

Recollections of 1912

The Last Big Freeze

Written and described by Winifred Baskin

We had the most beautiful autumn, plowed until December 27th. That morning the plow was frozen in the ground where the men were plowing in the barn field, west of our house.

The cold seemed to gradually increase until January. The fifth and sixth it had reached zero and each day a little colder. Along Old Seneca Lake the mercury sank from zero to 20 degrees below and west of us about ten and twelve miles it reached thirty below. The cold penetrated cellars that were never known to freeze before. One great blessing, there was scarcely any wind. It seemed as if people as well as stock would have perished if the wind had joined forces with old Jack Frost. Old Seneca steamed as if it was boiling.

Through January the ice began to form mornings. Huge patches of ice could be seen both ways as far as the eyes could reach.

Our farm is located about twelve miles from Watkins on the west side of the lake. Seneca Lake is about thirty five to forty miles in length. Starkey is a mile and a quarter from our house. Watkins at the head of the lake is twelve miles by railroad from Starkey. On bright days we can plainly see the Village of Watkins from our porch. Geneva is at the foot of the lake.

At grandpa's old homestead a mile west of us we can see down the lake below Dresden. The lake is the widest there, estimated to be about five miles across.

The morning of February 10th, 1912 the lake was nearly frozen over, just a small open space in the center. There was hardly a breath of air stirring. Sunday, February 11th 1912 at seven a.m., a narrow strip of water was visible. By nine o'clock a.m. it was completely closed and the air was still as death. Monday February 12th it was so clear that with the naked eye one could see people walking and skating along the east shore two miles across from nearly to Lodi to Valois or old North Hector. A Frenchman by the name of Valois, pronounced as if spelled Val-wah, located a short distance south of North Hector, built a castle with beautiful grounds, shrubbery, tree roses, etc. He promised the Village Board to do a great deal for the town on consideration they would rename the village after him, which they did.

Three or four people from the town of Valois ventured out quite a distance from the shore, tested the thickness of the ice and decided to venture across two miles landing at Lamb's Run, a small point south of Smith's Point renamed Connolly's Point.

My brother Herman with others were watching them at Lamb's Run and as they were convinced that the party from the east shore was really intending to cross, the party from the west shore started and they passed in about the middle of the lake.

On their return they bored a hole through the ice in the middle of the lake and found the ice measured three inches thick. News of Old Seneca being frozen over traveled fast and people began to flock to the shores. There was not much snow and the ground being frozen so hard made good sleighing.

Tuesday, February 12th, we girls, Stella, Maybelle and myself decide we would drive down to our point and see the lake. We hitched up George Ann to the cutter and drove across the fields to the point. We tied George Ann to a tree at the top of the dug road. We just put on our wraps and started out in our everyday clothes. We left the house at 2 p.m. We

covered the horse with a blanket and a robe as it was ten degrees below zero, although so still we did not realize it. We walked down the dug road to the point. There was no water in sight, only ice. Old Seneca's wild waves were held in subjection for once. A little snow had fallen when the ice was freezing and the ice was like frosted panes of glass. Oh the sight was beautiful and grand, yet there was something awesome about it, all so still and smooth.

Our friends and near neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Earl Shannon living in our brother's house on the south side of the farm, and Mr. and Mrs. Verne Robinson living on the old Smith Place, just across the gully from them had preceded us to the lake. We met them in the cove of the point where they were skating. Lena (Shannon) says "Winnie you get on Earl's sled and Mabe and I will draw you around." Earl and Verne skated and the rest walked on the ice down to Smith's Point and then a few rods to Lambs Run, a small point. Lambs Run is just opposite Valois or North Hector, you will recall best and was the crossing point near Starkey.

Lena, Sadie and I have been trying all the way down to persuade Stella and Maybelle to walk across the lake on the ice. This idea had never entered our minds before we went to the lake.

I rested on the sled and they said they would go over where the crowd was. Ogden Putnam was skating around and saw me. He thought I could not get over the few open spaces, a few six inches and some a foot wide where the ice had split and separated. He helped me with the hand sleigh.

Herman, my brother had just returned from walking two miles across the lake. Lena was urging the girls to cross and more anxious when she saw Herman returning. The girls did not wish to leave me behind alone. Lena says, "I will see what Herman says." She ran to meet him. She says "Herm is the ice safe to walk across?" He replied, "Just as safe as on land. This is the second time I have been across today." Lena says, "Would it be safe to draw Winnie across on the hand sleigh?" He replied, "Why yes, come on and I will help you draw her over." Lena called to me, "come Winnie, we are all going across." So I got on the sled and Herman and Lena started with me.

Mrs. Robinson called to Lena, "Where is Verne?" Lena says, "Don't you see him? He is half way across." Sadie looked around quick. "Why Verne has gone." And then she started with Stella and Maybelle, thinking she might as well run the risk of drowning too if her Verne has gone.

You could hear Lena's jolly laugh ring out and Earl skated along with the rest of the crowd. There were some thirty or forty people. They carried long poles and some had a long rope in a circle with several taking hold, some walking and many skating.

When we reached the middle of the lake we saw where the small hole had been cut to measure the thickness of the ice. It measured three and one half inches thick.

