





Monday, Jan. 31, 1977

The Big Freeze

Why had the rain turned white? Startled millionaires wintering in their baronial mansions in West Palm Beach, Fla., peered closer last week at the miracle that was falling from the skies and discovered—could it be?—yes, the substance was snow, the first ever reported there. Since mid-November, pedestrians in Dallas, unaccustomed to such hazards, have been slipping on sleet-slicked sidewalks. Meanwhile, a series of blizzards has smothered Buffalo this winter with an astonishing 126.6 in. of snow.

From the Dakotas and Minnesota, across the icy Great Lakes of the Middle West and down the Eastern seaboard to shivering Florida, the winter of 1976-77 is already one of the coldest since the U.S. began keeping weather statistics—and the worst may be yet to come. If February roars like January, this winter could be the coldest ever recorded for much of the U.S.—the great winter that millions of Americans will be telling their grandchildren about decades from now.

The dramatic changes in the weather patterns (see following box) that are sending temperatures plummeting across the nation are, ironically enough, warming the one state that is usually frozen stiff. In Anchorage, Alaska, where the thermometer was up to a comparatively balmy 45° last week, the ice was so soft that hockey players went home in disgust. Meanwhile, snowstorms avoided areas that are normally blanketed with white. Rocky Mountain ski operators complained bitterly about the clear skies. Sun Valley, Idaho, the haven of the wealthy and the sedate, had to use snowmaking machines, and even then managed to keep open only three of its 60 runs.

Still, it is the brutal and unrelenting cold—the Big Freeze—that has transformed the inevitable grouching about the weather into personal agony and national hardship. The furies of January have been unrelenting. Alltime low temperatures were recorded last week in Cincinnati (—25), Miami Beach (+ 32), Palm Beach (+ 27). Single-day records for the date were set in New York City (—1); Dayton (—21); and Lynchburg, Va. (—8). At —19, Chicago experienced its coldest day in this century. Peoria, Ill. (—25), had not been so cold since 1884. In Rice Lake, Wis., the temperature plunged to —60—and for two days dog owners had to push their reluctant pets outside to save their carpets.

It was like living in the Arctic—an ominous reminder of how modern man, so proud of his technological mastery of his environment, remains so vulnerable to its whims. Indeed, his very reliance on energy-consuming machines, vehicles and conveniences contributed

last week to widespread suffering. To meet soaring energy demands for heating, electrical utilities ordered temporary blackouts in some communities and reduced voltage in others.

A genuine crisis developed in the natural-gas industry. Suppliers put into effect emergency plans, cutting all deliveries to thousands of industrial users. Company officials pleaded for school closings, shortened business hours, and thermostats to be turned down to teeth-chattering levels in private homes.

As business leaders, local officials and countless citizens responded, some wholeheartedly, others grudgingly, life faltered and changed in many regions of the U.S. The Labor Department estimated that some 500,000 workers had been laid off in plants shut down by fuel shortages. Next summer's crops could be damaged by the effects of the deep-reaching cold on the soil, and the lack of moisture-bearing snow in the West.

Thousands of schools in at least a dozen states, including virtually all those in Georgia, were closed for varying lengths of time. The longest period was in Dayton, which planned a month-long shutdown. Energy emergencies were declared in Minnesota, New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio and the city of Milwaukee. Florida's Governor Reubin Askew proclaimed his state a disaster area because of damage to citrus crops. Maryland's Governor Marvin Mandel sought the same designation: 1,500 Chesapeake Bay watermen were frozen out of their oyster beds and fishing areas by layers of ice up to 3 ft. thick.

The natural-gas shortage was called "a nightmare" by Joseph Solters, the Federal Power Commission's gas expert.

"The weather," agreed a U.S. Senate energy specialist, "is going to be to the gas industry what the Arab embargo was to the oil industry." Indeed, if the current weather had coincided with the oil crisis in the winter of 1973-74, the double impact might well have been calamitous. Just how to increase natural-gas supplies remained in dispute (see *ECONOMY & BUSINESS*), but the time for national dawdling on a comprehensive energy policy has clearly run out. "Jimmy Carter's first confrontation as President will not be with the Russians," said a senior Washington weather scientist. "It is with the weather."

