

Remembering the deep freeze

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Writer's note: I posted this essay five years ago on my Facebook page to commemorate the 20th anniversary of this weather event. I have updated it to reflect this is the 25th anniversary. When this storm occurred, I was working at WMJS 92.7FM in Prince Frederick.

Lexington Park, MD - February 2019 brings with it a memorable milestone anniversary. Southern Maryland has had its share of major weather events—hurricanes, tornadoes, blizzards, even a derecho. There is one huge weather event that people still talk about and it happened 25 years ago this month. Anyone who lived in this region in 1994 can tell you at least one personal story from the ice storm. Talk about your frozen water torture. The event, which occurred over several seemingly endless days, slowly coated roads, trees, towers, roofs, motor vehicles...anything and everything that was exposed to the outdoors. Pictures of it show it to be beautiful in an abstract way. In reality, it was coyote-ugly. The strongest of tree branches couldn't bear up under the cumulative weight of the ice. Many trees couldn't stay standing. A constant snapping noise could be heard in the distance. Utility poles were also fractured. A grim-voiced official from Southern Maryland Electric Cooperative said that Friday the whole system was in terrible shape. I remember later that evening speaking on the phone with a woman who was in tears. Her electricity had gone out and trees surrounding her house were breaking. She thought the trees might fall on her house. If people weren't scared they may have been peeved. Why weren't crews working to get the electricity back on? Of course, they were working—in a battlefield against that arch-villain, Mr. Freeze. There were a lot of people who were calm and good-natured even though their electricity, too, was off. They had flashlights, battery-operated radios (an amazingly convenient little device that was widely rediscovered in 1994) and some, brandishing chainsaws, went out to help other people in need. They likely felt there was no sense cursing the darkness when there are so many candles to be lit.

That Sunday the precipitation had stopped and the temperature had slowly risen above the freezing mark. It was safe to go outside but the worst place to be was under a 500-foot tower coated with ice, which was now melting and hurtling perilously to Earth in huge, hard chunks. Well, wouldn't you know it, that's where I was. Mother Nature was mimicking Charles Bronson and telling me "this ain't over yet." I was okay but my little Plymouth hatchback needed new glass. At least 1994 had started out as a good year for the auto glass business.

The restoration crews were basically doing MASH unit meatball surgery on a badly wounded utility system. Looking back, they did a commendable job. However, while the restoration was ongoing that was not a unanimous perception.

In the week following the storm many people whose electricity still hadn't been restored pitched a fit, cursed the messengers, contemplated and threatened litigation, and generally got pretty hot under the collar. The heat they generated that week kept us warm the rest of the winter.

And I learned something that I will never, ever forget—people may lose their electricity but they never lose their power.

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