



The Great Ice Storm of 1998 by Ernie Bies, January 4, 2018

It is hard to believe that it is twenty years since we survived the great ice storm of 1998.

I was working for Public Works Canada over in Hull, Quebec, in Les Terrasses de la Chaudiere. Quebec Hydro suffered some disastrous collapses of transmission lines



and towers and much of the province, including our building, was without power. The Government Emergency Notification Service kicked into action and employees were told to stay home

until further notice for health and safety reasons. The building was not back in service for two weeks giving me a long unplanned vacation.



We lived in a fairly new subdivision in Barrhaven, where we had the benefit of underground services and were relatively unscathed, although my Rogers cable did go out for about 15 minutes. I did take a few pictures, but they portrayed more of a winter wonderland flavor than that of disaster. The authorities had asked people to avoid the

hardest hit areas in order to minimize interference with the repair crews.

I worked at home for a couple of days, but when I saw the minute by minute horror stories on TV, I decided to go out and see what I could do. Grabbing my trusty electric chainsaw and my hard hat, I toured the neighborhood. When I saw fallen trees and branches, I went to the door and announced "I'm from Public Works and I'm here to help". Some were suspicious as I'm sure they had heard

that line before, but I managed to clean up 15 yards in a few days. The trees were not that big, so it was mostly downed branches and an easy clean-up. One lady had just moved in the week before from Vail Colorado. She was astounded that this service was being provided for free in her new country.



My elderly in-laws lived in Nepean on the eleventh floor of Horizon House, the first condo built in Ottawa. It was a senior's condo, so I dubbed it "Horizontal House." Being of sturdy Saskatchewan stock, they refused to vacate and to come and stay with us when they lost power in their building. There was limited emergency backup power, but not enough to pump water up to the eleventh floor. I filled a couple of five-gallon jugs of water and went to deliver it, finding my 82-year-old father-in-law trying to carry water up the stairs. We started to carry the two five-gallon jugs, stopping to rest at every landing, when this young fellow came bounding past us. He grabbed both jugs and "ran" them up to the eleventh floor. As I write this now, I realize that my "elderly" in-laws were only a few years older than we are now.

I was a member on Nepean Kiwanis then, and a fellow member lived on an acreage in North Gower which was covered with mature trees. She had serious damage with fallen branches and trees. Before she knew it, about 10 club-mates arrived with chain-saws and in a couple of days cleaned up all the fallen trees leaving her with enough bonfire wood to last for years. She in turn treated us to some hardy homecooked country meals prepared on her wood-stove.

Another club member had a son who lived out in the country near Richmond. He was without power for weeks, relying on wood to heat his house. He ran out in no time and replacement wood was at a premium with prices more than doubling.

Several members of the club had wood supplies for their fireplaces that he gratefully accepted, offering to install remote car starters in exchange. There is nothing like a crisis to bring out the best in people.

My wife collects oil lamps and we thought we were ready for a power outage only



to discover that none of them worked, lacking wicks or oil. We now have a few that are in working order both here and at the cottage and have used them many times since.

Her hospital remained in service as they had a back-up generator. It was business as usual and they opened their doors to people in need of shelter. Driving through the city

every day, she witnessed the destruction and the armies of workers cleaning up the storm debris, including a convoy of about 50 trucks from a U.S. forestry service, Asplundh, on their way to help in Quebec.

Since I was working on Nunavut projects, I decided to go up to our office in Iqaluit for the second week of my forced vacation.



How ironic is that? - going from Ottawa to Iqaluit seeking better weather in January.