The Post-Thanksgiving’s Day Storm of 1985

This massive, far-reaching storm grew out of an unsettled pattern that developed early in November 1985. A series of troughs dug into the western United States, while cold air began massing in Canada after mid-month. On Friday the 29th, a strong low dove from the Gulf of Alaska into northern California. The system meandered southeastward, eventually redeveloping in south Texas on the following evening.

An inverted trough poked north-northeastward from the low into the Mid-Mississippi Valley, developing a wide area of precipitation between the cold air west of the trough and the mild, moist air to the east. Meanwhile, a disturbance containing arctic air dropped from western Canada into the northwestern United States. By the morning of December 1, a deepening low-pressure area was situated near St. Louis. As the low gradually pulled northeastward, it grew into a massive winter storm over the southern Great Lakes that evening.

Like the ’66 blizzard, this storm occurred during the return trip home for many travelers on Thanksgiving weekend. Snow broke out on Saturday night to the southwest and spread northeastward. “When I woke up,” remembers Greg Albrecht who grew up in Menominee, “there was probably four inches of new snow on the ground. I remember the wind really howling out of the east and northeast.”

The combination of wind and snow quickly made roads nearly impassable over a vast area of Minnesota, Wisconsin, northern Lower Michigan and the U.P. Home or college-bound travelers, many from large cities of the southern Great Lakes, drove into a nightmare of snow-covered roads and near-zero visibility.

One of those travelers was Beth Hoy of Greenville, northeast of Grand Rapids. “It was my first year attending Michigan Tech,” remembers Hoy. “My parents loaded me into this car to carpool back up with three other Tech students. It was an old, beat-up car, like Tech students often have. There wasn’t a working heater in it and the defroster didn’t work.” Beth recalls her parents being a little nervous sending her back up to the U.P.

“The weather was horrible. We made it across the Mackinac Bridge just before they closed it.” Hoy and her fellow travelers drove straight into the storm as evening set in. “The snow and ice scraper broke so we were using credit cards and licenses to scrape off the inside of the windows so we could see.” Scraping did not help that much, though. “The visibility outside was ridiculous,” recalls Hoy with a chuckle. “It was probably illegal to be driving that way.”

They moved on—slowly, finally reaching Marquette. A trip that would take about seven hours under normal conditions took 17 ½ hours. They had to stop in Marquette—authorities closed portions of U.S.-41 between Marquette and Houghton. The section of highway between L’Anse and Baraga was the worst. High winds drove water off Keweenaw Bay onto the roadway, where it froze. In addition, rocks and other debris were swept off the bay onto the highway.
A number of students bound for Tech were stranded in Marquette. Some were housed on gymnasium floors, but Hoy and her companions were lucky: “We knew somebody who was going to Northern; we stayed in that person’s apartment.”

A number of students did not make it that far. Many became stranded at Munising after severe blowing and drifting shut down M-28, the road winding along Lake Superior to Marquette. Area motels became jammed with students and other travelers who took refuge from the howling blizzard.

The next morning, snow was still falling, but the worst of the storm was over. Hoy and her companions got into their beat-up car and made their way northwest. She remembers driving through the section of highway adjacent to Keweenaw Bay: “There were almost like these frozen waves in time hanging next to the road. And there was obviously a lot of ice that had been broken and pushed off to the side to clear the highway.” Hoy and her companions finally made it to Tech late that Monday afternoon after spending more than 21 hours on the road.

Steve Asplund, longtime news anchor at TV6 in Marquette, was spending the weekend with relatives in suburban Milwaukee. He got up that Sunday morning, saw that it was raining, and started watching the football pre-game show. He and his wife, Ann, who was eight-months pregnant, along with a friend, were planning on leaving for home in the late afternoon.

During the pre-game, the network went live to Lambeau Field in Green Bay. The Packers were playing the Tampa Bay Buccaneers with a noon starting time. Asplund watched as the street sweepers cleared the field of several inches of snow. Soon the game started, and they watched about 10 minutes of it.

“It was just like a white sheet in front of the TV, it was snowing so hard,” remembers Asplund. A call to the TV station in Negaunee gave him an idea of the breadth of the storm; it had already started snowing heavily there and a large accumulation was expected. Immediately, they decided to pack up and leave.

“We got into our vehicle, a Chevy panel van, and headed north,” says Asplund. I-43 was in decent shape until about Sheboygan; then the road became snow covered. Soon the freeway was down to a single lane. They were listening to the radio and heard that the tower bridge, the main freeway bypassing the city of Green Bay, was closed due to the blinding snow and wind. “We ducked through town in Green Bay on 141,” recalls Asplund. It took nearly four hours to get to Green Bay; a trip that would normally take about an hour and 45 minutes.

