

AFTER THE STORM

Stories and pictures from the great storm of 1996

Wednesday, January 15, 1997



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Firemen battle snow to respond to 911 call

By GAIL DYSON
Driftwood Contributor

It was 4:30 a.m., December 29, when the 911 call went in from my parents' temporary home off Stewart Road.

Mother (age 75) was suffering heart attack symptoms; her husband Stanley (age 86) is totally blind.

The roads were impassable; the first volunteer fireman hiked and crawled several miles to reach them. He was soaking wet but immediately took charge, alleviating some of their fears.

The ambulance could not operate on either Beaver Point Road or Stewart Road. A grader was called to clear the road for the fire department rescue vehicle. Meanwhile, other firemen and ambulance attendants arrived having had to break trail through four feet of snow, up a

very long driveway, in the dark.

The wait began for road clearance but the grader could not get up the driveway. The crew prepared the stretcher and all six men carried the patient out — slipping and sliding through the snow. This took tremendous effort, as the patient was by now attached to a portable oxygen tank and would not survive if tumbled into the snow.

The firehall rescue vehicle was waiting, the grader had cleared a small portion of Stewart Road, so the vehicle managed to get to Fulford, where mother was transferred to an ambulance and thence to hospital — arriving at 8:30 a.m. There she was quickly transferred to an emergency bed and the hospital staff took over. She is recovering now because of

911 CALL B2



What a snowfall!

Some three feet of snow didn't deter Pete McKenzie and Nadja Marda (left) from climbing through a snow-ridden Ganges. Others

had less fun, such as the owners of the landmark Brigden barn which collapsed in the Burgoyne Valley during the storm.

Photos by Derrick Lundy and Damaris Rumsby

Emergency plan passes test situation with minor cracks

By SUSAN LUNDY
Driftwood Staff

Salt Spring's emergency plan coordinators guided Salt Spring through heavy snowfall, severe flooding, mud slides and eroding roads two weeks ago with only a few glitches in the system.

"We were extremely pleased with the number of volunteers who turned out, how hard they worked and their calm, professional manner," said Salt Spring Island Emergency Plan coordinator Chuck Hamilton last Friday. "It all fell into place."

More than 200 volunteers grouped together to bag sand and then use the sandbags to battle rising waters, put up barricades, re-direct traffic, evacuate three homes, and supply medicine and food to trapped islanders.

Volunteers at the Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) went on

alert at their headquarters in the ambulance building on Ganges Hill during the afternoon of December 31.

For the next 48 hours, they compiled data collected from a flood of phone calls and verbal information, and painted a picture of what was going on in every area of the island. EOC maps provided a visual indication of where floods, slides and road erosion were occurring.

"We prioritized situations and then allocated resources," Hamilton said. "We kept full phone logs, full radio logs and a separate list of physical conditions."

He described the situation as an excellent test to point out any loopholes in the emergency plan system. "There will always be rough spots, but we don't want to make the same mistakes next time."

Hamilton said communication

was the only area identified as needing improvement.

Hamilton said an overload on the phone lines, plus the closure of agencies due to the New Year's Day holiday, left workers unable to talk to each other.

"We'd phone an agency and there would be an answering machine on," he noted.

Eventually, walkie-talkies were handed out and telephone numbers for inside lines were passed around.

Emergency Social Services (ESS) coordinator Sharon Crouse said the island needs to get its emergency plan written down on paper: "We need to know exactly what each agency is doing so no overlaps occur."

But she also noted that the test emergency proved her group "has the flexibility, maturity and train-

EMERGENCY B2



Landslide

Melting snow and heavy rains caused two major slides on Salt Spring, including this massive mixture of dirt, vegetation and trees

which crashed onto North End Road on New Year's Eve.

Photo by Tony Richards



HAPPY NEW YEAR! Joan and Chris Clements New Year's Day. More than 200 volunteers were seen bagging sand at the Rainbow Road cement plant just moments after midnight on helped pull the island through its recent weather-related emergency. Photo by Derrick Lundy

911 CALL: Firemen fight snowfall

From Page B1
the heroic efforts and team approach of caring people in our community.

The story does not end with mother safely in hospital.

We then had an 86-year-old blind man alone in a house with an inaccessible driveway. What to do?

Despite my living only two miles away and having a four-wheel-drive vehicle, I could not drive or even walk on Beaver Point Road to reach him. This end of the island was totally snowed in!

