

Blizzard of 1779, The

One of the participants of the Thanksgiving dinner previously written about was a student at Yale who had ridden his horse from New Haven to Sharon. Remarkably, he also left a written account of that same holiday that has survived. His story recants the return trip to Yale, and was written in 1844 for the benefit of his grandchildren.

“After the day of praise and feasting came two days of visiting pleasantly among our neighbors. Although early in the season the sleighing had already been good for a fortnight, and the snow was again falling when we set out very early on Monday morning, my Father and I, in our big box sleigh, well wrapped in robes of long wooled sheepskins, and drawn by two old farm horses, not the best because the best had gone to the army. Fine as the sleighing was in the immediate neighborhood of Sharon, we found the roads badly drifted long before we reached what is now Ellsworth. At that point, only about five miles from home, we had to leave our sleigh in the care of one of my father’s parishioners, while we pursued our journey on horseback. In those days no one traveled in any sort of vehicle without taking along saddles for use in emergency. It was dark before we reached Litchfield and the snow-laden wind was piercingly cold.”

“Judge Tapping Reeve, though much younger than my father, was one of the latter’s choice friends, and it was at his house that by previous arrangement we were to pass the night. Judge Reeve was both a good and great man as well as one of the most eloquent speakers who ever adorned the Bar of his own or any other state. Five years later than this I was one of the earliest students in his law school, started in 1784, and since become so famous.”

“It was on this delightful evening, when we were all sitting round the roaring fire in the broad fireplace of Mrs. Reeve’s pleasant sitting room, and while listening to the elevating conversation between Judge Reeve and my father, that I made up my mind that the Law should be my profession. Before this time I had hesitated, but now I felt sure that an honest man could do as much good in this profession as in any other. My father and the judge fully coincided in sentiment, especially in wishing to supercede by a better that portion of the old English Common Law, which takes away all property rights from married women. Both of them had shown their faith by their works. Both my mother and Mrs. Reeve had inherited small fortunes and had been allowed by their husbands to retain the control of their own property; a thing almost unheard of at that time in cases where no anti-nuptial settlements had been made. The views of both men as I heard them stated at this time were afterwards clearly set forth by Judge Reeve in his celebrated pamphlet on ‘The Domestic Relations.’ This was the first voice ever publicly raised in this country, and perhaps in any other, in behalf of the property rights of married women, and attracted much attention both favorable and unfavorable. Judge Reeve stood almost alone on this point among the lawyers of his day; but in his school he made many disciples.”

“During the night the storm that had plagued us the previous day increased in violence and in the morning it was impossible to see many feet from the door on account of the whirling masses of a snow so hard, dry and powdery that it cut into the face like fine iron filings. To proceed on our journey was clearly impossible. Neither man nor beast could long have endured the intense cold and the friction of the icy snow, even if it had been possible for anyone to keep the direction in the blinding storm. In traversing the short distance from the house to the barn to attend to the wants of our animals, over a path hardly more than twenty yards long and partly sheltered by the woodshed, we were almost blinded and bewildered.”

“All that day and far into the night of Tuesday we piled logs upon the kitchen fire, for in that room alone was it possible to maintain a comfortable degree of warmth. Fortunately there was space enough for us all to sit without disturbing the labors of the servants in preparing our meals. As no one could be allowed to remain idle in such times of pressing need, my father and I

helped to mould bullets for the soldiers' muskets, while gentle Mrs. Reeve sat busily knitting on yarn stockings for their feet. The wind blew so fiercely down through all the other chimneys in the house that it was impossible to light the fires in them. It is under such circumstances that characters are displayed without disguise, and Judge and Mrs. Reeve then seemed, what I afterwards proved them to be, genial, courteous and kind: making light of every difficulty, and by their hearty warmth of welcome and their sparkling wit making that day and evening among the happiest recollections of a lifetime which has held as many joys and as few sorrows as may fall to the lot of mortals."

"On Wednesday the sun rose bright and clear over a dazzling desert of snow. The lower windows of most of the house were hidden beneath great piles of drift. In some cases even the second story windows were hidden, or only visible through openings in the drift like the hooded bastions of some icy fort. Looking from the garret windows of Judge Reeve's house as far as the eye could reach we could see no trace of road or path. Fences and shrubs were obliterated. Trees, some looking like mountains of snow and some like naked and broken skeletons, arose here and there. And in the village only rising wreaths of smoke told that life existed in the half buried houses. The Meeting House spire was on one side decked by the icy snow with fantastic semblances of marble statuary over which the new long, black lightning rod (the first one I had ever seen) had been twisted by the wind until it looked like a Chinese character. The Meeting House, where on Sunday the Rev. Judah Champion thundered his rousing appeals to the patriotism of his congregation; the great house for the reception of military stores on North Street and the Army Work-shop, where blacksmiths, gunsmiths and the makers of saddles and harness were constantly working for the troops, were the only buildings which were large enough to serve as landmarks to any but the natives of the place under this bewildering confusion of snow. The military guard, which was always stationed to protect these valuable buildings, on this day omitted their customary drills to take their places in the 'shovel-brigade', which was organized to dig out the beleaguered inhabitants. One might suppose that we were in Lapland or Iceland, so strange and frozen did everything look; so vast seemed the desert of snow which even on a level was found to be several feet in depth and was everywhere covered with a frozen crust."

" 'Now we shall have the pleasure of keeping you for a week at least,' said Judge Reeve, heartily clasping my father's hand.

" 'Yes,' said dear Mrs. Reeve, giving me a kindly look, 'yes, my dear boy, you will not get back to your classes this week.' "

We will continue this saga next week.

