

An Epic Winter

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Next season, let's hope that we are able to enjoy the interior of the clubhouse. When that time comes, whether you are a new or longtime member, look for a small photograph in the main room to the right of the kitchen counter. Note the large expanse of ice, snowbanks far taller than the man at the left in the photo, and the original bowling alley turned clubhouse in the background. The clearing of the ice to the very edges after a blizzard seems miraculous! Read on.



The photo was framed decades ago, its date and photographer left unrecorded. (In the club's 50th anniversary history, it is captioned, "EARLY PICTURE OF RINK.") With so much time passed, those details seemed unknowable, but a key to the photo is contained in an ice log for the club's second season – the winter of 1898–99 – that came to light at the time of the club's centennial. Here is the story of how that log came to be, and what it tells about this extraordinary photograph.

The club's first season, 1897–98, had been disappointing both on account of weather and the steepness of the learning curve that goes into putting down a one-acre

backyard rink. As the second season approached, the club's founders likely felt some urgency to improve upon the ice of the previous winter. This concern would have been heightened because, the City's water board was about to prevail after a decade-long battle to ban skating on Fresh Pond, long a favorite destination for Cambridge skaters. Further, a hurricane-snowstorm on November 26–27 had blanketed Boston with nearly 18 inches of snow (still a record), and continuing cold was favoring an early start to the skating season. By the first week of December, skaters were enjoying the ice on a shallow pond north of Fresh Pond,¹ but no skating at the Cambridge Skating Club. Would the club's ice-makers disappoint again?

Fortune shined on the Cambridge Skating Club in a member named George H. Browne, who joined the ice committee on December 11. Co-founder of Browne & Nichols School, Mr. Browne was well known as an avid skater (and prominent opponent of the ban on skating at Fresh

¹ The shallow pond, known as Artificial Pond or Glacialis dated to the days when ice-harvesting was a major enterprise. Dug in the 1840s, Glacialis was seven acres, but its shallow depth did not produce the quality of ice required for sale, so the pond was left to naturalize, and it became the place to skate early in the season. In 1928, developers, Moulton and Fawcett, filled in Glacialis, created an industrial subdivision, and lent their names to its streets.

Pond), who had published a figure skating manual in 1892. If anyone could bring an analytical approach to ice making, it was George Browne.

Mr. Browne immediately set to work. His ice log, kept in a Browne & Nichols School bluebook, is the best record of any season in the club's history. A model for presentation of data, the log has columns for temperature (a.m., p.m., daytime high), weather conditions, ice conditions, days lost on account of weather, days lost on account of mismanagement or lack of tools, and skating days (complete with a note on the quality of the ice) plus side tabulations on the time of skating (morning, afternoon, evening) on ice days.

The log begins on December 12, with the first day of skating on the 14th (rated as "good"). Then came three more ice days (two "excellent"), followed by a series of ups and downs – a week-long warm spell before Christmas, good post-Christmas skating, a New Year's meltdown, a brief frigid period, another meltdown, a series of five excellent ice days, another meltdown. On January 17, the midday temperature reached 70°F. Then came a precipitous drop to the teens that brought a return to skating on the evening of January 18. (The depth of the rink was shallower in those pre-tennis court days, and froze faster.) Thus, began a four-week stretch, January 19 through February 16, with 25 skating days, rated good or better, including one described by Mr. Browne as "superlative" and another "finest yet."

The cold snap that began at the end of January 1899 set the stage for the photograph. Mr. Browne's log shows that the cold came with snow on January 31, and more on February 3–8. Six days of extreme cold followed, temperatures dropping to the single digits and even below 0°. Snow arrived again on February 12, with an evening pause, and then a blizzard on February 13. The storm's winds were such that the club had to close at 2:30 p.m. The next day, the snow had drifted to nearly six feet in places, but it had fallen on hard ice. Eight men went to work; by the afternoon, the club was skating again on almost half the surface, and by the next day the full one-acre rink was clear. An item in the *Cambridge Tribune* of February 18, 1899, describes the Cambridge Skating Club's rink as "a picturesque scene last Tuesday and Wednesday, an acre of smooth ice surrounded by banks of snow almost ten feet high." It was on one of those days – February 15 or 16 – that the photo would have been taken. Who took the photograph? Likely Mr. Browne, who was a photographer as well as a skater.

Although the amount of snow was great, one fact that favored snow-clearing was not mentioned by Mr. Browne – the snow was "extremely light and not damp." This information is provided in another article in the *Tribune*'s February 18th edition – "Storm in Cambridge: Little Damage Done Street Department Handled the Snow Successfully." Had the snow been wet and heavy, it is doubtful that snow-clearing by even a dozen men could have produced the picturesque conditions of the photo.

As often happens in our part of New England, extreme cold and snow are quickly followed by thawing temperatures, and such was the case following the

blizzard. On February 16, soon after the photo that memorialized the snowbanks, the ice softened in the afternoon, and skaters had eight days off. Then colder temperatures brought three more days of skating on February 25, 26, and 28, plus a last half-day hurrah on March 2. Thus ended an epic winter of skating at the Cambridge Skating Club.

But one more curious thing about the photograph: Neither Mr. Browne nor the Cambridge newspapers mentioned anything unusual about the two weeks of cold weather that descended at the end January and culminated in a blizzard. In fact, it was part of an unprecedented weather system that engulfed the entire country – an event that has its own Wikipedia page.

In weather history, the system was known as the Great Arctic Outbreak of 1899, and the storm at the end as the Great Blizzard of 1899 and sometimes the St. Valentine's Day Blizzard. The Arctic Outbreak was felt from the Pacific to the Atlantic coasts, from the Northern Plains states to the Gulf Coast, even in Cuba. Bays and rivers in Louisiana and Texas froze, and days after the blizzard, ice floes in the Mississippi floated past New Orleans and into the Gulf of Mexico.

Mr. Browne's ice log provides contemporaneous evidence of one of the most extreme winters on record, and his photograph, taken on February 15 or 16, a singular image of its aftermath.