

# UNBROKEN RECORD **Unbroken Record: The Great Snow of 1940**

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## **Reporter on a mule, Great Snow January 1940**

News Leader reporter Merritt K. Ruddock rode a mule nine miles from Bon Air to the newspaper office downtown after the Jan. 23-24, 1940, snowst

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**Unbroken Record: The Great Snow of 1940** By Walter S. Griggs Jr.

In January of 1940, 21.6 inches of snow fell on Richmond. The story of this monster storm began on Jan. 23, 1940, when Richmonders read in the Richmond Times-Dispatch that the Byrd Airport Weather Station predicted about 3 inches of snow.

That afternoon the Richmond News Leader, the evening newspaper, published a different forecast. Richmonders were now told that a heavy snow was expected. Indeed, the snow had already begun to fall around noon. A sudden change in a weather forecast in the 1940s was not unusual since radar, computer guidance, the Internet and Andrew Freiden were not yet available.

- The weather station must have been a little embarrassed when the newspaper headline on Wednesday, Jan. 24, read, "Blizzard Sweeps State." Richmond schools and businesses were closed because the rapidly falling snow had reached 12 inches ... considerably more than the 3 inches that had been predicted. Soon buses, cars, streetcars, taxis and people were stranded all over the city. Planes were no longer flying from Byrd Airport. The only public transportation that seemed to be available were the railroads. To help remove a stuck car, a local company dispatched a wrecker. That wrecker burned out its clutch trying to move the car. The company then dispatched its other two wreckers. Soon, they both had burned out their clutches. Now there were three stuck wreckers and one stuck car.
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Although traffic was at a standstill, Thalheimer's Department store ran an advertisement stating, "Don't let a little snow make a sissy out of you! Come on down and save (money)." Those Richmonders who were "sissies" stayed at home and relaxed by listening to radio programs such as Ma Perkins, Backstage Wife or Kate Smith. Reading the comics was also an option. Characters like Blondie, Flash Gordon, or The Phantom provided entertainment for young and old alike. Although it would have been difficult to get to the Colonial Theater, the movie "Brother Rat," starring Ronald Reagan, was being shown.

By Thursday, Jan. 25, Richmond had over 16 inches of snow. Stores, schools and just about everything else remained closed. The restaurants that were able to open doubled their menu prices. Mayor Bright advised all women who worked for the city that they could stay home, but men had to report to work since the mayor was able to walk to work. Richmond's male population, in addition to walking, used horses, skis, mules, and the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway that ran from Westham to Richmond to get to work. One worn-out worker commented, "This is a clean snow: clean up to your neck."

The snow fell so fast that many Richmonders were stranded. Some people who could not get home slept in hotel lobbies, because all of the rooms were in use. When couples attending a dance at the Tantilla Gardens were unable to go home, the stranded dancers sang, bowled, slept, drank coffee or ate sandwiches. To use the lyrics of a popular song, "The weather outside was frightful."

Only about 40 percent of the mail was delivered in spite of the slogan: "Neither snow nor rain nor gloom of night stays these carriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds." In contrast, paper boys delivered the papers and were commended for it. In the 1940s, milkmen delivered milk to a customer's door. Although the milk trucks were unable to reach most homes, milkmen tried to deliver milk to hospitals and to homes with young children. The same policy was followed by the coal companies in making deliveries. There were numerous pleas to feed the birds, and the local SPCA asked Richmonders to feed any stray dogs or cats they might see, because the animals were probably lost. With little else to do, Richmonders set a record for making phone calls.

The snow removal forces of the City of Richmond were attacking the snow with electric sweepers, tractors with brooms, shovels, trucks with scrapers, steam shovels and snow plows. More than 600 men working around the clock slowly cleared the streets.

By Friday, Jan. 26, the primary roads were being reopened and public transportation was slowly returning to normal, but not soon enough for one young man who had promised to get his date home on time. They were on the trolley headed home when the trolley's wheels froze to the tracks. Fearing the wrath of the girl's mother, the young man wrote down the number of the trolley along with the name of the motorman so that he would be able to prove that the trolley was frozen to the rails when he was confronted by the girl's irate mother. Also delayed was the regular meeting of the Richmond Homing Pigeon Society. Perhaps it was too cold for the pigeons to fly.

During the snowstorm, a story was published in the newspaper that most young men did not propose to their girlfriends in the parlor anymore, but in cars. One can only imagine how many proposals took place in stuck cars during the record-breaking snowstorm of January 1940 — a snowfall record that is still unbroken today!

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Postscript, concerning the photo of News Leader reporter Merritt K. Ruddock, who rode a mule nine miles from Bon Air to the newspaper office downtown after the Jan. 23-24, 1940, snowstorm:

“A long-standing tradition at The News Leader, though, was that reporters and editors struggled to work, no matter what. On the morning of the big snow, one reporter, Merritt K. Ruddock, rode into News Leader folklore. Ruddock borrowed a mule, Belle, and set off before daybreak on a nine-mile ride from his home off Bon Air Road to Forest Hill Avenue and across Lee Bridge – where he was charged a 10-cent toll – to the office on North Fourth Street. Ruddock and Belle made it in about three hours, then were faced with the necessity of riding back home that evening. What was it like for man and beast? Ruddock wrote of their trek: ‘The awful stillness, broken by the crunches of her unshod feet, got on her nerves after a bit. She tried to bray, but the ‘he’ froze in her teeth and the ‘haw’ never got out.’”

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# 1940

January 23rd-24th, 1940 snow began during the evening of January 23rd and was over by mid-morning of January 24th. Most of the snow fell between 2:00 a.m. and 5:00 a.m. when snow came down a rate of 2 inches per hour. The storm tracked up the East Coast to near Cape Hatteras and then swerved out sea. Washington was on the northern fringe of one of the greatest of storms to ever to hit the southern states. Snowfall totals included 21.3 inches in Richmond, 22 inches in Danville Virginia and 8.3 inches in Atlanta all of which set 24 hour records in the cities. Officially, 9.5 inches of snow fell at Washington's weather recording station (at the time located near 24th and M Street); however, over a foot of snow fell in southeastern Washington. In Frederick and Upper Montgomery County only a few inches of snow fell. However, just east of Andrews Air Force Base, 24 inches of snow was measured. Generally 20 to 25 inches of snow fell in the Southern Maryland area as well as Central and Eastern Virginia. (p. 61 Washington Weather Book 2002 by Ambrose, Henry, Weiss)

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