I decided to play the waiting game — surely a plow would come soon — phoning Stanley every hour. Fortunately, we had power and water at both houses. Later in the day, with no road

crew in sight, I became alarmed and called the firehall deputy chief — what to do? Despite having to deal with multi-problems from all directions, he sent a rescue vehicle for me. We then met up with volunteer firemen from the Fulford Hall, most of whom had been on duty for more than 12 hours.

We hiked into the house and prepared my step-father to walk out to the road. Yes! Walk out! He guided himself with a sturdy broom and was supported by two men in front, one behind and I brought up the rear carrying the overnight case. We carefully picked our steps, sliding here and there, but they never let him fall.

Arriving all in one piece at the road, he was bodily lifted into the

fire truck. He was safe.

Our little convoy then picked our way back to Beaver Point Road, where a small trail had finally been plowed. Upon arriving at my driveway, I found three feet of snow and ice had been deposited there by an evening plow, and buried my car.

It was dark and it appeared the old "fireman's lift" was in order, when we noticed that a neighbour had cut little stairs in the icy mound — up and over we went. The firemen made sure we were both safely established in the house before leaving and gallantly brushed aside our heartfelt thanks.

The woodstove was warm and cozy. Stanley had some ginger ale. I reached for the Scotch bottle — "It has been one hell of a day."

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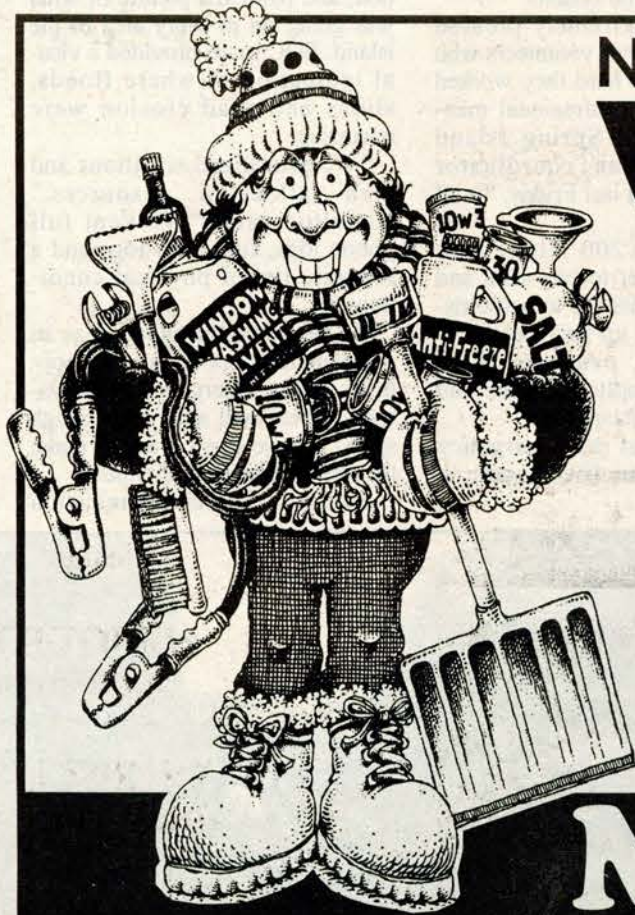
Ganges-based Gulf Island Productions will take any snow storm photo and through computer manipulation process it on a t-shirt or sweat shirt.

The company, run by Noel and Fran Burbidge, is also offering shirts bearing its own image of the storm — a snow-filled scene of the government dock near Centennial Park.

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EMERGENCY

From Page B1

ing" to successfully run an emergency centre operation.

Although the ESS's mandate involves the emergency provision of food, clothing and lodging, plus the reuniting of families following a disaster, the group found itself working mostly in other areas.

Crouse said the bulk of ESS volunteers' work involved matching volunteers to needs, fielding calls and manning the EOC.

Within their mandate, they arranged delivery of food and medicine to a total of four families.

Crouse said the emergency has spurred her group to plan greater community outreach and to focus on establishing personal and neighbourhood preparedness plans

throughout the island.

Hamilton also noted that community-wide emergency preparedness needs to work alongside personal disaster preparedness.

"Most people don't have sufficient supplies to last through an emergency situation," he noted. "People should accumulate kits plus first aid and radio skills."

As for the island's emergency plan, Hamilton said, the major players in the recent snow and rain storm — including police, fire, ambulance, emergency personnel, Hydro and road officials — have met once and plan to gather again next month to address the issue of improving emergency communications.

And despite the one crack in the system, Hamilton said, "If we had to go for it again tomorrow — we'd be ready."