We met people crossing and returning. It was just like a sight in the streets of a city. We all were rushing along as if on business, bent on affairs of our own. Did not stop to converse with anybody.

Herman would often look back and call to anyone he saw walking too close together fearing the weight might be too heavy in one place. He asked them to keep separated as much as possible.

We could see up and down the lake for many miles. One vast sheet of beautiful ice. Oh it was a fearful thing to be in the middle of the lake, hundreds of feet of water under us and only three and one half inches between us and eternity perhaps and in either direction people were crossing the lake walking or skating.

As we approached the other shore the little village of North Hector or Valois was so beautiful. The sun broke through the clouds and shone brightly lighting up the whole village with its bright colored houses. Roofs, grounds and street were covered with winter's sunlit mantle sparkling in the sun's bright rays.

Oh, it was a sight never to be forgotten. Many different ones exclaimed: "Oh isn't the little village beautiful? Oh, what a grand sight. Isn't that a pretty picture?"

Near the shore there were perhaps two hundred people. Some in groups. Some old ladies. Starkey people. Some drawn on sleds and some walking. It reminded me of a country fair. People talking and laughing, shaking hands with friends they had not seen in years. One old gentleman of seventy or seventy five, a tall soldierly looking man, gray hair and white mustache came out to meet us. Greeting us and telling us he wanted to see if he knew anyone. He says, "We ought to meet you with fife and drum, we welcome you over."

We all walked to the shore so that we could truthfully say that we had crossed the lake from shore to shore. About two and one half miles.

We met a few friends we knew. Some came in sleighs and cutter from a distance and some just from their homes as we had, not stopping to take off their kitchen aprons. Stella forgot hers and when coming back, Lena, laughing seeing that Stella's apron disappeared, says, "Stella, where is your apron?" Stella replied, "In my pocket, in my pocket."

The novelty and the fearfulness of it all had an intoxicating effect on the people. Everybody was hilarious and laughing. All were children of one God.

We did not rest long on the other side. When bidding our friends goodbye, we kindly invited them to meet us on the other shore and they in return hoped we might walk over again and spend the afternoon and stay to tea.

When the lake was frozen over in 1875 people drove to the lake and spent the afternoon having bonfires and picnic dinners.

Thirty five people had crossed with us. When we started back Earl Shannon was drawing me on the sled and leading his dog Don, a fox dog that had preceded him across and was lost on the other side. Lena was walking by my side, Earl tied his dog Don's rope to my sled and he trotted along drawing me. It was a little hard for him until he had passed over the center of the lake when the sled ran easier. I have heard people say when rowing a boat it is always easier after passing the middle of the lake. I think it is estimated there is an incline of eight (feet?) to the mile. I have drifted again.

A slight wind had raised and being ten degrees below zero it was a bit cold in the middle of the lake. Yet those that were skating had only light coats and sweaters on and were wiping the perspiration from their brows and said they were tired. Don the dog drew me the rest of the way across. He went so fast Lena and girls could not keep up with me. A friend who was skating said he would keep up with me and take care of me.

When we all were nearing the shore some one called out, "Here comes the tribes from Alaska." Another says, "The last of the Mohicans."

Agnes, a niece, had been to Watkins on business, returning on the afternoon train and came down from Starkey to the point. She was skating around waiting for us to return as some one had told her we had crossed the lake on the ice. I was in advance of the rest and saw her first to speak to. I urged her to go and meet the girls as she had skates, also a camera for snapshots before we returned.

Fathers came over with their children after school, all anxious to say they had crossed "Old Seneca" on the ice.

We were all very tired as we all wended our way to the point drawing me on the hand sled. Weren't they all kind to poor me? I cannot tell you how I appreciated it all, for it was a wonderful experience to see "Old Seneca" completely frozen over and being able to walk across. In the cove of the point I wrote the names of our party and the day we crossed on the ice, February 11, 1912.

We found Trouble our dog with Agnes as in the excitement when we started to cross we forgot to call him and he would not follow strangers.

We found George Ann the horse patiently waiting rolling her large eyes at us seeming to say " I am very much surprised at your leaving me here so long," as we had told her when we covered her we would not be gone long.

We drove home and our friends trudged along with us, all a very tired lot. Lena and Sadie every little while saying, "Well Winnie we all crossed the lake and came back didn't we?" We arrived at home at five thirty just three hours from the time we left the house.

Seneca Lake was completely frozen over on this date February 11th, 1912. The ice began to break Sunday, March 17th, 1912 on St. Patrick's Day.

A neighbor, Earl Shannon sailed his ice boat from the old plaster mill dock on the farm to Baskin's Point, also on the farm, at 9 a.m. and past Potter's Point to the north about a mile.

At 3 p.m. the same day, the ice began to pull away from the shore leaving a small open space of water along the shore. This same neighbor then took out his motor boat and over the same course as he had a few hours before done with his ice boat.

The oldest resident in this community had seen the lake partly frozen over only four times during his life.

At another date five men came across from Lodi to Potter's Point pushing over a boat or skiff with them.

Another man Lyman Fowler started to skate from Starkey Point to North Hector and found with his weight the ice broke and separated. He dared not turn back but jumped from cake to cake of ice reaching the other side in safety. People were watching from both sides of the lake in fearful suspense, expecting to see him disappear.