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GEDDY GARDEN NEWS

The winter does not go without looking backward.

A Finnish Proverb

Looking back over the past season we realize what bizarre weather we have experienced this year. We enjoyed an unusually hot spell – with record breaking temperatures in the weeks prior to Christmas. During that warm spell, we at the Geddy site enjoyed our seasonal annual events. We wassailed our way to the Poiriers new residence for the junior interpreters' Christmas party, blessing the trees en route with our wassail. We have come to think of Jennifer Poirier as our Saint Julian, the patron saint of hospitality. She and Noel had only been living in the house a few weeks when we descended upon them. It was a wonderful party!

We also were hosted by Beverly and Dwight Rudd in the Peary Hartwell Ordinary for our Geddy Christmas party. It too was a very successful, festive affair. Then just as Christmas Eve approached we were the recipients of an unexpected gift from Mother Nature. Because it was unexpected by a lot of us we were quite unprepared. The weatherman had predicted some freezing weather but I certainly did not expect the extreme outcome that resulted. Most of us were caught off guard when we lost our electric power, our telephones and in some cases our water supply.

The visual scene created by the ice storm however was one of silent beauty. The trees were all silver plated and draped over in graceful positions.

Being controlled by our high tech lifestyle we were suddenly presented with the challenge of survival. It was a most humbling experience. Nature demanded that we slow down our frantic pace. We had no choice but to comply.

In past centuries these stark winter conditions did not cripple the people. Samuel Pepy's wrote in his diary on January 11, 1668, "With my wife for half an hour walking in the moonlight, and it being cold, frosty weather, walking in the garden, and then home to supper, and so by the fireside to have my head combed, as I do now often do, by Deb."

There was a period of time from the 15th century called the Little Ice Age. In England the Thames River froze often during those times. It was frozen solid for a period of nine weeks in 1778. There were at those times Frost Fairs where many typical fair activities, such as shows and sales took place on the thick ice. In the last Frost Fair that was held in 1814 an elephant actually paraded down the frozen Thames River.

Landon Carter in his diary often wrote of the weather. He relied on the position of the moon as his weather forecaster. He felt when the moon was leaning on its back frost and rain were in the offing. He mentioned that the river had frozen over twice in

1766 and in January of 1767. There were two days of frozen sleet and he wrote that it was, "A bad season this for old people and creatures which must feel it in their bones and joynts. It is also very bad for any Kind (of work) for none can be done." After a siege of bad weather in February of 1770 he wrote, "Hardly a day without falling weather, severe frosts, pinching colds, and violent winds."

Those of us who were lucky enough to have a fireplace in our homes made good use of them. During those cold days we truly appreciated whatever warmth they provided even though Ben Franklin wrote it "will heat your face while your behind freezes." I simply turned around every so often.

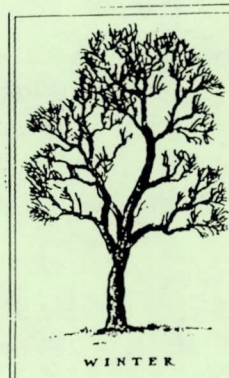
Landon Carter also wrote, "Another consequence of the gust is the destruction of the timber which no future age of the world can repair. For the standing trees are in a state of death mostly being shaken by the winds the roots so broke and the violent wet weather since disposing of them to hasty rots."

We can certainly relate to the suffering Mr. Carter felt from the loss of fallen trees. The greatest destruction of the ice storm was done to the trees. Perhaps it would have been wise for us to have made a detour on our wassail route to include the trees in the woods at Bassett Hall this year, for on Christmas Eve the Great Oak at Bassett Hall was lost. We were aware that it was living on borrowed time for some time now but we were assisting it in staying alive as best we could.

For anyone, such as myself who has worked at Bassett hall in the past it is lamentable. That tree was always an integral part of the Rockefeller story and stood as a living symbol of the past. It had stood there for over three hundred years with its branches spread over a one hundred-foot span. It was very much a part of the visitor's experience to Williamsburg. Part of the joy of interpreting Bassett Hall was the opportunity to roam the beautiful grounds and sit in the shade of the Great Oak and allow yourself to be transported back through the centuries.

Now as the work continues to clear away the ice storms victims, the broken and dead tree branches, we realize that nature has her own way of cleaning house. Perhaps she was a bit over zealous and got carried away with her pruning chore this year!

Janet Guthrie



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