

Extrait d'une lettre en date du 24 janvier 1998, décrivant la tempête de verglas

Dans cette lettre, rédigée en anglais, l'auteur décrit ses expériences personnelles, ses observations et ses réflexions relative à la tempête de verglas.

The storm was every bit as bad as it appeared on television. It began on Monday, the 5th of January and by Tuesday, we began to see damaged trees, power failures and school closings. Two neighbours immediately to the north of me, who each had one tree in front of their houses, lost them. At that time, however, we still did not fully realize what was coming. [...] We had more ice on Wednesday night and it was devastating. [...] It was difficult to sleep because of the sound of breaking branches - either a sharp cracking or a slow tearing sound. It was very painful to hear. [...]

We tried to clear the outside stairs of ice. The curved stairs, which are very pretty and picturesque and typical of Montreal architecture, are dangerous at the best of times in winter. Coated with ice as they were, they were treacherous. It was necessary to scale the stairs rather than climb them. With the use of a small axe and a pick loaned by neighbours, we managed [...] to remove at least part of the ice. There were many different layers, all remarkably hard. [...] To this day, the stairs are still not as safe as we would wish. There was also a great deal of ice on my mansard roof, which is directly over the stairs, and we managed to remove some of it.

Many of the trees in St-Louis Square are over one hundred years old. By Friday, they were badly damaged and huge branches littered the ground. Although Drolet Street had had power throughout most of the week, on Friday at about noon, the power went out. [...]

On that day, I foolishly decided to go through the laneway to see the damage. Halfway through the laneway, I realized that I should never have ventured in so far. I was afraid to go back and afraid to go forward because of the broken branches and wires which frequently blocked the laneway. It was necessary to climb over and around the branches and wires. In addition, there were broken branches which were still hanging from the trees and which were due to fall. The trees were beautiful, in a very eerie kind of way. They were completely covered with thick clear ice. At the slightest wind, I would hear a clear tinkling sound. I could also hear the occasional sharp cracking sound as branches or ice fell. There was not a bird or animal to be seen.

Because it was still light and the houses were, for the most part, unheated, all the neighbours were outside, assessing the damage and trying to remove ice. Cars were completely iced in. Removing the ice from the windshields was a major feat. I saw many persons using hammers, screwdrivers and mallets. Spirit nevertheless was high and there was a lot of sharing (tools, manpower, houses heated by wood burning fireplaces or by gas). By 4:30 pm, it was getting dark, so we sought refuge with neighbours who had had the foresight to install a wood burning fireplace five years previously. We sat by candlelight in their living room until 7:00 pm, chatting and listening to the news reports on their battery powered radio. We then returned home where I prepared a cold meal by candlelight and listened to news reports. My neighbours had very kindly loaned me one of their radios. Fortunately, the telephone was operating and a major part of the evening was spent reassuring friends and relatives that we were just fine. I subsequently heard on the news that we were only able to maintain telephone service because Bell Telephone had a powerful emergency generator which was able to provide power long enough for two other huge generators to be flown in from Vancouver on a Hercules aircraft. At about nine that evening, we heard on the news that we were expected to limit our use of water and to boil it because the two City of Montreal water pumping stations did not have emergency generators. We discovered subsequently that by the time power returned to Montreal the next evening, there remained only a two-hour supply of water and that the City had made arrangements to ship from other municipalities, water which would have been distributed to residents at specific locations. Considering the large numbers of people who were using candles

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and oil lamps and who were heating their houses with wood burning fireplaces, we were very lucky not to have had major fires during that period.

We slept very comfortably that night. Although we have two sleeping bags which are specifically designed for winter camping, they were not necessary. The advantage to living in a reasonably well insulated house which is attached on either side to other houses was very apparent. Even the next day, we could manage quite comfortably in the house, provided we were warmly dressed (snowpants, woolen socks, shoes and sweaters).