The winter that is hurting the economy is also bringing suffering and tragedy to countless Americans. Two elderly men, Pinkney Carson, 66, and Herman Jackson, 62, were found frozen to death in unheated rooms in a New York City residential hotel. A furnace boiler had failed, and the men had huddled under thin blankets as water froze in glasses and ice formed on the cracked plaster of their tenement. In rural Georgia, three young brothers, Timmy Schuler, 11, Brian, 9, and Kirt, 7, romped on a pond covered with ice that had come South with the Northern winter. Timmy saw the younger boys break through and ran to their aid. All three drowned. In Atlanta, Mrs. Irma May Key, 51, died of exposure, after falling a short distance from her apartment. Veronica Hynson, 22, and her three children died in a fire in a Baltimore row house. The oil tank was empty, and the gas jets in a kitchen stove had been turned on for heating.

In North Yarmouth, Me., where winds had been gusting up to 80 m.p.h., heavy, frozen snow caved through a hockey rink's roof—minutes after 25 youngsters had left. The same heavy snow leveled a horse barn in Windham, Me., but four horses trapped under the snow and twisted metal were dug out alive. Sturdy North Dakotans of Scandinavian descent, long since inured to cold, broke out booster buttons proclaiming: MINUS 40 BELOW KEEPS THE RIFRAFF OUT. When West Virginia's Governor Jay Rockefeller insisted on being inaugurated outdoors in Charleston's 0° weather, local wags quipped, "We always figured it would be a cold day in hell when a New Yorker would become Governor here." The situation was hardly funny, however, to the 25 inauguration watchers who had to be treated for frostbite.

On an icy hill in Jackson, Miss., Diana Berg flagged down a milk truck and warned the driver against going so fast. "Oh, don't you worry about me," he said. "I'm from Illinois. I can handle this stuff. Want a joyride?" Berg declined, then watched the truck slam downhill into a Volkswagen and another truck. Amazingly, no one was hurt. Says she: "My jaws were frozen into a laugh for about an hour."

As water pipes burst in Little Rock, Ark., one resident remarked, "My basement is flooded and my furnace doesn't work—but we're going to have an ice-skating party in my basement tonight." In Fort Walton Beach, Fla., Circuit Court Judge Clyde

Wells stopped a trial so that everyone could watch the snow fall. Opined the judge: "It's a real novelty."

The elements were simply a challenge to some outdoorsmen—and women. The combination of —23° temperatures and 46-m.p.h. winds on New Hampshire's Mount Washington created a —95° wind-chill factor—but did not stop some hikers from risking their lives on its lower slopes. The same was true in New York's gale-whipped Adirondacks, where Psychiatric Social Worker Bill Myers explained that people went out in such weather just because it was there. Said he: "It's an aggressive response, not a passive response like staying inside with a blanket."

For most who shivered in long Johns or waited up to six hours for tow trucks to pull their cars out of snowbanks, the challenge of the extraordinary winter was something they would prefer to pass up. The weather punished sections of the nation in varied ways, most of them harsh and costly. A tour of the icy American horizon, region by region:

THE FROZEN MIDWEST

As gales and subzero cold threatened to turn the Great Lakes into one vast skating rink, boat traffic virtually ceased. Only a few adventurous captains steered past the treacherous floes in Lake Michigan, where ice was a foot thick eight miles from shore. Worse, both the Ohio and Mississippi rivers were frozen solid in long stretches. Some 300 barges and more than 50 tugs were locked in the 181-mile leg of the Mississippi between Cairo, Ill., and St. Louis. A few steel barges, weighing some 750 tons each, were shoved atop the sturdy ice like so many giant hockey pucks. Others were crushed by converging packs of

ice. Even barges able to move were collecting ice barnacles up to 6 ft. thick on their bottoms. "That makes one hellacious load to push," said a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers official.

The freeze of the waterways aggravated the region's fuel crisis. For a time, Cincinnati Gas and Electric Co. had 3 million gal. of fuel oil stalled on the Mississippi, 400,000 gal. blocked on the Ohio near Aurora, Ind., and another 400,000 gal. stuck in the river near Paducah, Ky. Electric utilities sent out crews armed with hammers and iron bars to smash the frozen coal loose from rail cars. "It's absolutely miserable work," said Detroit Edison Co. Vice President Walter J. McCarthy Jr. Strapped for fuel, his firm at one point was turning out only 250,000 kilowatts, less than one-tenth of its normal production. At one Cincinnati plant, the slippery coal would not stick to conveyor belts. Ingenious employees devised a solution: spreading molasses on the belts.

The fuel shortage led the Northern Indiana Public Service Co. to order 1,500 industrial users of natural gas to cut their consumption by 20%. Both Columbia Gas of Ohio and East Ohio Gas Co. limited 1,675 heavy users to only enough fuel to keep their machinery from freezing. Ford, General Motors and Chrysler laid off some 58,000 workers in Michigan and Ohio. In Cleveland alone, about 10,000 laborers were idled. The cutbacks forced the closing of schools in 245 downstate Illinois communities. In Milwaukee, which has had a record 21 days of subzero weather, water mains burst or froze, creating extreme fire-fighting hazards. Amtrak canceled trains on eight major routes out of Chicago—and sent 25 cars down to New Orleans to thaw out. However, the cold did bring some blessings. Street crime was down, and three gunmen foolish enough to hold up the Cleveland Trust Co. were quickly caught when their getaway car spun its wheels futilely in the snow.

