

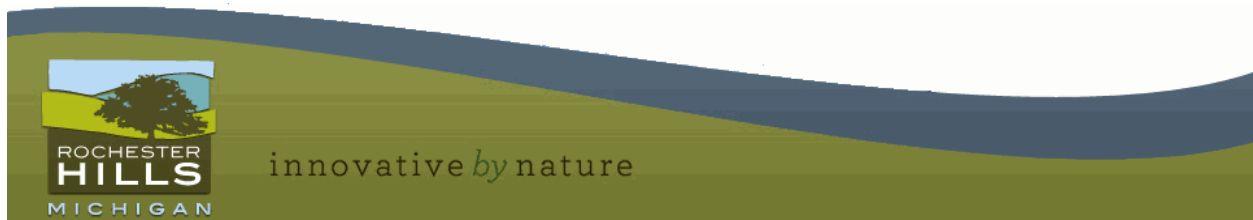
Blizzard of 1886

The biggest snowstorm ever to strike Michigan occurred on Tuesday, April 6, 1886. The days preceding the storm, however, were more in keeping with spring weather rather than winter. Spring activities were already underway with many believing that winter was a distant memory. Only four days prior to the storm, The Rochester Era reported:

"We hail this charming month, for it brings with it freshness, the sweet breath of the springtime and the gentle rains that herald the advent of the early flowers, and the starting grass upon our lawns and meadows...Farm stock, glad to leave the confines of the barn and yard, are straying hither and yon, through field and woodland seeking the tender blades of grass and early vegetation."

On April 3, strong and persistent winds blew throughout the state and lasted until the storm struck. On April 5, the temperature was a chilly 38 degrees. Light snow began to fall shortly after midnight on April 6 and it got progressively heavier during the pre-dawn hours. At 7:00 a.m. the snowfall measured 4.6." At 3:00 p.m., snowfall was at 17.1." When the snow finally stopped falling around 9:00 p.m., there was about 24.5" of snow on the ground. In order to be classified as a blizzard, the snowstorm had to be accompanied by winds of at least 32 mph, low temperatures (temperatures held at 20 to 30 degrees throughout the storm), and visibility of less than 500 feet. The April 6 storm met all criteria.

Twelve-foot high drifts and snow in the street that totaled 10" to 40" were common throughout southeastern Michigan. In Rochester, sidewalks were rendered impassible with "drifts in many places being as high as the fence, or higher...business was virtually suspended." Newspaper, milk, and coal delivery were halted. Stories of people using crowbars and ice picks to clear the snow and underlying ice from streets in order to travel were common. Railroad cars were abandoned or "thrown" from the tracks. The Air Line Railroad between Rochester and Pontiac was completely blockaded; even two days after the storm, assistance from Romeo was sent for "to enable the hands to clear the track." According to The Rochester Era, "during the day it was impossible to see more than half a block distant by reason of the blinding snow which was filled with fine, sharp particles, cutting the face of the luckless pedestrian and rendering life a burden." Snowplows proved inoperable so each person had to shovel snow from in front of their door or "wait for the sun to do it for him, many doing the latter."



Small towns and farms were less affected by the blizzard than larger cities, which were further removed from food sources and more dependant on electricity or coal delivery. Most farms were self-sufficient enough to wait out the storm. The only major problems occurred when cows and other animals were sent from the barns into the fields to begin grazing, owing to the warm early days in April. Some animals were buried in the snow and died while others remained alive until the farmer dug them out. Also, if the farmer was unable to get to his barn to water and feed his animals, they could also die.

Amazingly, no human deaths were reported due to the blizzard. Since newspaper delivery was halted the day of the blizzard, people had to wait for news concerning it. Interestingly enough, by April 7, the blizzard had passed and was considered "old news." Only a small paragraph was devoted to it in The Rochester Era on April 9. Heavy rainfall and warm temperatures on Monday, April 12 disbursed much of the remaining snow. The days following the blizzard saw temperatures well into the mid-50s and even reached mid-70s by mid-month. Yet, those that lived through that day would always remember it. As the Detroit Weather Log recorded in 1886, "The storm was unprecedented in fierceness, snowfall[,] and blockades in the history of the service and the oldest inhabitants can recall nothing equal to it."