SALT SPRING

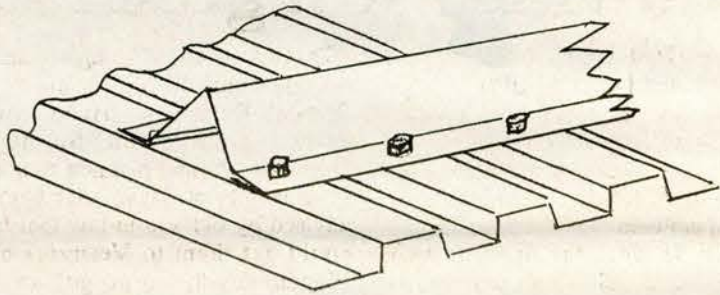
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Snowbound

It didn't take much effort for five-year-old Margo Milton to be swallowed by the snow. The youngster is enjoying the snowfall of a lifetime in this photo submitted by Derrick and Wendy Milton.

Prairie folk thought they'd trade snowfall for a green Christmas

By GERTRUDE FRIESEN
Driftwood Contributor

"As I write to you I am looking out at green grass, majestic cedars and open water. What a contrast to snowy fields and below zero temperatures."

These were the opening two lines of our Christmas letter written November 30. We are prairie folk and were anticipating our first green Christmas.

Escaping -30° C temperatures and arriving at Salt Spring on November 25 it looked promising. My tramping around the wooded areas of Mt. Belcher with our children and grandchildren who live here and not even wearing mittens and snowboots was great.

"How do you like it here?" a lady at church asked. "We've traded the snow for rain," I replied. "Well, you don't have to shovel it," she commented.

However, three weeks later we experienced a snowfall of such magnitude that the prairies pale by contrast. As I watched it pile up on the deck and railings and completely cover the lower shrubs, I wondered how much more would come down. In Noah's day it rained 40 days and

40 nights — was it going to snow 40 days and 40 nights on Salt Spring? Relatives arrived from Prince George on Sunday, December 21 and planned to stay for a couple of days. After being advised by our son-in-law that he could get them to Vesuvius on Monday night, but no guarantee for Tuesday, they hastily packed and were out the door. It was too bad because we were really enjoying our Rook card games.

The children from Edmonton also arrived Sunday but they were staying for a week and surely by then there would be no problem. What a wrong assumption! When it was time to leave, most roads were blocked and of course the airport in Victoria was shut down. Oh my, did we ever become good Rook players.

It reminded me of the spring 30 years ago when we farmed in southern Manitoba. The Red River Valley was bracing itself for a flood. All the machinery and stored grain had to be transported to high ground. The men would work hard all day and then in the evening, to take their minds off the impending disaster, they relaxed with this card game. Strange how the uncontrollable

elements prompt people to some light-hearted diversions.

Our Manitoba mentality made us think that the mountains of snow would be with us until April. We could hardly believe how quickly the beautiful heavily-laden tree branches were relieved of their coverings. Walking up the road New Year's Day the water music rivaled Handel's. And, okay, the air smelled like Manitoba in April.

All in all it was a great experience and we will long remember our first Christmas on Salt Spring Island.

Snow storm watched on eastern television

By BEV STEWART
Driftwood Contributor

Our greenhouse was wrecked, water flooded our basement and numerous shrubs and hedges were flattened.

But by far the most galling thing about the snowstorm was that we missed it.

We flew back east to visit relatives for Christmas and to get in some cross country skiing in Quebec, where the snow is usually good. Only this time, it wasn't.

It was as we sat in front of the TV each evening watching the weather report, hoping for some snow, that we learned of the events in B.C. With horror, we saw the slides around Boston Bar, the damage to marinas around Victoria and the flattening of greenhouses in Saanich.

A phone call to a neighbour revealed water coming into the

basement, and eaves troughs collapsed by heavy snow.

"It's absolutely incredible," he said. "No one can get out."

Becoming alarmed, we called the woman who was looking after our cats. "Are they all right?" we asked.

"Well, one of them isn't," she answered. Silky, our aging stray cat, had died on the front deck two nights after our departure.

There were about five days left in our holiday.

"Maybe we should try to get home early," I ventured.

"There's probably nothing we can do anyway," Craig said.

We stayed. We tried to enjoy ourselves, but lost a lot of sleep.

The trip home seemed endless.

Once home, evidence of the storm was everywhere, yet nothing was too terribly out of place.

For us, the snow storm that was, wasn't.



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Snowbound islanders issue road clearing complaints

By VALORIE LENNOX
Driftwood Staff

Like the now-vanished snowflakes, questions about snow removal are piling up on the island in the wake of the massive December 29 snowfall which trapped many residents at the end of impassable roads.