The "cold soak" also plagued the Midwest's farmers. Near Mount Vernon, Iowa, Gordon Neal discovered that the frost had penetrated an astonishing 6 ft. into the soil, freezing his water line for the first time since it was installed at the turn of the century. His silage pile was unusable, frozen rock-solid; he was forced to feed his cattle scarce hay. Following an extended drought, the freeze endangered the winter wheat crop throughout the Midwest.

In South Dakota, where two-thirds of the state's stock ponds were dry, there was not enough moisture to freeze the soil and, incredibly, it began to blow away in scenes chillingly reminiscent of the Dust Bowl of the '30s. Soil erosion in the coming windy months is also a threat throughout the farm belt. Grain farmers want more snow, not less, to blanket and insulate the ground—and provide moisture in the spring. Livestock herds are being sold off as feed costs rise. Things are so bad that Roald Lund, a North Dakota agriculture expert, suggested that farmers should simply take a holiday in 1977.

NEW ENGLAND ON GUARD

It was cold enough at home to freeze submarines into the ice in Groton, Conn., but New Englanders were somewhat smugly observing the discomfort elsewhere in the land. They had been especially hard-hit during the oil crisis of 1973-74. Since then, they have

managed to accumulate some reserves, and Yankee dealers have become adept at scrounging new supplies. Moreover, the area uses little of what is now so scarce: natural gas. Nonetheless, as the sun rose cheerless over hills of gray, snowbound New Englanders felt the cold—in their pocketbooks. Both inflation and the severe winter mean that an average homeowner in the area may well pay \$230 more for heating this season than last, according to the Massachusetts energy policy office.

Although cold is a customary way of life during New England winters, many cities in Maine have already exhausted their snow-removal budgets. Highway crews in Connecticut have eaten through a 48,000-ton mountain of road salt near Hartford. "You might get a bucketful if you took a broom and swept the yard," said Edward Archibald, a highway department official. While blizzards battered Boston, the doughy breed of ice fishermen in the Berkshires of western Massachusetts sipped Jack Daniel's, and kept right on angling in their snug lake shacks.

The major worry of some New Englanders seemed to be where to go for a warm vacation. Thomas K. Wiehl III, a flight instructor in Pittsfield, Mass., flew a Connecticut vacationer south in search of sun. They landed in Savannah, Ga., balked at the 50° chill, rejected Key West (65°), figured Bimini ought to do better than its 70°, and eventually wound up 300 miles southeast of Miami in the Exuma Islands' toasty 85°. Then Wiehl flew home into the miseries of ice, sleet and — 5°.

THE BESIEGED MIDDLE ATLANTIC

More industrialized and energy-dependent than other areas, the Middle Atlantic states from New York south worried about the potential impact of continued cold and dwindling fuel supplies. So far, so good—relatively speaking. Buried under record snowfalls, northern New York did close schools heated by gas. Residents of the Buffalo area were asked to set thermostats at a shivering 55°. Two General Motors plants near Buffalo and a Bethlehem Steel factory near Lackawanna closed their doors. But much-maligned Con Edison, which lights up most of the New York megalopolis, had its day in the cold. The giant utility, which has generated criticism for high prices and erratic service, was meeting its commitments and even urging New Yorkers to share electricity with other states that had helped them in past crises. Much of the city's suffering was caused by one perennial problem: highly taxed landlords who were unable—or too stingy—to keep antiquated furnaces repaired and fueled. More than 10,000 complaints a day overwhelmed a city hall office empowered to investigate claims of inadequate heat, make the necessary repairs and bill landlords later. Keeping up was so hopeless that five centers were opened in churches and community buildings to house anyone in danger of freezing. Some 200 refugees found shelter.

Out in New York harbor, the Coast Guard waged a bitter struggle to keep shipping lanes open to the nation's busiest port. Sandy Hook Channel, one of the two main passageways, finally was closed as the unusually heavy ice submerged or moved navigational buoys. No one wanted to risk yet another major oil-tanker disaster. Icebreakers rammed their curved prows against ice up to 18 in. thick to keep the Hudson open as far north as

Albany. Surprisingly, the faithful Staten Island ferry kept moving Manhattan workers in comfort to their jobs across the windswept harbor.

