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Snow

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on lawns that morning.

Leigh Lane and her daughters, Lauren and Lindy, built a snowman in their yard. "About this big," Leigh Lane said while holding her hands about two feet apart. It was the first time the 3-year-old Lindy had seen snow.

Former Mayor Brad Brown was an adult, but he got out into the deep snow having only seen a light dusting before. There was a picture to prove it on the front page of The Brunswick News.

"I was in the middle of Union Street pulling my little sister, Katie, on a sled," he said.

Bobby Haven, who shot the picture, sent it to the Associated Press and newspapers published it around the country. "We had people from all over the country calling my parents," he said.

On the 20th anniversary of the storm, Donnie Thompson gave Brown a picture of him on the sled with his wife, Debbie, towing.

Dr. Tom Willis and his wife Janie skied cross-country from their house in the Butler Mews area to the King & Prince hotel. Then they skied cross-country on the Island Club golf course, now Retreat. He told Taylor Adams, who was working for Sea Island at the time, about their adventure across the snowy fairways.

"He said, 'My goodness. That's terrible.'"

Stephanie Owens was 5 at the time and remembers she and her 6-year-old cousin, Miles, built a snow duck in her front yard.

"We may have started out building a snowman and just gave up. I distinctly remember building a snow duck," she said.

Her dad, Mark Owens, recalled making four or five trips to the mainland. He first ferried her aunt, uncle and cousins to the island and then made more trips for Christmas presents, she said. He had no problem because he grew up in Ohio where snow is not rare and often unwelcome.

But it was rare for the coast, and the storm was labeled historic.

The National Weather Service recorded 4 inches at the Brunswick airport. It was an inch deeper in places on St. Simons Island.

The precipitation started as sleet and freezing rain late the previous night but turned into a solid snowfall in the



The Jekyll Island Club Resort juts out of the snow.

Provided photo

darkness of early morning, coating trees and covering lawns, roofs and roads. The latter is where the problems came.

"Everybody was slipping and sliding all over the place," said Maj. Larry Bruce of the Camden County Sheriff's Office. At the time of the storm, he was an investigator with the Brunswick Police Department, but his job description didn't matter.

Chief T.C. Cowan called everybody in to work the many accidents and to keep the roads cleared.

"A lot of the wrecker companies said, 'I'm going to pay for Christmas this way,'" he said.

Jeff Embry of J&M Towing said he stayed busy for four days although he was working with walking pneumonia.

"I think a lot of people just got out to see if they could drive in it. They found out they couldn't," he said.

Embry said he pulled a lot of people out of ditches free.

"It cost me more than I made that day," he said.

A National Weather Service website said the storm resulted when record cold crossed the nation and settled over the Eastern Seaboard. Miami recorded freezing temperatures and huge chunks of Florida's citrus harvest were wiped out.

Then a low pressure center pushed warm, humid air over the top of the frigid air and the result was a coating of freezing rain in north Florida and heavy snow along the

coast from Georgia north, the National Weather Service said. There were flurries in Tampa and Sarasota while Wilmington, N.C., had an all-time record of 15.3 inches and Myrtle Beach, just south, had 14 inches. Charleston, S.C., had 8 inches of snow and Savannah 3.6 inches. The snow tapered off inland with Waycross getting only about an inch and in counties farther west there were only flurries and light sleet.

Twenty-six people died in Florida from accidents and other causes related to the storm while employees at the Gator Bowl flushed the toilets continuously for 24 hours to keep the pipes from freezing. In spite of that effort, Jacksonville had \$5,000 in plumbing repairs at what is now EverBank Stadium.

The problems on north Florida roads were compounded by Georgia's efficiency. Knowing well in advance that the storm was coming, the Georgia Department of Transportation moved its road clearing equipment from the mountains to the coast. As the snow fell, the DOT kept Interstate 95 clear with motor graders and snow plows. The southbound traffic moved slowly but steadily until just past the state line at the St. Marys River where Florida had shut down I-95 and routed traffic onto U.S. 17 at the first exit. Motorists had no place to go, and the roads were iced over.

At the same time, the St. Simons causeway and the high bridges were snowy

but passable from plowing and applications of sand or rock salt. That was not true of the roads on the island. Early in the morning of Dec. 22, the Sea Palms clubhouse caught fire and burned completely. Some laid the total loss to the icy and snowy roads delaying the Glynn County Fire Department's response.