Andy Gravelle and girlfriend Christine Maloney estimate they lost \$800 in wages when they could not escape from Garner Road and return to work on the mainland as scheduled December 30.

The couple had reservations on the December 29 ferry from Long Harbour, but the sailing was cancelled due to the weather. The next day the ferry was running but the roads were blocked.

Garner Road was not cleared by a highways maintenance crew until 11:30 p.m. January 1. By then, the young couple had left the island, digging out a path for themselves and their Volkswagen Beetle.

Someone with a four-wheel-drive vehicle managed to get pianist Barrington Perry, who also lives on Garner Road, into Ganges for a New Year's Eve appointment, Elna Gravelle reported.

She said the main problem for her son and future daughter-in-law was that the road maintenance company kept promising the road would be cleared within hours and then nothing happened. The family began calling JJM Maintenance the morning of December 30. If they had known the road would not be cleared, they would have made other arrangements, Gravelle said.

"The major complaint was that they kept telling us they were

going to come."

Adding insult to injury were reports that nearby Dukes Road was cleared at noon December 30 and that Mouat's parking lot was cleared early in the morning December 31.

But it wasn't a highways crew that cleared Dukes Road. Johnny Bennett, who lives near the top of the hill, said someone with a green tractor equipped with a front-end loader cleared a single track in the road up to Seymour Heights. "It was a private person, it wasn't government," Bennett said.

That cleared road turned out to be essential. Bennett suffered a minor stroke at noon December 31 and had to be taken to hospital. Using a four-wheel-drive truck equipped with chains, Bernie Reynolds was able to get Bennett down to the cleared track.

"That tractor certainly made the difference, I tell you," Bennett said.

Ellen Bennett said the road clearing was slower than usual but she doesn't know if the maintenance crews did not have enough equipment or were unable to hire outside equipment.

Neighbours kept tabs on each other, she said, while a 14-hour power outage New Year's Day forced a return to farmhouse traditions. "We went back to old-fashioned cooking for New Year's dinner."

Barry Green, who lives on top of Channel Ridge, saw the other side of medical emergencies as neighbours attempted to clear a path so Dr. Ron Reznick could reach the hospital. They were unsuccessful and the doctor walked down to the main road.

Efforts to reach JJM Maintenance usually produced a busy signal, Green reported. He was told the snow was so heavy that it could only be moved by a grader and it would take 24 to 36 hours for a grader to reach Green's neighbourhood. Two doctors live on the street, he said.

Green felt the problem would not have been as severe if plowing had been done before and during the December 29 snowstorm to reduce the amount of accumulated snow. No effort was made to plow the road between December 27 and 30, he said.

"They were keeping the main roads quite clear but what's the point of having the main roads clear if no one can reach them?" Green asked.

Laurie Craig was another islander disappointed by the snow clearing. He was called by JJM at 1 a.m. December 30 when the company wanted to use his tow truck to remove a stuck vehicle but Craig couldn't get out of snow-clogged Scott Point Drive.

He pointed out that another area resident requires nursing care, yet the road was not cleared until New Year's Eve.

In the meantime, the plows cleared the road to nearby Long Harbour and also cleared Sunset Drive more than once, Craig said. "It wasn't very good out this neck of the woods."

Other complaints revolved around a report that highways crews were clearing a motel parking lot before clearing side roads, a perception that crews would not leave the main roads and a perceived lack of cooperation between highways and other

emergency services.

On Douglas Road, which was washed out by the storm, resident Marv Coulthard wondered why road maintenance crews were waiting for heavy equipment to do repairs when a large excavator was parked in his yard, right on the scene. Coulthard said the excavator, which can lift over 7,000 pounds, was in his yard because of some work being done before the storm hit.

"I wonder why JJM is bringing in heavy equipment from off island, at great expense, while there is equipment like this on the island that is sitting idle during a

time of crisis," he observed.

"My neighbours and I have not been able to get out since December 22," he noted January 7. Work to repair Douglas Road started Thursday.

Not everyone had complaints. Fire chief Les Wagg said the highways crews cooperated with the fire department. "When we needed them, they got someone there as quick as they could."

Salt Spring Provincial Emergency Program coordinator Chuck Hamilton declined to comment on the complaints. "It's not for me to pass comment on other agencies," he said.

Volunteers work to remove snow

A series of volunteers filled in — or rather, cleared out — ahead of road crews in many areas.

Walter Rumsby worked December 30 and 31 to clear Burgoyne Bay Road and also removed a tree which had fallen across the road to the beach houses.

