

NATIONAL

NEWS FROM AROUND THE COUNTRY

Listen closely: That's the sound of silence the day 'hell froze over'

■ **SHUTDOWN:** Snowstorm quiets New York City itself, but not its critics

NEW YORK (AP) — These were the sounds of the city on Monday: the scrape of snowplows, the gentle schuss of cross-country skis, the yips and shouts of more than a million schoolchildren given a free day to play.

And something else. In some parts of New York City, you could hear the most foreign sound of all: absolute, pristine silence.

It was deafening.

New York is always at its quietest and gentlest after a snowfall. Then, before the snow is smudged by soot and trampled by a multitude of scuffling feet, the city seems somehow cleaner and softer, its rough edges smoothed, its brassy attitude muffled.

Monday was no exception. For many people, the day was a gift, an unexpected holiday on which many offices and all schools were closed, and most trains, planes, cars and buses were idled.

In Central Park, 13-year-old Eric Sacco came skittering down a hill on a snowboard, whooping all the way. At the bottom, he was asked his assessment of the day.

"It's good," he said. "No school."

Which pretty much said it all.

About 25 yards away, the city Parks Department was giving away hot chocolate and lending out plastic sleds and saucers for children — and some adults — to use on the still-accumulating snow. It wasn't hard to mentally strip away the plastic and the bright nylon parkas and imagine the same scene on the same hill on the day after the Great Blizzard of '88 — 1888.

Throughout the city, familiar

sights were transformed. Telephone booths had graceful cupolas of snow. On a dead-silent street in Queens, an entire block of cars became a row of white mushrooms, each sporting a side-view mirror sticking through the snow.

Across from St. Patrick's Cathedral on Fifth Avenue, snowplows pushed snow into jagged hillocks that rose 10 to 15 feet off the street.

Busy streets became pedestrian malls. At the self-proclaimed Crossroads of the World, Broadway and 42nd Street, it was possible to stand in the middle of the intersection for more than a minute with no danger of getting hit by anything harder than a snowflake.

A couple of blocks away, Machi Tantiello and Mike deSeve skied up Seventh Avenue toward their office at 50th Street, where they work for MTV. They were on their way from Greenwich Village, a trip of about 2 1/2 miles.

"Excellent ski conditions," deSeve said.

He went on to identify himself as the director of MTV's cartoon hit, "Beavis and Butt-head." All right, he was asked: What would THEY do during the blizzard?

"Well, they might write their names in the snow, if you know what I mean," he said. On further reflection, he added, "They'd probably use it as a way to meet chicks."

Uh huh, uh huh.

Even the pimps and hustlers of Times Square appeared to have taken the day off. In the Show World Center, a vast porn emporium, a bored cashier named Rico said business was way off.

"If you're looking at a 1 to 10 scale, it's maybe 2 to 3 percent," he said.

If most people greeted the storm with equanimity, or even

glee, there were those for whom it was an annoyance — or worse.

Consider the plight of David Demelo, Denise Spor, Eric Hansen and Shane Gray. The four, who range in age from 19 to 23, were each in the middle of bus trips that were scheduled to stop briefly in New York. That was Sunday.

Twenty-four hours later, they were still in New York, hanging out in a hallway at the Port Authority Bus Terminal and not very happy to be there. They were looking at the likelihood of another 24 hours in the bus station, which on a cheeriness scale of 1 to 10 would rate about 2 percent.

The bus terminal usually serves 185,000 passengers a day but was nearly shut down on Monday. The only buses running were going to Jersey City, N.J., and that didn't help Demelo, Spor, Hansen or Gray.

None of the four had enough money for a hotel — or much of anything else. Gray had begun with a little money but was conned out of \$20 by one of the station's sharks. That was on Sunday, his 20th birthday.

"I thought about buying one of those cheesy danishes, sticking a candle in it and lighting it," he said. Instead, he smoked 4 1/2 packs of cigarettes.

Demelo, a 23-year-old from Providence, R.I., who was en route to college in Kansas City, Mo., said none of the four had much interest in seeing the snowy cityscape outside the bus station.

"We all hate New York and we hated it before we got here," he said.

And that hadn't changed? No, Demelo said.

"We heard a guy say last night that hell would freeze over before he'd spend the night in a bus terminal. And I thought, 'It has.'"

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