Snow removal equipment changes over time

By WAYNE CARHART

In New England when people lived mostly on farms, snow removal was limited to clearing a path from the house to the barn if the two buildings were not connected by a series of sheds, as they often were. Most of the accounts here were met within the confines of their house and barn. Food, firewood and salvaged snow had been used so little need to travel on snow-covered roads.

When travel was necessary, horse-drawn sleighs and heavier wagons, equipped with runners and drawn by a team of oxen, were used. In areas, were used to get about. To combat heavy snow drifts a snow plow was used to pack down the snow, making it easier to travel by sleigh. Lester Powers, who worked for Brattleboro Public Works department for 50 years, remembers his dad using a snow plow on Stratton Hill in the late 1930s and early 1940s. On occasion hitches up his team of oxen and guides the roller along the road a few miles to the next farm, where the job would be taken over by his neighbor and a fresh team. O’Powers said.

A double snow roller was used on Main Street in Brattleboro, which enabled people to travel to town to conduct business. After the railroad and streetcars came to Brattleboro, snowplows and teams of men were hired to clear the tracks. The thought was given to actually removing the snow from the roads until after the arrival of the automobile. When roads were paved and people became more dependent on the automobile, the thought of not being able to use it in the snow was simply unacceptable to most citizens. Telegraph and then telephone and electric lines that were felled by a snowstorm had to be repaired. As communication and transportation became an essential part of everyday life, keeping the roads open became a major civic priority.

Rather than packing the snow down for a better sleigh ride, it was pushed to the side by a snow plow, pulled by a team of oxen or horses, making it easier for the wheels of the automobile to travel on the snow-covered road. In areas of heavy automobile use, this process caused the snow to turn to ice, making for a slick road service which was often hazardous for the automobile. To deal with this new problem, sand was used to pack down the roadway and tire chains were attached to automobile tires to provide greater traction.

Now snow and all-weather tires serve this purpose. Enterprising motorists started to place bags of sand in the back of their rear-wheel-drive truck or car to put more weight over the drive wheels of the vehicle, creating better traction. If this failed and they got stuck, they had a supply of sand to throw on the slick surface. This technique is still practiced today.

As the automobile took over as a means of transportation and sleighs were reserved for Old-fashioned sleigh rides, the idea of clearing the road surface altogether took hold. To accomplish this, better plows were designed. First, simple V plows were used and then winged plows that had the ability to move the snow to the side of the road. With the aid of the wing, which was originally controlled by a man using a block and tackle (now automated), a shelf was formed in the plow snow, making room for more snow to be removed from the road without narrowing the lanes. When the snow blower made its appearance, it enabled the snow to be blown from the ground right into a truck and hauled away.

What the snow plow and blower could not do was done with a mixture of imported salt and sand from a local sandbank. Salt continues to be spread on the plowed surfaces today because it lowers the freezing point of water which causes the ice to turn to slush and therefore not as slick. Powers recalls that the salt would arrive via boxcar at Brattleboro’s Union Station and his job, in addition to running a plow, was to shovel it into a wheelbarrow, push it up a wooden ramp, and dump it in a truck. Later a motorized spreader was used to accomplish the task.

Keeping a community’s roadways clear for automobile traffic has become part of the winter experience. In fact, the Volkswagen Company once ran an advertisement showing the VW Beetle traveling through unplowed snow higher than the Beetle itself. When it reaches the town’s garage and snow plow, a voice-over said ‘Oh, you never wonder how the guy who drives the snow plow got to the snow plow?’

Wayne Carhart is president of the Brattleboro Historical Society.

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ROLL ALONG Ñ The town’s snow blower goes to work on Barrows Road, Brattleboro and gets its first snow blower in 1953. At right, a double snow roller, made of heavy wooden planks, rolls Main Street. The snow roller turned on an axle and was hitched to a team of horses or oxen with a brace that was also used to clear snow from the roller.

HEAVY MACHINERY Ñ Most towns use a basic dump truck with a power-driven, tail-end sander and spinner (inset) to spread sand on slick roads. The trucks dump body is raised to let the sand slide a power-driven, tail-end sander and spinner (inset) to spread sand on slick roads.

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