Larry Quesnel used his skidder with its nine-foot-wide blade to clear the snow on his home street of Don Ore and then extended his efforts onto Charlesworth, Wilkie Way and the end of Mount Belcher. "I was just bored," he explained.

He called JJM Maintenance before doing the additional clearing and said it took him about eight hours to clear the roads in "Cudmore's" subdivision. "I hope they'll pay me for it," he remarked.

He noted his skidder cannot push uphill but was able to move the snow downhill. He said the maintenance crew grader didn't reach the area until January 2.

Mark Hughes and Merv Walde were credited with clearing the Dukes Road area days ahead of the highways maintenance plow, which didn't reach the road until 9 p.m. January 1. Walde was out the day of the snowfall, December 29.

Another volunteer was Grant Eckberg, who trundled out of his Fulford-Ganges Road driveway on Hector, a 1960s vintage farm tractor equipped with a front-end loader, to clear the RCMP and ambulance parking lot December 29.

He also cleared a few neighbouring driveways before returning to tackle his own driveway. "Then I went back to work," the software developer said.

For the next few days he received countless calls from people wanting to hire him to clear their driveways.

"But that's not what I do so I had to say no," he said.

He is busy programming the next upgrade of his company's Help Payroll software, which needs to be completed shortly.

B. C. Hydro hired an independ-

dent contractor to plow a single lane into Stonecutter Way so manager Murray Smith could get into the office to coordinate the repair of power outages.

Smith said he tried unsuccessfully to get into work at 5:30 a.m. December 29 so he coordinated repair efforts from home until late

Sunday, when a track was cleared in his road.

Coincidentally, Smith lives next door to island road maintenance foreman John Charlton, something he suspects is not an advantage in a snow storm. "The foreman has to be careful not to do his own road first," Smith observed.

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Equipment shortage, parked cars hamper JJM road clearing effort

Islanders who live on dead-end streets may enjoy more privacy and less traffic, but they will also wait the longest after a snowfall to see a snowplow, according to JJM Maintenance superintendent John Weighill.

When plowing, Weighill said main roads are cleared first, followed by secondary feeder roads and then residential through streets. Dead-end streets are usually cleared last.

While trying to clear the December 29 snowfall, Weighill said crews were hampered by cars left on the side of the road, which blocked grader access to some roads. In those situations, Weighill said crews were instructed to move on to another road rather than try to find the vehicle owner.

For example, Weighill said access was blocked in the Walker Hook/Fort Street area by cars parked on both sides of the road.

Crews were also hampered by shortage of equipment since JJM Maintenance had only one grader on the island and the snow was so heavy it had to be pushed with a grader. To supplement its own crew, the high-

way maintenance company employed local contractors Norman Twa and Ken Tara with their graders, Weighill said.

He also felt communication with emergency services was good, pointing out that he had a radio from emergency services and met with Salt Spring Provincial Emergency Program coordinator Chuck Hamilton.

Although no one from JJM Maintenance attended the emergency services planning meeting December 30, Weighill said all eight on-island crew members were probably out clearing roads.

Despite rumours, he doubted any private parking lots were cleared ahead of streets following the snowstorm. "We, as a private contractor, do private work," he said. "But to my knowledge, I don't believe we were doing any during the storms."

He noted JJM Maintenance received numerous requests from residents requesting that their road be given priority when snow-clearing. Crews did their best, he said.

The slide across North End Road was cleared by January 6 and Fulford-Ganges Road re-

opened to two-way traffic January 8.

Work on Douglas Road did not start until January 9 but the delay was not caused by a shortage of equipment, Weighill said. An excavator belonging to the company was on the island since January 3.

There was no need to hire additional on-island equipment, he said. "It makes more sense to use our own equipment than to use hired equipment."

Crews focussed first on more heavily travelled roads, clearing the slide on North End Road and repairing Fulford-Ganges Road while waiting for the Douglas Road area to drain. Weighill said the ground needed to dry out before repairs could be attempted.

Speaking from the repair site last Thursday where workers were installing a new culvert, he said the job would take a few more days to complete.

"We worked around the clock with every piece of equipment we could. Crews were doing a bang-up job," he concluded, summarizing the road crews' work during the storm.



A look back

These scenes of Government Street (above) and Douglas Street in Victoria took place in that city's last major snowfall — February, 1916. The photographs were submitted by Madeleine Hardisty of Salt Spring, and taken by her father-in-law, Doug Hardisty.



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Hard shovelling and determination save one greenhouse

By SUSAN LUNDY
Driftwood Staff

Four hours of intensive work in the freezing rain saved one commercial greenhouse on the island, but most Salt Spring nursery operators were not so lucky.

