

Legends of Chambers County: The Worst Winters Ever

By Kevin Ladd

Winter storms are not all that unusual or uncommon down here, but devastating winter conditions are. Within the pages of Chambers County history a few such storms stand out. This article takes a look at those winters of the past that local folks will always be talking about.

The Great Freeze of 1886

A fierce storm from out of the north struck this area in January 1886. Thermometers dropped down toward the freezing mark and continued falling to what would become historic levels. Old-timers went to the record books and at first compared it to the hard winters of 1838, 1845 and 1864. In time, however, they realized that the Great Freeze of 1886 was unlike anything else that had ever passed this way before. Galveston Bay froze solid for miles. Boat captains froze to death in their capsized vessels. Others, trapped in a vast sea of ice, burned fires within their boats to ward away the wrath of nature.

It was a world turned upside down and became one of the more extraordinary chapters in local history. However, it is a story that is rarely found in history books and one that has almost escaped from both our oral and written history. In the realm of local folklore, it came to be recalled as "The Time Galveston Bay Froze."

Temperatures on Galveston Island began falling rapidly on January 7, 1886 as a blue "norther" slammed its way across Texas. The signal station in Galveston clocked the winds at an average of 35 miles per hour, sometimes running up to 42 miles. The temperature fell to 11 degrees at 5 a.m. on January 8, the coldest day of the freeze. Some thermometers around the town recorded temperatures even lower, one at the wharf read 7 degrees.

The ***Galveston News*** reported: "Yesterday [January 8] can be described as decidedly winterish. While the water in the street gutters was frozen hard, the water in the bay, except along the extreme edges, was not frozen; but as the high wind would dash the spray upon the sides of the vessels in port, it would rapidly freeze and cover their sides, rudders and chains with ice, reminding the seafarers of a more northern latitude."

The first victim of the freeze was Captain Thomas Jefferson, age 25, of Wallisville. The young man was bringing his sloop Annie in from Goose Creek during the worst of the storm. Just opposite Seventeenth Street, the boat ran upon the flats. Captain W. A. Hutchings, of the local Life Saving Service, grew concerned about the vessel the next morning.

Hutchings spent a miserable morning getting a schooner off the flats near Central Wharf, but he continued to worry about the sloop. "[Hutchings] asked for

volunteers to help him take a boat and go out to see her condition. Captain W. A. Stannard and Mr. Alf Smith volunteered to go with him. The wind was blowing a gale at the time. . .The pilots of the steamer **Amy Higgins** loaned them a yawl, and, after about a hour's pull they reached the sloop. . .Found her water-logged on the flats. Aboard they found the body of the deceased sitting on the forward part of the main gaff. The body was covered with about six inches of ice. . .The position of his body showed that he was attempting to take in his sail and secure himself for the night, in which attempt he perished."

During a brief inquest later that day, two other boat captains from Wallisville, Winfield Shelton and William Barton Jones, each identified the body as their friend, Thomas Jefferson. Another Wallisville boat captain, James Lafayette Mixon, encountered similar problems. His schooner, the **Oranzoff**, capsized a half-mile west of the New Wharf. Mixon also perished in the freezing waters.

The newspaper, in its January 10, 1886 edition, proclaimed it "A Sea of Ice." The newspaper described the scene: "The intense cold of Friday night resulted in the waters of the Gulf being frozen for many yards from shore, while the bay, as far as the eye could see, was covered with a sheet of ice varying, so far as investigated from half an inch to an inch and a half or more in thickness."

Thousands of Galvestonians, as well as others trapped there by the inclement weather, descended upon the wharves to witness the scene. At Central Wharf, hundreds looked over three schooners, all covered with ice from the decks to the cabin, from the sides to the lower rigging. Some Smith Point residents found themselves trapped in the icy bay waters. George Paschal McNeir, the son of William and Emily Agnes [Paschal] McNeir, described the incident: "In January of 1886, my mother was in Galveston and took passage home on the mailboat 'Rambler' with Captain E. N. (Tucker) Stephenson, Howard Holmes, Captains Walter Heiman and William (Billy) Young, and Mr. [Charles N.] Eley, our postmaster. On the way up the bay they met a terrible blizzard. They fought on under a three-reefed sail but could not make the mailboat landing at Mr. Eley's. So they anchored at Henry I Heiman's landing. Captain Heiman's brothers tried to get them off but no man could handle a skiff in that freezing gale. They all spent the night in a small cabin without a fire. Mother unpacked her bags and gave the men dresses, coats and such to wrap up in.

