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1918: Bone-Chilling Temperatures Freeze River

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HISTORY

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CLARK COUNTY CHRONICLES

1918: Bone-chilling temperatures freeze river

By Wendy Richter
For the Siftings

With recent frigid temperatures in the area, it is difficult to imagine that the harsh cold weather does not come close to that which visited Arkadelphia 100 years ago.

In fact, the winter of 1918 was among the coldest on record. It was so cold that the Ouachita River froze at Arkadelphia. Photographs from that year illustrate that some area residents seized the extraordinary opportunity to walk across the river, certainly an experience they would never forget. Interestingly, Arkadelphia's Southern Standard newspaper had relatively little to say about the extreme temperatures, even though the severe cold was very rare for the region.

On January 17, 1918, the Southern Standard did, however, recall 1899 as the year of the "big freeze" and characterized current (1918) conditions as being the "coldest weather during past week we have had here for eighteen years." The article's headline read, "Mother Earth Has Blanket of Snow."

"During the past week we have experienced real winter weather here, in fact the coldest weather which we have had in many years. Friday night was the very coldest, as on that night the mercury in the thermometers dropped to 10 degrees below zero, though for several days after Friday the figures hovered around zero. The extreme cold weather followed a 7-inch snow which was covering the ground on Friday morning. On Sunday night, however, it became warmer, and with a continual rain the snow was formed into a slush which made it most disagreeable. However, there is plenty of snow on the ground yet.

"While we have had several cold spells this winter, this last spell is perhaps the coldest since the last big freeze in February, 1899, though it was hardly as cold as it was then, nor did it last as long, for then the Ouachita River was frozen over so hard that wagons were hauled across it, while at this time the river was only partially frozen over, though the river is frozen thick enough for skating with

safety. Practically all business has been suspended during this week."

The cold weather had some unexpected consequences. The newspaper reported it this way: "On account of the unusual drain on the stand pipe because the people would persist in leaving their water running to prevent freezing, and since a broken pipe between the stand pipe and the pumping station made it impossible to pump in a sufficient amount of water, the water company has been cutting off the water in the city all west of Sixth Street between the hours of 6 at night until 8 in the morning. For a while there was only a few feet of water in the stand pipe which left the city to the tender mercies of the elements in case there had been a fire."

For additional information about Clark County history, visit or contact the Clark County Historical Museum (www.clarkcountyhistory.org) or (870) 230-1360 or the Clark County Historical Association's Archives at the Ouachita Baptist University Library (www.obu.edu/archives) or (870) 2450-5332).



COURTESY OF THE CLARK COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

Images of the frozen Ouachita River at Arkadelphia in 1918.