Jamie and Jane Squier, whose Mansell Road business The Garden produces Salt Spring Living Lettuce, spent several hours shovelling snow from the roofs of their 5,000-square-foot set of greenhouses and other out buildings to prevent a snow load collapse during the blizzard last month.

Jamie told the Driftwood that heat from the greenhouses melted some of the snow following the first dump. After the second heavy snowfall, he and Jane spent several hours pulling down about half of the accumulated snow.

"That night we woke up around three or four (a.m.) to a huge crash and thought 'oh no.' But it must have been a tree in the

woods."

When the couple saw that it was now raining, they became really concerned about the additional weight the rain-laden snow would press on the greenhouses.

"We got up — I was aching all over — but Jane said 'we just have to do it.' So we worked for three or four hours in the dark and light rain."

The Squiers said their business has already gone through "difficult times" since they moved it to the west coast from Calgary and adjusted to growing conditions here.

"If the greenhouses had fallen it would have been the straw that broke the camel's back for our business," Jamie said.

"It feels like when you go to war and survive, or find your house still standing after an earthquake when everyone else's is down — you feel bad," he noted. "We lucked out."

Because it is difficult to insure

the contents of greenhouses, most island nurseries which suffered damage are still waiting to see if a government compensation program will help out with their losses.

In Ganges, Foxglove Farm and Garden Supply lost 4,400 square feet of (two) greenhouses and about \$3,000 worth of plants inside.

Foxglove owner Chris Schmah said the collapsed greenhouses were not a total loss and they were able to use some existing materials to rebuild new greenhouses.

On the night of the snowfall, Schmah left the business at about 5 p.m., having cleaned off the accumulated snow, and left massive heating burners running.

Schmah said he had not anticipated another 23 inches of snow falling during the night of December 28 — "it came so fast." He had to clear out his driveway before he could get to town and attempt to save the greenhouses.

"But when we see what other growers lost (in the Victoria area), we are feeling fortunate."

Fraser's Thimble Farms Nursery and Greenhouses at the north end of the island, plus the The Plant Farm located on Vesuvius Bay Road also lost greenhouses.

Richard Fraser estimates Thimble Farms suffered \$10,000 worth of damage due to the collapse of an approximately 2,100-square-foot greenhouse.

Although the business lost some plants, the Frasers managed to keep the heat on inside the greenhouse after it had fallen.

"If we had lost the contents, we would have lost a lot," Fraser said

— about \$75,000 to \$100,000 worth.

At The Plant Farm, Jeff and Morgan Savin were working on removing snow from their 4,000-square-foot greenhouse when it started to collapse.

"Morgan came sliding off the roof," Jeff said.

Like other nursery owners, the Savins are waiting to see if any compensation will be coming their way.

And as Walter Davis at Rainbow Nursery noted, even nurseries without greenhouses were affected by the storm. Many of his plants suffered broken branches, making them useless for sale for the next year or two.



TOO LATE: Foxglove Farm and Garden Supply owner Chris Schmah got an early start to snow removal following the December 28-29 snowfall, but he was too late to save the business' greenhouses. Photo by Derrick Lundy

Aston estimates 7.5 tons on garage

Snow drifted down like fluffy feathers onto the islands December 29 but enough of those feathery flakes added up to a lot of weight, especially when drenched with rain.

Ganges weather observer and retired industrial engineer Robert Aston calculated how much the accumulated snow and water weighed.

As an example, he used his 20 X 20-foot garage roof. He noted the roof carried an average burden of three feet of snow. The snow was followed by 3.55 inches of rain falling in 36 hours, which the fluffy snow soaked up like a sponge.

The sodden mix of snow and rain was then equal to 7.15 inches of rain. Given the weight of water at 36 pounds per square foot, Aston calculated

his 20 X 20-foot roof carried a total weight of 7.5 tons.

Given the weight, he is surprised so few island structures collapsed. Such heavy snow loads are not anticipated by most west coast builders. "It amazes me a lot of places didn't collapse."

The rain soaked up by the snow added dramatically to the problem, Aston noted. Instead of the rain washing away the snow, the snow trapped the rain. "When rain falls into snow it really complicates the issue."

He also explained why it was hazardous for people to climb on snow-heavy roofs. The gradual accumulation of snow and then rain was what is referred to in engineering as a "dead load," he explained. That means the weight increased gradually and

did not shift.

However, the movement of a person on the roof is a "live load" in which full weight falls abruptly and shifts around. It takes much more strength in a structure to withstand a "live load" than a "dead load" — rather like the difference between a slow push and a sudden punch — so the addition of 190 pounds of human could be enough to cause a structure to collapse.