I awoke early on Saturday morning and went looking for supplies. Many stores were closed. Others were operating with candles and generators. [...] a portion of St-Laurent Boulevard, near Hôtel-Dieu Hospital, had never lost power and stores were open in that area. It was, however, impossible to find batteries, bottled water, candles or fuel for fondue pots. Saturday was a repeat of our activities of the previous day. We did, however, receive visits from police officers, who were going from house to house in order to ensure that everyone was fine.

At about 6:00 pm, power was restored in many parts of the island, including our area. We were very fortunate, since the time spent without power was very short. As I write this, I have friends, relatives and acquaintances living in the so-called "triangle of darkness" located to the south of Montreal, who are still without electricity. They have proven to be remarkably resilient. As a rule, despite many offers of accommodation, many have chosen to remain in their areas, if not in their homes. Others have left. [...] There are very many instances of people grouping together in heated homes and managing to cope. Many have continued to work during most of this period, often at double shift. Others spend much time looking for food and wood, keeping fireplaces, stoves and generators going and looking after the young and old. [...]

[...] The entire center core of the city, including all the office towers, has had to be de-iced, because the danger from falling ice is extreme. At least one death has been reported as a result and many cars have been damaged. For the past two weeks, the City has been closing areas and systematically de-icing them. I have seen people working on the buildings and it is very impressive. Many look like alpinists scaling mountains. As late as last Tuesday, I was on Sherbrooke Street and I had to remain in the building a few minutes longer because de-icing operations were under way. The work involved in de-icing the many bridges connecting the island and the steel pylons is nothing short of heroic. During the worst of the storm, all the bridges to the South Shore were closed. Many main highways were closed since there was a danger that the ice, which had collected on the overhead signs, would drop onto cars below.

As I write this, I can see through my window that neighbours across the laneway are attempting to de-ice their roof. We had a heavy snowfall on Friday and this new snow, in addition to the ice, is straining roof capacity. Since Friday, at least four roofs on commercial buildings have collapsed. The flat roofs are of course the most vulnerable and we have worried about mine. Since our roof surface is not large, we are probably safe, but we plan on discussing it with friends and neighbours. The likelihood of a collapse is remote, but there could eventually be water damage when the ice begins to melt. Fortunately, the front mansard roof was rebuilt last fall. It had been covered with cedar shingles which were lifting and which were obviously in bad condition. Had it not been rebuilt, there is no doubt that the weight of the ice would have ripped off all the shingles.

The hydro system remains very fragile and we can anticipate a few other minor (I hope) power failures between now and spring. It will take far longer than that for Hydro-Québec to repair and strengthen the system and it is obvious to all that even once the work has been completed, the system will never be fail-safe.

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I have always been aware of how interdependent and vulnerable we are, particularly those of us who live in cities. My brother occasionally made fun of me when I talked of someday buying a house in the country and becoming completely self-sufficient. He knows, given my circumstances, that that would be extremely unlikely. Clearly, that option is available to only a very few hardy, stubborn and probably fanatical individuals. Even those who lived in the country were not spared, since they are so dependent on power to maintain farming and other operations.

Despite the fact that I was aware of my vulnerability, we were very poorly equipped for the emergency. We rely exclusively on electricity for heating, we did not have a battery powered radio or camp stove or fondue pot which many used for cooking during that period. We did not even have matches or an oil lamp which worked properly (although we did have lamp oil which I loaned to neighbours). Apart from a house which was becoming progressively colder but which did provide shelter, all we had were the two winter sleeping bags, candles, a supply of liquids which might have lasted one week and a limited supply of canned food. Although I very much doubt that we will ever attain self-sufficiency, I am now looking at alternative heating methods and plan on buying to-day, much of the equipment which we should have had as a matter of course during the ice storm. Hopefully, we won't ever have to use the equipment and it would obviously be of only limited assistance in a major catastrophe (of apocalyptic proportions of course!). Nevertheless, I resolve to always keep supplies on hand in the future.

As for the lessons learned from this experience, I was reassured by the extraordinary resiliency of the human spirit, but remain acutely aware of our continuing vulnerability.