Only the manager spoke English, and he was not in sight.

We had driven only a few miles, when we noticed a highway sign indicating that we were 2000 feet above sea-level, evidently the highest point in this extension of the Appalachians. Another mile or two, and the road was narrowed by snowdrifts five feet in height, leaving insufficient room for even one automobile.

"Let's go back," I said, but there was hardly enough room to turn. I tried to maneuver so as to face the opposite direction. When the situation looked hopeless, three men on a horse-drawn sled came along and helped to swing the car around,

Back to the hotel we went. By this time the manager was available, and he told us that all the others in the lobby were waiting for the snowplow, which would be passing about 10 o'clock.

Impatiently we stood around, awaiting the plow. It arrived on schedule, and soon we were again on the road. We followed the plow into the next town, St. Germaine, but there it stopped.

"Let's go ahead," we decided, despite the fact that only part of the road was open. Within a few minutes, we were again stopped by a snow-clogged road. Several cars were following us, and some of the men in those cars tried to nudge us along, but without success. Before long, however, another plow came along from the opposite direction, and pulled us back on the road.

Again we were on our halting way, but not for long. A few more miles, and the recently plowed road narrowed to the width of one car. It was here that we found ourselves blocked by the oncoming car with lights ablaze.



As my wife and I sat in the front seat of our auto, Bob Lautzenheiser got out to look for help. He was back within a few minutes. "My hat is frozen to my face," he said; "I had better get in and thaw out."

Bob and I can probably walk to that house ahead, I thought to myself, but my wife will never be able to make it. Will she ever forgive me? She didn't want to go in the first place. Will I ever forgive myself?

It seemed like eternity, but it could not have been more than an hour when I thought I heard the noise of a plow. A few more minutes, the ever-welcome plow again came to the rescue. A short time later, we were in the next town, St. Rose, only 20 miles away from last evening's destination of St. Georges.

It was already past noon, and we had covered less than 10 miles since 8 o'clock. "Let's get some gas," I said, "we must have used up quite a bit trying to keep our heater going."

"Is there a restaurant," I asked the gas station attendant. He spoke no English, but he took me into his home next door and turned me over to his 80-year-old father, who evidently understood that we were hungry.

The old man directed me to a nearby home, where tourists were accommodated. The cheerful proprietress, a Mrs. Grondin, provided an excellent lunch.

The food and warm house revived our spirits. It was almost 3 o'clock, "Shall we try to make St. Georges?", I asked my companions. They were agreeable. We had gone but a few hundred yards when we realized that blowing snow was still restricting the visibility.

We turned around at a service station, but before us was a steep hill with several inches of freshly-churned snow. It was impossible to climb the hill, and the two men in a nearby truck whom we asked for help did not seem to understand us.

Not knowing what to do, we waited in our car. Soon a station wagon with Maine license plates tried to come down the hill but the snow was too much for it. Before long, another snow plow came along, and we returned to Grondin's House. She did not appear to be surprised at our return.

The remainder of the day was spent listening to TV in French and peering anxiously through frosted windows at "horizontal" snow. Vertically it was piled at least eight feet high against the neighboring house.

Our gracious hostess tried to cheer us with her limited command of English. But one remark by her gave me a vision of being snow-bound for a week. "It always blow here," she said. Being unfamiliar with the topography of the area, I wondered whether the brisk wind was due to a local terrain condition.

The next day was Sunday, and it lived up to its cheerful name. The bright sun was reflected from the vast fields of white, but the temperature must have been 20 degrees below zero. Anxiously I looked to see whether the snow was still in motion. It lay still. A clothes line on the porch swung a little, but smoke from nearby chimneys rose almost vertically. "I hope the wind doesn't start up again," I said to my wife.

Our hostess had gone to church, so I dialed the telephone operator for information on road conditions. She spoke some English, but knew nothing about the roads. But she gave me a telephone number where I could find out. I called, but the language barrier again stood in my way. There was nothing to do but wait for our hostess to do the calling.

Soon she returned from church and made the call. The roads to St. Georges were clear. "Merci," she told the operator. "Merci," I said to her.

After breakfast, I tried to start the car but without success. The intense cold plus the snow which had drifted in under the hood were too much for it. A call to a local service station eventually brought some help. Our optimism was returning. The service man tried to get the motor going by relaying power from his battery, but to no avail.

Then he reversed the terminals. A vivid flash of light, and the battery in my car burst open. My heart sank.

Could we get another oversized battery in a small town like this on a Sunday morning? He would try, he reassured me. Half an hour later, another man returned with three batteries. One of them fit, and the car finally started.

The remainder of the trip home was uneventful. Several times we drove on roads only wide enough for one car. At times, the snow was banked so high along the sides that we seemed to be driving through roofless tunnels.

When we finally reached Jackman, Me., the U.S. Customs man asked, "Where are you going?" "To Boston," I replied.

"For how long?" he wanted to know.

"Forever, I hope," was my reply.