



# Phelps Community Historical Society

February 2022 Volume 30 Issue 259



**WINTER** (Part II) by Don Tiffany December 2002

The arrival of the automobile drastically changed the way the human population tackled winter. By the time of Henry Ford's Model T some adventurous motorists tried the winter roads at their own risk. Tires had only acquired a tread about 1915 and this tread was rudimentary and ineffectual, so to improve winter travel chains were installed on the rear wheels. The high road clearance of the "T" and the chains took some of the uncertainty out of arriving where you wanted to go—and—getting back.

The first municipal snowplow was used in Wisconsin in 1862. The first practical snowplow was built in 1920 by a tire dealer named Frink for a man who had a bus route from Clayton to Alexandria Bay. It was mounted on the front of a Duplex truck and proved so successful that in a very few years the Frink Snowplow was being shipped all over the American continent. The Town of Phelps acquired a fleet of 4 Walter Sno-Fiter trucks in the mid 30s equipped with Frink Vee plows and wings. These trucks were the sole means of keeping Phelps roads open for about 15 years. These big rigs were capable of ramming through 12' to 15' snowdrifts. They were also capable of getting themselves buried. When this happened the driver would have to walk to the nearest farmhouse and call the highway garage and tell the Superintendent that he was stuck. The only machine capable of pulling him out was another Walter Sno-Fiter. So the Superintendent would then have to drive to another location, find the second plow and send him to pull out the machine that was stuck. There were occasions when 2 of these trucks would be needed to pull out the first one. Of course all this time only one of the 4 trucks was plowing roads. With heavy winter snows - the winter of 1944-1945 comes to mind - it is not surprising that farmers were snowed in for 2 weeks at a time and some roads never got plowed at all!

As farmers increased the size of their dairy herds and shipped milk by trucks to pasteurization plants the pressures to keep the roads open increased. Miles of snow fence were put up in October and November along critical parts of the roads susceptible to heavy drifting. During WWII some sand was used on icy spots. People in Orleans watched the road going east up the steep hill from the creek. If the cars started slipping and were unable to get up the hill someone would call Joe Mattoon and tell him to send out a truck loaded with sand. He would dispatch one of the Walter trucks with 2 men in the back and the truck would slowly back up the hill with the 2 men shoveling sand on the highway from the truck box. By 1950 salt was sparingly mixed with the sand to speed melting the snow. The U.S. automakers had never planned their cars

to contend with the rust caused by even the limited use of sodium chloride on the roads. Many motorists of the 50s became adept at putting replacement panels on their cars to cover the huge rust holes in the rocker panels and rear fenders.

Packed snow was still to be encountered on even the paved highways and tire chains were still common 50 years ago. It was a challenge on a sunny day to start in the morning with chains and then remove them after the sun had melted the snow off the pavement. My father did this in 1939 and 1940 on the original Phelps Central School fleet of 7 school buses.

The first snow tires were very popular. No longer did you have to worry about the chain problem. The tread was covered with rubber knobs each about 1" high and 1" in diameter. They were excellent in snow but only lasted about one winter season. These were a long way from sleigh bells as you could hear a "knobbie" equipped car a half-mile away on dry pavement.



*Automobile parked in front of the Howe House*

Heavy robes were still used in winter travel in the touring cars. Auto manufacturers began installing heaters when the enclosed, steel bodies arrived. These heaters were the recirculating type. Defrosters were not part of the package so a rag or scraper was needed to keep the windshield clear enough to see through. A popular substitute for the inefficient early heaters was an accessory called the *SOUTH WIND* heater. It ran on the car's gas supply and would give quick and HOT air but the rear passengers still had to carry a blanket.

Now with radio-equipped snow plows, better designed roads, the *liberal* use of salt to clear the pavement, more efficient heaters and all-weather tires, the modern motorist expects to be able to travel anywhere at anytime of the year.