

# My Biggest Snowstorm and Coldest Winter – 1936-37

by Rodney S. Rockenbach - February 16, 2003

(transcribed from the original hand-written story)

Most of this is true. What is not true you had better believe because it makes a better story!

Route 14 between Crystal Lake and Woodstock was closed because of the deep snowdrifts. Snow was head high deep or more. Those days you did not have to post any road closing signs-it was self-evident. Bowman Dairy from Chicago were concerned that they were not able to get the farmers' milk to their plant.

I believe the state of Illinois highway foreman was a man by the name of \_\_\_\_\_ Ryan. He lived next door to the Harry Rydquist family. A group of us, about 20 in number, met at the Dodge vehicle dealer on Virginia Avenue, across from the park, to get organized with the foreman. The foreman asked the Dodge dealer if he could take a set of skid chains for the car of one of the men, and if he did not use them if he could return them at no charge. The dealer agreed to this, but a little later, the dealer whispered to the car owner that he should be sure to use the set of chains. We each had our own shovels. We started our mission about 10 PM.

Our first big project on Route 14 was near the Fred Dietrich farm, about where Route 176 is now. This was a relay operation. I made myself a clearing about 5 feet high in the snow bank. My brother Ray was standing on the roadbed. He would shovel the snow up on my platform then I would relay it over the top of the snow bank away from the road. About this time Bowman Dairy showed up with a large truck with a V-shaped snow blade plow. This was a blunt shaped V blade, more of a straight blade than a "V". The snow at this location was too deep and compact for this plow.

Then a bus supplied by Bowman Dairy showed up with manpower (drafted, conscripted or volunteered from skid Row). Those days most everyone had five-buckle rubber overshoes for cold damp weather protection. Most of these "volunteers" had no overshoes. They improvised !! They had cut car tire inner tubes in strips, slip these over their shoes, tied the ends up with wire to just beyond the toes of their shoes. That night we got as far as the cattle dealer's farm of Lars Anderson - about 3 miles. It's a good thing we did not get as far as the Lily Pond Tavern or this story may have got longer.

We local workers got into the bus for the return trip. The driver was to turn around in Lars Anderson's driveway. The clutch began to slip and was smoking. The driver said he could not give us a ride

back to Crystal Lake, but we convinced him that we would lighten the load by getting out while he turned his bus around. He agreed and we did not have to walk back to Crystal Lake.

I believe the road was cleared the next day.

My brother Ray says the story is a little different, but he cannot convince me because the snow is finally gone!! Our family has always had the reputation of telling the truth. By this writing, I may have tarnished that record.

Clearing railroad tracks by shoveling the snow was another way of earning extra cash. The locomotives had snowplows but the snow was so deep they could not get through going at a slow speed. If they hit the snow at a higher rate of speed they took a chance of derailing the train. This job took a few more days. One day Bobby Malone went along with me to get a job. We had to walk a good distance. When we saw the foreman, he told Bobby he had a frozen nose, so he was not hired.

For one of our clearing projects we rode the Gandy handcars toward Ridgefield for one of our unusual times. The handcar was driven by a gasoline engine, but also was driven by hand power. The engine would drive the handcar either way. While the engine was running slowly the foreman had to see that the engine piston was in the correct position. He would switch a lever and the direction of the engine rotation would reverse and we would head back to Crystal Lake.

I worked there for a few shifts. Then one cold - extra cold - miserable night about 3 AM I got a call from the foreman wanting me to come to work. I thought the "hell" with it, so I stayed in bed. Still to this day my conscience bothers me that I did not get up to go to work instead of lying in bed while it was 20° below outside.