Blizzard of 1779, Conclusion

"I was both enchanted and miserable. To stay in this beautiful home would be most delightful. To lose the time from my classes would be almost unendurable. My father settled the matter by asking quietly if our host could not get us each a pair of snowshoes.

"At first our hosts treated this request as a pleasantry, but when they perceived that my father was quite in earnest their dismay was amusing. The general habit of using snowshoes, which at a very early period had been adopted from the Indians, had already nearly disappeared, but down to a comparatively recent period there had been a few persons who continued to use them in places where there were no interruptions from fences. My father, a slight but sinewy and most athletic man, had spent two or three years of his early life as teacher in a school which had been recently established for the instruction of Indians in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, and there he had joined in all the athletic sports of the natives, gaining a great influence among them by his prowess in running, leaping and wrestling. (It has nothing to do with our present purpose, but

my descendants may like to know that the marks reached by my father, when a student at Yale, for running and standing leaps, were kept as the highest attained by any student on the college campus. No one else had been able to reach the same until I did so in my senior year.)

“It was among the Indians that my father had learned to use the snowshoes with great skill and as much grace as the unwieldy things would permit, but I could never see him or any one else on them without an inclination to laugh which was sometimes stronger than my filial reverence. But, as my father had a strong vein of humor, he always rather joined in my mirth than rebuked me for it. Fore-seeing that there might be some occasion on which this somewhat unusual accomplishment might prove of service, my father had taught me also to become moderately expert in the use of snowshoes.”

“Fortunately Judge Reeve had stored away in his garret, more as a curiosity than for any use that he expected to be made of them, two pairs of snowshoes of the finest Indian manufacture, so that we had not to spend any time in searching for them, and by nine o’clock on Wednesday morning we climbed out of an upper story window upon the hard crust of frozen snow and started off with no other burden than the light, but cumbersome snowshoes attached to our feet, and a small roll like a knapsack, fastened to each of our backs.”

“I was a boy of unusual strength for my years, and my father, although a Parson, was remarkable for his vigor, but I can assure you that we were both of us thankful when at nightfall we reached the little town of Bethlehem and the hospitable abode of my father’s very dear friend, the Rev. Dr. Joseph Bellamy. Although the distance is a little more than ten miles as the crow flies, it had seemed a long journey and I had never been so tired before.”

“On Thursday the roads continuing impassable, we could not abandon our snowshoes, though they made our ankles ache so that we could hardly stand upon them. The air was of a clear, still cold that would have been severe if we had not been exercising ourselves so greatly. Even as it was, our dread-naughts [these were caped coats of exceedingly thick homespun cloth, belted around the waist and descending well below the knees] were none too warm.”

“Our second day’s journey on the snowshoes was much like the first, and of about the same length, bringing us to Woodbury and the house of the Rev. Noah Benedict where we were entertained with warm hospitality. Mr. Benedict was a peace making man in his congregation, and his gentle spirit long influenced the manners and the actions of the people of his flock. But in public matters he was as war-like as any of us. Woodbury, like Litchfield, was a place for the collection and storage of the supplies for the patriot armies. Here we found the streets, running each way from the Meeting House, piled high on either side for a hundred yards or more with barrels and hogsheads of pork, beef, lard and flour, besides great quantities of bales of blankets, tents and clothing for the troops. All these now made miniature mountains under the snow. Almost all the able bodied male inhabitants more than seventeen years of age were enrolled in the armies, and the work pertaining to the stores was carried on by the women and children under the direction of a few old men. Many shoes were made in this place for the troops. Parson Benedict had himself been taught to make them that he might assist in the work. On this evening the women of the family were paring apples to dry for the army use and as my father and I could not assist Mr. Benedict and the men servants in shoemaking, we took our part in the apple paring. And a very merry and delightful evening we all had together, for to work with a good will is a sure road to happiness, let our circumstances be as untoward as they may.”

“Friday morning found the temperature greatly modified, and, by the time we had accomplished the first five or six miles of our journey toward New Haven we found ourselves in an evil case, for the snow was beginning to get wet and soft and held down the four foot length of snowshoe so that at every step it became harder to lift our feet. Glad enough were we when at last we reached an inn where the accommodations were poor enough, but where we could at least get a little refreshment for ourselves and were able to leave the snowshoes to await some later

opportunity to be returned to Judge Reeve, and to hire horses to ride upon to New Haven. From this point the snow was not nearly so deep and we had but little trouble in making, by eight in the evening, the eighteen miles to the house of the Rev. Dr. Daggett, the venerable ex-President of Yale College; which house was almost a second home to us.”

“Tired as I had been the day before, I found myself still more so tonight; but my father would not allow me to complain, saying that I should never make a soldier who could serve his country, as our soldiers were now doing, if I gave out so easily. Never the less, I observed that my father was himself very lame for the next few days and by no means in haste to depart for home again as he would otherwise have been. I have never regretted the experience, since no harm save a few days of stiff joints and sore bones came of it, but I think that my mother’s remark when she heard of it showed much common sense: ‘A week or two more or less would not have spoiled our Johnny’s prospects, and lung fevers might have destroyed both your lives. I say, leave Indian ways to Indian folk.’”

“ ‘Never the less,’ answered my father, with a merry twinkle in his eye, ‘never the less, my dear, I observe that when you have anything to do you brook no delays and you shirk no labor. Your wisdom seems rather to be for others than for yourself.’”

“My mother shook her head slightly and walked away, turning to say over her shoulder, - ‘And would you have the great-granddaughter of Captain John Gallup any more timorsome than her husband?’”