The safest way to remove snow from a roof, Aston suggested, was to pull as much as possible off from the ground and, if climbing on the roof, to only climb on sections which were cleared from the ground. "Otherwise, your live load effect could cause it to collapse."

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Floating snow phenomenon seen during big storm

Anyone who looked at Ganges Harbour during the hours following the December 29 storm saw a rare phenomenon: an inlet filled with snow which was floating on still liquid water.

Ganges weather observer Robert Aston recognized the phenomenon from an experience in 1951 on the shores of the Richelieu River in Quebec. He remembers watching one day as the falling flakes formed a slushy layer on the water, which stilled the waves into gentle rolls.

Within 10 minutes, the water surface was "set" like gelatin and snow falling on the surface floated on top of the slush. Ten minutes later, he watched a man step off the river bank and into the slush, and sink about four inches as he walked across the river.

Within the hour, Aston himself was able to walk across the frozen river.

In Ganges Harbour, the situation was slightly different because the water did not freeze. But Aston said the initial effect was the same: snow mixing with the top layer of water to form a slush which stilled the waves and floated at the surface, carrying the weight of more snow.

By mid-day December 30, Aston said the floating snow was gone. But seeing it was one more unusual experience arising out of the big storm of 1996.

"That, out here, is a phenomenon I've never seen before."



SILENCED: The unusual sight of snow floating on the still waters of Ganges Harbour was captured in this early morning photo and submitted to the Driftwood by Noel and Fran Burbidge.

Local insurance pay-outs not so bad in comparison

What Island Savings Insurance Services headquarters in Duncan described as a huge insurance claim pay-out is not as serious on Salt Spring.

Tom Hosie, owner of Salt Spring Insurance, said his business will likely pay out about \$200,000 in island claims directly related to the 1996 snow storm.

"One decent house fire can be about \$300,000," he noted. "So it's not that bad."

Insurance adjusters in Victoria, he added, believe pay-outs in that city could reach \$2 million.

At the Salt Spring branch of Island Savings Insurance, Mike Garside said, "It's not as bad as I thought it could be."

Most of the Island Savings Insurance claims involve broken gutters, some water damage and collapsed outbuildings.

Hosie said Salt Spring Insurance will be paying varying amounts of money to approximately 45 water damage claims, 30 snow load collapses and about a dozen torn-off gutters.

Water claims are mostly related to damage found in basements while the majority of collapse claims involve porches and outbuildings.

Claims related to vehicle damage have been relatively small, Hosie added: after the first day or two of snow, most people kept

their vehicles at home.

"In Victoria there's boats and houses and on and on and on ... and a lot of it is not covered," he said.

Coverage is a big issue for homeowners right now as individual policies and insurance company plans differ dramatically.

As Hosie explained, some collapsed greenhouses are covered by house insurance while others are not, depending on the policy.

One potential hazard that cannot be insured, he said, is damage incurred by a house sliding over a cliff or into the water.

At Islands Savings Insurance headquarters in Duncan, Shirley Neudorf said most standard "all risk" comprehensive homeowner policies cover house damage due to snow load but many companies will not cover snow load collapses for barns.

Individual policies depend on the insurance company offerings, what customers want covered and the premium they are willing to pay.

Neudorf noted that Island Savings Insurance Services branches located throughout Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands are extremely busy.

"It's probably the biggest insurance claim pay-out in many years."