In New Jersey, Governor Brendan Byrne summoned the state's nearly forgotten civil defense workers to canvass commercial buildings and offer advice on how to reduce gas usage. School Superintendent Frank Mastoraki of Bridgeton, N.J., played out an exhausting daily ritual that was becoming commonplace for many school officials. He asked local police to telephone him at 4 a.m. with information on road and weather conditions so that he could decide by 6 a.m. whether to open his schools on schedule. Alternating conditions of snow, ice and fog made roads perilous for students who drove cars or rode buses.

After experiencing the coldest November in 66 years, Delaware endured a below-normal December and seemed headed for its most frigid January in history. The state's electricity consumption reached an alltime winter high. Home TV pictures shrank slightly in the Baltimore area when voltage was cut by 5% to conserve energy. Maryland woods were sprinkled with thousands of dead birds, which were unable to penetrate the icy snow to reach food. Stores were running out of rock salt to melt ice, but elderly women found a substitute to steady their steps on sidewalks: a scattering of kitty litter. In Aston Township, Pa., Ned Oppelt, 24, decided that it was too cold to risk a long walk home from a party, crawled into a Laundromat's king-sized clothes dryer—still cozy and warm from the day's tumbling —and slept the night through. Fortunately, no early arrival slammed the door or turned on the heat.

THE SNOWY SOUTH

President Jimmy Carter could not have left his home state at a better time. The Chattahoochee River in northeast Georgia was choked with invading ice. Studying the strange landscape, Mountaineer Lanier Chambers declared: "It is so cold, my imagination is frozen." The Georgia Power Co. instituted 30-to 60-minute blackouts throughout the state. In Atlanta, which dipped to 1°, patrons wore their overcoats while dining at the posh Peachtree Plaza Hotel.

"It's the roughest winter that anyone can remember since nineteen-and-eighteen," observed Newspaper Editor Mary Ann Oakley in Providence, Ky., a coal-mining town (pop. 4,270) numbed by temperatures down to —20°. As ice and snow made the winding roads impassable, the children have been able to attend school only three days this month. When the town's water supply was blocked by a frozen valve, the National Guard trucked in water to the fire station, where residents lined up with jugs for their 2-gal. rations. In their mutual need, the townspeople found a new spirit of closeness. "Everybody is working as one big family," said Municipal Inspector Randy McCully.

The chill extended across the Florida panhandle, where the biggest problem was the shortage of natural gas. Utilities Director Tom Smith in Tallahassee suggested that residents should take a bath only every other day. Frostproof (pop. 2,814) belied its name, recording 27°. But the real novelty was snow—snow as far south as Miami and Boca

Raton. "I feel sorry for these people working on a \$100-a-day suntan," said Alex Ballora, pool manager at Key Biscayne's Sonesta Hotel. "What do you say when a guest comes up and asks you for an electric blanket?"

Worried citrus-fruit growers still could not tell whether firing up nighttime heaters had done much to save their groves. Some 55 million boxes of oranges (out of an estimated 211-million-box crop) were lost, forecasting a likely price rise. Temperatures as low as 30° at Fort Lauderdale and 23° in Homestead killed pole beans, watermelons and tomatoes. It was the worst frost in 37 years. The weather was causing even Floridians to pack up and head south. Puerto Rico reported an influx of tourists from Miami—but high winds made even San Juan's 78° seem too cool. Wise vacationers fleeing the cold headed west rather than south: Phoenix and Tucson offered their usual winter warmth, San Diego baked and beached in a delightful 86°—a high for the date.

Along the Gulf Coast, a 4-in. snow hit parts of Mississippi, which was undergoing its coldest winter in 17 years. Jackson had a record number of auto accidents as motorists unfamiliar with icy driving banged up their cars. The speaker of Mississippi's house of representatives dispatched a four-wheel-drive truck to round up stranded legislators.

Texas was having its worst January ever recorded. In Dallas the temperature hit 12° and the flow of natural gas in one of the nation's petroleum-richest states was curtailed to heavy industrial users. High winds aggravated the cold. Texans say they use logging chains fastened to stout posts as wind gauges—and this month the chains have been flying flat-out.

Those chains will surely rattle a great deal more before the winter is through. At week's end, temperatures were rising in some regions, but the scientists and computers at the National Atmospheric and Oceanic Administration were confidently predicting that the frigid weather would continue. The chilling pronouncement of Dr. J. Murray Mitchell Jr., NAOA's senior climatologist: "The forecast is for no change." And spring may indeed be a little late this year—the year when a real old-fashioned winter gripped the U.S., and held on, and on, and on.