"Next morning the bay was frozen solid from Wallisville to Galveston and the 'Rambler' was frozen solid in the bay. The Heiman brothers dragged a skiff across the sandflats for four hundred yards, chopped a path for the skiff out to the boat in the bay and brought the half-frozen men in, one at a time and helped them to Henry Heiman's warm house. Mother refused to go until the last, for privacy's sake, and by then the rescuers were completely exhausted too. So Capt. Stephenson came by our house and told us, and on his way home, told Capt. Andy Davis, who got into boots and oilskins and went to get mother ashore by himself like the hero he always was in a crisis.

"Forest [Paschal's brother] was in bed with a severe cold but Mr. LeBert [a schoolteacher] and I got a feather bed into the wagon with blankets and quilts. We got a team from the barn harnessed but could hardly hold them still. I had no

gloves and the neck yoke chains would freeze to my hands, a youngster of nine. He drove off across the prairie.

"Capt. Davis got mother ashore and carried her to a dry sandbar, set her on her feet, and went to the skiff for a light suitcase. Looking back, [he saw] she was walking blindly up the shore before the icy wind. He threw the suitcase into the skiff and raced after her and carried her 400 yards to Mr. Heiman's house, unconscious, where Mrs. Heiman and her daughter, Fannie, worked over her for hours, chafing feet, hand and face with ice water to restore circulation. In the evening, Mr. LeBert brought her home in the wagon; she was in bed for a month but recovered thanks to Capt. Davis, Mrs. Heiman and Fannie."

Frozen Point and the Snow of 1895

A few fading photographs is the only tangible evidence of the record snowfall that hit this area on February 13-14, 1895. One picture shows the George Stengler family posing stiffly outside their home in Hankamer. A snowball is splattered here and there against the two-story house. Family members hold a few others in their hands, waiting anxiously for the unknown photographer to finish his work.

Residents of Anahuac measured 20 inches of snow on the ground. The snow hit Wallisville while the Jail and Hanging Tower were under construction.

Even more snow fell at Double Bayou, with disastrous consequences. Ralph Semmes Jackson spoke of the blizzard in his book, *Home on the Double Bayou*: When the storm was over snow stood three feet deep on the prairies at Double Bayou. As the storm struck, the some six thousand head of cattle that were pastured on the Jackson Ranch turned tail to the driving snow and started drifting south with the wind. When they reached the shore of East Bay they walked off into the warmer waters of the Bay and were drowned by the thousands. Of the six thousand head of cattle, only a fraction of this number escaped the disaster, leaving a pitifully small herd with which to start over again. After the storm abated, the men of the family saddled their horses and rode toward the bayshore, fearful of what they would find. Reaching East Bay, they saw dead cattle lying so thick in the shallow waters along the shore that a man could walk for several hundred yards out into the Bay on the bodies of the dead cattle. There was a point of land extending out into the Bay where most of the cattle made their last stand before stepping off into the water to their death. From that day forward this point of land was known as Frozen Point."

Other Winters, Other Years

Newspaper accounts speak knowingly of the hard winters of 1838, 1845, and 1864, although little documentation exists as to its effect upon present-day Chambers County. Folks on Galveston Island saw around an inch of snow on January 8, 1864, which was soon followed by sleet and hardened into a crust. The severity of that freeze was owed not so much to low temperatures or heavy snowfall, but rather to the fact that the conditions hung on for most of the month.

During this century several winter storms stand out, but none so much as the winter storm of January 20-21, 1935, a combination of freezing weather and rainfall that wiped out approximately 35 percent of the cattle in Chambers County. White's Ranch lost some 2,000 head, while Earl Cooper lost 1,000. The total loss for the whole county in cattle alone was estimated at \$150,000, a lot of money in those days. Cattle drifted further and further south, trying to stay ahead of the wind. Between High Island and Stowell, the dead cattle lay frozen in the ditch along the highway. "There were so many," wrote The Progress, "that at one point a man could walk for more than a mile by standing on dead animals."

In recent years, two devastating storms stand out. The January 8-11, 1973 winter storm of snow and ice caused business and residential damages, as well as numerous automobile fatalities. The "Christmas Freeze of 1989" dropped temperatures down to historic lows, often as far down as six degrees. Galveston experienced two inches of snow.

All in all, Chambers County has had few cold, hard winters in its history. Those which did come our way quickly became and will continue to be part of our local legends.