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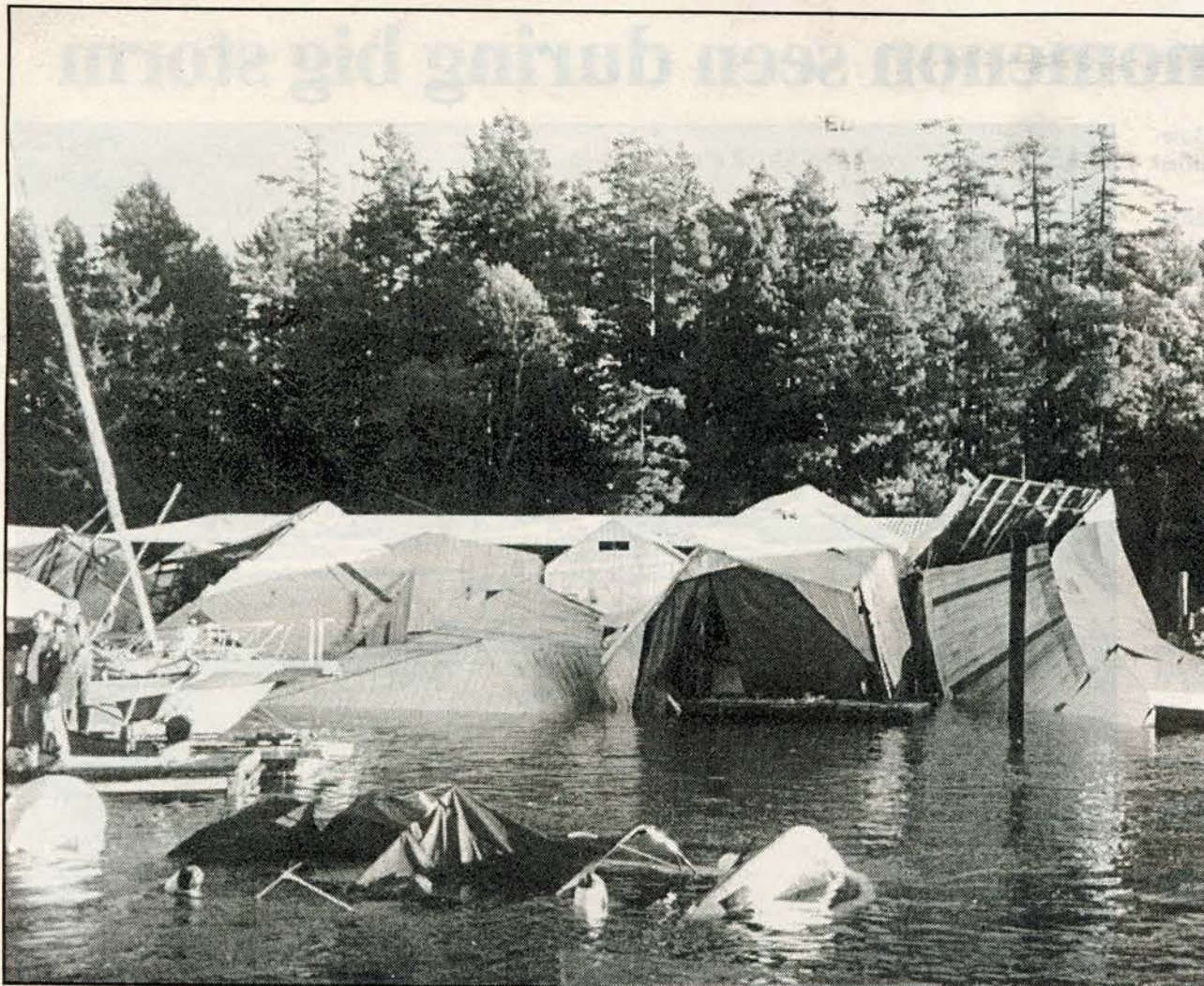
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STORM DAMAGE: Damaged boathouses — some with boats inside — sit at Canoe Cove Marina in North Saanich before salvage operations by Salt Spring-based Island Marine Construction.

Local firm gets Canoe Cove job

Employees of one island company experienced first hand the devastation of December's snow storm on the Saanich Peninsula.

Ross Walker, co-owner of Island Marine Construction, said he received several calls New Year's Eve from businesses on Vancouver Island which needed the service of his barge and crane.

He accepted a job at Canoe Cove Marina and spent close to a week lifting crushed boathouses and sunken vessels from the sea.

"It was a disaster," he said. "There was a lot of devastation."

Boathouses at the marina collapsed under the three feet of snow which accumulated from the weekend-long snowfall in late December. Some of the fallen boathouses rested in a tangled clutter on the vessels, others forced the boats underneath them to sink.

Walker said his crane lifted out boats ranging in size from 12 to 45 feet.

"Most of these boats were high end — if you can afford a boathouse at Canoe Cove there's usually a pretty nice boat underneath."

Walker owns Island Marine Construction with partner Dave Rayment, who was vacationing in Mexico during the blizzard.

"He got off the float plane about the same time as the barge was coming back into the harbour," Walker said.

The pair's business typically uses its barge, a 20-ton crane and a 35-foot tugboat for barging and towing, dock building, and piledriving.

At Canoe Cove, Walker said, they also used a 26-foot aluminum work boat to help them manoeuvre through the tight confines of the debris-laden waters.

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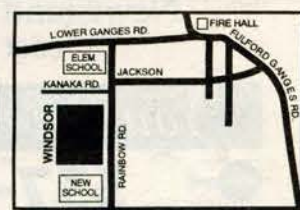
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