

History: The winter of '52 started Jan. 11

Publisher's note: *This is from the November-December 1972 Lake Tahoe Historical Society newsletter.*

By Marie Walsh

Some 100 persons turned out to hear Tahoe's fabled 'Winter of 1952' described at the October meeting of the Lake Tahoe Historical Society.



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"It started to snow on the 11th of January and then it just didn't quit," recalled Mrs. Bernhardt. "Even today it's hard to visualize how deep the snow really was, but to give you an idea – you couldn't see the houses from the streets, and people were actually skiing off second-story roofs!"

When it first started snowing, Mrs. Bernhardt said that the locals' main concern was keeping Echo summit open. "We sent the rotary plow up there, but that was to no avail because it got stuck, and Echo was thus closed indefinitely. We then were left with only once plow in the entire South Tahoe area – a push plow—and this was used to keep Hwy. 50 plowed from the Tahoe Sierra Market at the Y, to the Kingsbury Grade intersection. None of the side streets were open during this

time, nor was Kingsbury, because that just would have been impossible!”

“With all roads into and out of the basin closed,” she added, “we didn’t have any fresh bread, milk, produce or vegetables. Most of the shelves were bare, but despite this, there was no panic – we didn’t rush off to the store and buy everything in sight like we tend to today because in those days we always used to stock up well in advance of winter. And, no one went hungry because the women baked bread everyday and, most of all, everyone shared. We did a lot of cross-country skiing that winter!”

Among those in the audience who stressed how helpful and cooperative people were that winter was Marie Plimpton, who told of the time that a local resident was thought to have had appendicitis, Mrs. Plimpton said that after Dr. Neff had skied over to the home of his patient, and had found her condition to be serious, he notified the Coast Guard – it was then that 150-200 residents all went out to beat down a path out to the lake so that Betty Hogan could be transported to the waiting plane in a toboggan.

Del Laine mentioned that “people on the outside were more nervous than those stranded at the lake.” She said that one of Bob Wakeman’s favorite stories of that winter concerns the time that several of the locals were down a Fenn Barkley’s market when, all of a sudden, they saw a plane circling overhead. After a packaged bundle was dropped in the woods behind the market, those that ere there put on their skis and took off to see what it was, thinking perhaps that it might be fresh meat. “It wasn’t meat at all, but bundle of the Lake Tahoe News [which were then printed in Minden, Nev.] telling us we were snowed in.”

And Ann Celio, who was one of those actually ‘snowed-out’ during those 28 days, spoke of the time that she and her husband were told that Echo was finally going to be opened.

"We made it as far as Frog Pond, to about where Echo Creek crosses the highway, and found that the plow hadn't opened the road any farther east. Norm got out of the car and asked the snow plow operator if he could ride with him to our home so that he could get his plow and help clear out more of the area. When they reached the corner of Sawmill Road and Highway 50, they came across 16 or 17 cars buried in the snow, and filled with half-frozen people."

"Evidently," Mrs. Celio continued, "quite a few residents had been stranded inside Ethel's Pie Shop that snowy afternoon, and when the fuel oil inside the building had run out, they'd all gotten into the cars and turned on the motors to keep warm. By the time the two men had found the cars, though, the snow had just about buried the cars and the gasoline was exhausted. Norm said the visibility was zero, and that it took from 8 p.m. to 2 a.m. to get those cars out."

"Many still ask if we were frightened that winter," said Mrs. Bernhardt. "There were a great many hardships, I'll admit, but I guess we were just having too much fun to worry."

"As I look back on it, I remember it as a time of sharing, real neighborliness and a time of getting together and doing things with all our friends. Sometimes it takes a catastrophe to get people to live this way, but of course a winter like this would never happen again because of our modern snow plow equipment."