Bill Brunson, then the owner of what is now H&H Lifestyles, remembers the snow as the last in a series of unfortunate events for the family business.

A couple of months before the storm, H&H had bought the former Gibson's Discount Center that sat in what is now the parking lot at the Target/Lowe's shopping center and was in the process of moving there from downtown in plenty of time for Christmas shoppers.

"We were at the Gloucester Street store at 5 a.m. doing the payroll because we were going to move that day. We got a call saying they had heard on the scanner that the H&H is on fire," Brunson said.

He sped up Altama Ave and saw flames jumping three stories high while the Brunswick and Glynn County fire departments had jurisdictional debate. The city limits went between H&H and the Kroger's next door, he said.

"I got in the middle of that, and they started fighting the fire," Brunson said.

The hydrant closest to the store was dry, but they ultimately put out the fire and contained it to the front of the store crammed with new appliances, electronics and furniture, Brunson said.

Ernie Tuten, who had remodeled the Gibson's, brought in his crew, got the smoke smell out and began rebuilding the front of the building. But Tuten also put in a construction tunnel so customers could get inside safely, Brunson said.

"We reloaded it," Brunson

said of the inventory, and announced a reopening date: Dec. 22.

Before he unlocked that morning to greet customers, snow piled up on the roads keeping shoppers away.


"The only ones there were me" and one salesman, Brunson said. "Yes, I remember

the snowstorm of 1989."

"We made it. It wasn't ideal, but we made it," he said.

The snow melted over the next few days and some houses had long icicles hanging from the roofs.

According to the National Weather Service, there won't be a repeat this year.



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Dwight Sweat, left, and Jonathan Sweat, owners of Sweat's Furniture

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Family

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how he wanted his kids to have the same experience.

"They're only this age one time in their lives," he said.

His wife's family is very big on Christmas. They get together every year for gift-giving, prayer and family time. Of course, the family does try to break away from the cookie-cutter Christmas. They don't have a typical ham or turkey. It's steak, potatoes and other foods fit for a feast.

Griffis said he worries the world is less cheerful and festive than it used to be. His kids likely wouldn't know, given as much effort as the family puts into making sure they have as much fun as possible. It's pretty fun for the adults to play Santa as well, and he's making the best of it.

"You only get 10 times to be Santa Claus, and that's it," Griffis said.

At the Rowell household, it's pretty similar. Kasey Rowell, one of The News' advertising representatives, is originally from Texas, but her husband's family is very local and very much into Christmas.

"Christmas is a big deal to their family, so normally on Christmas Eve we do a dinner and everybody comes over and all the kids pull names and buy for each other," she said.

It seems that she and her



TJ Griffis is dedicated to giving his daughters, pictured, unforgettable Christmas memories.

husband set off a trend in the family 13 years ago with the birth of the first of two daughters. For years after, it seemed like her kids would get a new cousin or two every year. With so much youthful energy, Christmas is always a good time.

"The tradition is we all dress up in Christmas pajamas and we eat and we do the kids presents on Christmas Day and a white elephant for adults, and my in-laws come over and watch our kids open up their Christmas gifts," Rowell said.

At lunch, the whole family sits down for the kind of meal that Griffis tries to avoid — turkey with dressing and all the fixings.

"I enjoy the family time. Seeing the kids interact with each other because they range from seniors in high school to pre-k. They're all interacting, the family is

laughing, doing the white elephant gift — which gets out of hand and loud — but having everyone there is what I like," Rowell said.

Trying to pin down one traditional Christmas tradition won't work for Nate Jackson, a member of The News' operations crew.

"It varies. One year we may do the gag gifts, some call it dirty Santa, and another year we may just get together and watch a movie, or go to the movies. Last year we went to see The Matrix, I think, or the year before," he said. "We just come together. This year we're going to rent a suite on Jekyll and just go to Jekyll Island"

He's got three sisters with their kids, plus his three children — two of whom still live in Brunswick — plus a grandson. His mom is still alive, and it's largely because of her that one of the few constants is going to church.

"Because of my mother, Christmas is definitely about Jesus Christ. It's his birthday," Jackson said.

Mom was very strict about going to church. They were there six days a week for sermons, Sunday school, Bible study, choir practice, you name it.

"It was a lot," he laughed. "But looking back at my age right now, it was one of the best things that my mother did for all of us."

"We still not only enjoy the company, but we bring the main focus on the reason for Christmas, the birth of Christ."