

Memories of Elliston Ridge Gordon Bradley (1958)

Provided by Mr. Wayne Larson

New Year's Eve Snowstorm - 1958

Imagine leaving your home to attend a New Year's party and not getting home until five days later. This happened to Gordon and Marjorie Bradley of Bonavista. They were two of the 27 guests at New Year's party held in the United States Radar Station near Elliston. The party began on December 31, 1958, but it was January 5, 1959, before the guests were able to leave the radar site. Now, almost 40 years later, Gordon Bradley recalls the occasion as clearly as when it happened.

"I don't know if I've ever seen, before or since, a bigger snowstorm. We left by car to go up to the radar station on New Year's Eve about 9:30 PM. There hadn't been any snow down worthwhile. The road was quite clear and there was just the slightest amount of snow falling gently as we went up over Elliston Ridge, through American snake road to the top of the hill. It wasn't cold, just barely freezing and no wind at all."

In those days, Bradley recalls, there were no clubs in Bonavista. So if you wanted to ring in the New Year you had the choice of going to the Masonic Hall New Year's dance, or going to a house party. Then there was the New Year's dance at the Radar Station, which was by invitation only. The Radar Station was part of the Early Warning System and was operated by the 642nd AC&W Squadron of US Air Force. It was only a small station with a complement of one officer, 15 to 16 GI's and six civilian employees. It was then under the command of Captain Bob Hampson.

"By the time we arrived, the party was in full swing. There was music playing, people dancing, people drinking and talking and nobody was paying any attention to the weather outside. About one o'clock in the morning, one of the civilians (Rufus Baker from Elliston) who was on duty, came in and said in a loud voice, "If anyone thinks they're going home tonight, forget it. When asked why, he said to go outside and look" said Bradley.

The outside doors opened inward rather than outward and when they were hauled open, the partygoers were facing a wall of snow. They were other exits to the building but these doors faced windward and by this time were dwarfed by a bank of snow. Because the building was solid and with the music playing, nobody had heard the wind or realized there was a viscous snowstorm going on outside.

"I don't know how hard the wind blew or how much snow fell because there was no weather station to report this locally at the time. But it snowed through the rest of that night, all New Year's Day, and New Year's night, all day and night of January 2 and all day and into the night of January 3. It was a howling blizzard pretty much the whole time and when it broke on the morning of January 4, the wind had dropped, the sun came out, and it was a beautiful day."

With the storm raging, one of the problems facing the base personnel was the possibility of a food shortage. With the party guests, the number of people at the base had doubled. Sleeping accommodations for the extra 27 people also had to be arranged.

"They were running out of food as their food supplies came in once a week by train. They ran out of milk and then they ran out of drinks and this was getting to be a bit of a problem. Some people were getting a bit nervous after being on a three-day binge. There's no more beer so let's get out of here-that sort of attitude" Bradley recalled with a chuckle.

"Quite a few of the civilian guests were couples, my wife and I among them. So they gave us a room and somebody had to move out and double up with another GI and they worked the accommodations out all right. The cooks had a hard time of it - you add 27 people to your menu every day and that makes a big difference."

Nobody got unduly upset during the five days, Bradley said. Some people played pool, others played cards and although a few did keep going from window to window looking to see if the storm would break, everyone managed to keep occupied. The one good thing was that no one had left early to return to Elliston or Bonavista or they would have likely been lost in the storm, he pointed out. Bradley recalls one person who was fortunate in that he managed to reach shelter before the storm became too bad.

"Bill Doody had come home to Bonavista for Christmas and he left Bonavista that night to come to the party. He was in car and he got stuck in Elliston and spent the next three days in Gerald Tilley's in Elliston where he had gone for refuge from the storm. And when the storm was over he came up to the party."

By that time, Bradley said, there were mountains of snow everywhere.

"To give an idea of how much snow was around, the highroad system had a garage here in Bonavista and as soon as they went to work on the morning of the fourth, a D7 Dozer and a big Caterpillar grader left Bonavista that morning and arrived at Elliston Northside, the evening of the fifth. It took them two days and two machines to reach Elliston; that gives an idea of how much snow fell during the storm," said Bradley.