

SNOW BOUND

TV scenes prompt a Whittier experience
By J B Leftwich

Television pictures of the January storm that swept through the northern tier of states and into New York and New England kindled memories of childhood snows and childhood families.

Both of us, my wife and I, cherish fond memories of childhood snowstorms and lingering snow -- experiences that through the years gathered a romantic aura capable of masking many of the inconveniences of farm life winters.

We viewed the TV snow scenes while the minds of both of us flashed to a favorite poem -- John Greenleaf Whittier's *Snow-Bound*, and its classic lines of rhythm and rhyme describing a winter snowstorm in early Eighteenth Century New England.

The snowstorm came when Whittier was a boy in a family that included parents, two brothers, a sister and an uncle.

Our scrawny little snow last month was a puny reminder of childhood snows and of Whittier's *Snow-Bound*. It took the TV news and the dearth of interesting TV programs to prompt us to go to the internet in search of the poem. We spent much of the evening reading aloud the timeless words of a great American writer, including:

The sun that brief December day . . . Rose cheerless over hills of gray . . . And, darkly circled, gave at noon . . . A sadder light than waning moon. . . Slow tracing down the thickening sky . . . Its mute and ominous prophecy, . . . A portent seeming less than threat, . . . It sank from sight before it set.

The distance from my boyhood home near Buffalo Valley to the western hilltops where the weather front first appeared was perhaps two miles. I loved to watch the rain approach, and I delighted when rain turned to snow.

My most memorable experience was similar to Whittier's snowstorm. Clouds rolled in, obliterating the sun and casting a grayish hue over our valley. Early light rain became mixed precipitation, which morphed into postage stamp size flakes falling in visibility limiting dimensions. The romantic part of me loved every minute of that snowfall.

*Meanwhile we did our nightly chores,
Brought in the wood from out of doors,*

Such was farm life. The cattle had to be fed, the cows milked, the firewood brought inside to afford us our only way of keeping warm. We tracked snow onto the back porch, stamped our feet but tracked more into the big room that was both living room and bedroom

We were ready for the night when Granny brought out her popcorn popper and above coals raked onto the hearth, popped bowls of corn. The next day, more popping would become material for popcorn balls molded with molasses heated to a degree she knew without thermometer.

Whittier described a similar scene:

Between the andirons' straddling feet, . . . The mug of cider simmered slow, . . . The apples sputtered in a row, . . . And, close at hand, the basket stood . . . With nuts from brown October's wood.

Yes, we had mugs of cider. Granddaddy saw to that. He grew bushels of apples, not just for the fruit, but also for the cider. And we had the baskets of hickory nuts and walnuts. Earlier in the year, we had gathered the nuts, hulled walnuts and stored them for winter snacks.

The storm brought other actions, including squabbles between me and my brother, which dad had to settle. As tempers grew short, Mama would scold us. Impatience surged. We longed for the great outdoors.

At last the weather moderated, but the snow clung to our hillside facing away from the sun, and the slope that was our front yard became a snow-sled slope.

When night fell, and with it the temperature, we boys welcomed the roaring fire, the popcorn and nuts, never realizing we were storing memories to be savored generations into the future.

Whittier also was nostalgic as he ended the poem with these lines:

Sit with me by the homestead hearth . . . And stretch the hands of memory forth . . . To warm them at the wood-fire's blaze! . . . And thanks untraced to lips unknown . . . Shall greet me like the odors blown . . . From unseen meadows newly mown, . . . Or lilies floating in some pond, . . . Wood-fringed, the wayside gaze beyond; . . . The traveler owns the grateful sense . . . Of sweetness near, he knows not whence, . . . And, pausing takes with forehead bare . . . The benediction of the air

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