They stopped in town for gas. “We talked to some people there who asked, ‘Where are you going,’” he remembers, “We said we were going to the U.P. and they said, ‘You’re crazy to continue on.’” They decided to press on, anyway. He recalls that many streets
in Green Bay were blocked and the city was virtually shut down. The Packer game had ended and the fans made their way home or took refuge from the storm in area motels.

The game was a rout. The Packers solidified their reputation as a bad-weather team by pounding the hapless Buccaneers 44-0. To add insult to injury, Tampa was stranded for the night in snowbound Green Bay.

Asplund headed north out of town and found the highway to be in decent shape. “The roads were kind of wind-swept,” he says. North of Menominee the snow started picking up and the wind was ferocious. Conditions steadily deteriorated as they drove north until there were just “two ruts in the middle of 41.” By the time they reached Trenary in Alger County, Asplund remembers creeping along at 25 miles per hour, “just plowing through snow.”

Finally, they reached Marquette. A five-and-a-half-hour-under-normal-conditions trip took 11 hours. They dropped their friend off in town. Their friend urged them to stay, but they had a mere 10 miles left to Negaunee. “Little did we know,” recounts Aplund, “that this would be the worst part of the trip.” They headed west and drove into a whiteout. “You couldn’t see anything,” he says. “Ann was looking out the right side window; I was looking out the left side just so we wouldn’t go off the road.” Asplund drove blind at 20 miles per hour.

Their tandem side-viewing technique worked—they kept the van on the road and eventually made it to Negaunee. The main street they lived on was plowed clean; however, the driveway in front of their house was clogged with four feet of snow. Asplund backed up, got up a head of steam and drove his van straight into the snowbank. “I then crawled out the window,” he recalls, “because I couldn't open the door.” He waded through the snow, grabbed a shovel and made a pathway back to the van so his wife could get to the house.

The next morning Asplund called the TV station and found that the crew that did the Sunday night news was still there. No one could get out of the parking lot. This same crew did the Monday morning news. It was the last time a storm would keep employees at WLUC-TV overnight.

Asplund recalls that his evening news co-anchor left the Milwaukee area on Sunday later than he did. “She got as far as Grafton [about 20 miles north of Milwaukee]. She ended up spending a day and a half at an armory there because they shut down I-43.”

Across the Upper Peninsula, snowfall totals were impressive. Over 30 inches came down in the hills west of Marquette. Ironwood reported 19.5 inches with five-foot drifts. Even away from Lake Superior’s influence, deep snow fell—Menominee collected 15 inches. To the northwest, Norway checked in with around 20 inches and to the east Bark River, tallied 14.5 inches with a wind gust to 42 miles an hour.
That wind wreaked havoc along the shore of Lake Superior. Photographer Tom Buchkoe lives along the lake just north of Marquette. “Usually when storms are blowing like that one was, you look at them through a window,” he says. “That one I wanted to go out and look at because that was the first and only time that I had waves hitting the crest of the beach. They were big waves.”

On another beach, waves undermined the foundation of a beachfront home. At Shot Point and Bayou Roads east of Marquette, trees were uprooted, boulders were washed up on shore and basements were flooded. The Coast Guard station in Marquette had waves wash away a fuel shed. Doors on a boathouse were pushed in and the building was strewn with rocks and ice. Other shoreline homes received severe property damage. “It was unbelievable,” the county sheriff later recalled. “The waves cracked four-inch slabs of concrete…it looked like an explosion.”

The post-Thanksgiving Storm of ’85 brought out the best in area residents. John Turausky, longtime Parks and Recreation Director for the city of Marquette, was a relative newcomer to the area. He moved up with his family from Chicago a few years before and was impressed at how people pulled together and helped each other out. “I saw people out plowing out other people’s driveways,” he recalls.

He himself had a “Chicago snowblower,” a small “carpet sweeper” with an 18-inch cut. It was no match for the mountain of snow, so he began shoveling his driveway. One of his neighbors saw him shoveling and asked if he wanted to borrow a snowblower. “The guy came from a block and a half away to bring me his machine,” remembers Turausky. “It was one of those animals, a 42-inch cut or whatever. He asked, ‘Can I help you?’ That’s how people do things around here.”

Students all over Upper Michigan had their Thanksgiving vacation extended a day as all schools, as well as colleges and universities were shut down on Monday, December 2. “We spent the whole day playing outside,” says Steve Brown who grew up in Norway and was 12 years old at the time. “It was still snowing on Monday. That was the largest snow accumulation that I remember from a single storm.”