

FROM THE SCRAPBOOK

The Saxby Gale of 1869

by Rev. Dr. William Randall

Reprinted from The Harvey Lionews August, 1998

This summer you need not be stranded for a subject of conversation. The weather alone can occupy many hours. If you are an expert in discussing El Niño or La Niña you can entertain, or bore away, uninvited guests. Ask your guests how fast a moderate breeze travels across the lake. It's 13 to 18 miles an hour. A strong breeze is 25 to 31 miles an hour. A strong gale is 47 to 54 miles per hour and a hurricane is 73 miles per hour or more. One of the most significant weather phenomenon to ever strike Southern New Brunswick was the Saxby Gale of October 4th and 5th, 1869; a storm so intense that it is still spoken of more than 100 years later, which significantly affected the environment of our ancestors, not only in its own force, but because of the debris it left behind to fuel the Miramichi Fire. The storm was named for Lieutenant Saxby of the Royal Navy whom a year earlier had predicted that a major storm would strike somewhere on the Earth on Oct 4, 1869. He made his prediction based on the moon making its closest approach during its monthly passage on that day in combination with a new moon. His prediction was dead on with a significant part of the damage in coastal areas being caused by tide enhanced storm surges.

THE SAXBY GALE OF '69

The day before the storm had been like many others in that region, an early morning fog, which later gave way to warm and clear weather with light breezes from the southwest. As the day advanced, however, the breeze grew steadily stronger, and the heat became oppressive, a recognized sign of high wind. To the south the sky was a dull, leaden grey, becoming darker and more threatening momentarily. By five o'clock a veritable hurricane was blowing. At Saint John rain began falling at six, and by nine o'clock the raging, terrifying Saxby Gale was at its height.

The night was one of horror on land as well as at sea. The extreme darkness, the constant roar and tumult of wind, the lashing rain, the groaning of great trees, the hail of debris, shingles, slates, branches, objects large and small falling everywhere, roofs carried aloft, whole buildings collapsing, all gave a paralyzing sense of insecurity and calamity.

Where now is restful St. Andrews, the storm that night raged with demon force. There and in the neighborhood - around Calais, Machias and Eastport, Maine, one hundred and twenty-one vessels were driven ashore. From one vessel alone, "The Genii", eleven lives were lost.

At St. George the roof of the Volunteer Armories was blown clear and carried a distance of over one hundred yards. The Anglican church at St. Stephen was badly damaged, its large tower being carried away bodily. Here too, a resident had a somewhat breath-taking experience when he was caught up by the gale at the foot of Church street and set down badly scared and shaken, on the far side of Main!

At Milltown a railway bridge was thrown into the falls below. The Universalist Church was leveled to the ground. Horses and cattle were killed, crushed by the weight of timbers from falling barns.

The group of islands at the mouth of the Bay of Fundy, lying unprotected in the direct path of the storm, suffered from both fierce winds and overwhelming waves. On the Island of Campobello over eighty buildings were swept from their foundations and piled in ruins. Grand Manan and Deer Island fared likewise.

Furious winds took heavy toll from timberlands, particularly in York County. Areas of full-grown trees were uprooted and flung aside. Even today, after a lapse of nearly seventy-years, the York woodlands carry scars from that havoc.

In the harbor of Saint John the sight was spectacular. All along the waterfront the waves were dashing in at tremendous height, leaping over every wharf and tearing countless vessels from their moorings. On Shore, buildings were flooded to their upper floors, many were completely demolished, while warehouses were destroyed and bridges carried away. Shipyards and fishing weirs suffered particularly. In the morning coves and beaches all around the harbor were piled high with wreckage.

At Moncton, too, the effects of the storm were long felt. Houses all along the lower streets were flooded when the water swept up Main Street to the point where the City Hall now stands. In Bore Park today stands a shaft set up to show the extraordinary high water mark reached by the Saxby Tide, more than two meters higher than the previous record.

In the shipyards at Lewisville a schooner was caught up in the might of wind and waves and left stranded high and dry in the midst of an orchard. At Hopewell Hill and at Shediac good-sized vessels were also thrown far up on land.

The damage from wind and water, in Albert County alone, was estimated to reach the quarter-million mark. Orchard lands were swept by the gale as by rue. Hay meadows were flooded with great losses in crops. Miles of dyke, some of which had served for generations, were broken away. Roads were buried beneath debris, and in many cases damaged beyond repair.