

2008/09 Washington State Avalanche Fatality

Location: Rockford, WA (near Spokane, eastern WA)

Date: 12-30-08

Activity: shoveling walk / clearing roof

Buried: 1

Killed: 1

Report on Valley Watch Newspaper, Spokane, WA

[<http://spokanevalleyinsider.com/?p=329>]

Rockford Resident Dies from Roof Avalanche

By ValleyWatch (December 30, 2008 at 11:02) · Filed under Area News, Rockford WA, Roof Avalanche, Spokane County Sheriff, Venita Johnson

85-year-old Venita Jonson, a Rockford resident died over the weekend when heavy snow fell from her rooftop avalanched and buried her as she shoveled her walk. Her death was ruled accidental, and caused by suffocation.

A neighbor called deputies to Johnson's home in Rockford about 9 a.m. Sunday. The neighbor said he had stopped by the woman's home to give her some candy and found the front door standing open.

The neighbor checked the home and found no one inside. He saw the back of her head protruding from a pile of snow. Her snow shovel handle was sticking out of the snow nearby. It appeared the snow had cascaded from her rooftop, knocked her down and buried her.

Second report from KHQ-Q6 NBC affiliate in Spokane, WA

[<http://www.khq.com/Global/story.asp?S=9595798>]

Woman killed after being buried in snow while shoveling

ROCKFORD, Wash. - An 85-year-old Rockford resident was killed over the weekend when heavy snow fell from her rooftop and buried her as she shoveled her walk.

The Spokane County Medical Examiner's Office ruled the death of Venita Johnson accidental. Cause of her death was suffocation.

A neighbor called Deputy Brandon Armstrong to the victim's home in Rockford about 9 a.m. Sunday. The 72-year-old man said he had stopped by the woman's home to give her some candy and found the front door standing open.

He checked the home and found no one inside. Suspecting he would find her in the yard, he began checking and saw the back of her head protruding from a pile of snow. Her snow shovel handle was sticking out of the snow nearby.

It appeared the snow had cascaded from her rooftop, knocked her down and buried her. She was dressed in clothing appropriate for the winter weather and may have been shoveling her walks when the accident occurred.

Third report on this avalanche from KXLY.com

[<http://www.kxly.com/Global/story.asp?S=9597909>]

Snowfall claims life of long-time Rockford resident

ROCKFORD, WA. - Sliding snow off a roof has contributed to the death of a fiercely independent 85-year-old life-long Rockford resident.

Like many people in the community right now Venita Johnson was worried about what our record snowfall was doing to her roof. But neighbors say the 85-year-old was fiercely independent and so when Mrs. Johnson decided to tackle the ice piling up on her eaves she did it alone.

While other parts of Venita Johnson's sheet metal roof had done a great job of shedding the snowfall the ice got caught up on one corner. It appears Mrs. Johnson was trying to break it free when a lot more came down than she expected.

"Well she was probably out shoveling her walk in the morning she was always shoveling and it looks like the snow came down on top of her," neighbor Kimberly Creed said.

A friend came by later in the day and found Johnson pinned under a avalanche of snow so heavy it snapped thick tree branches on the way down. The medical examiner later ruled that she died from suffocation.

Rockford residents reacted swiftly to her death dropping off bags of food for Mrs. Johnson's cats.

"Over the summer we had over 20 cats that she was taking care of and even though people complained they all drop off cat food as you can see on the porch. Those were her children," Creed said.

Johnson graduated from Rockford High School in 1940. She never learned to drive and kept up her health by walking everywhere.

"She wanted to do it herself, she wanted to do everything for herself, if you offered to give her a ride when she was out walking she'd say no I'm walking," neighbor Evelyn Fricke said.

Johnson's stubborn pride drew great respect from Rockford residents. The only thing Johnson was afraid of was winding up in a nursing home.

"I'm going to miss summertime lemonade with her and talking philosophy, she was a very, very smart woman," Kimberly Creed said.

Later in life Mrs. Johnson was best known for the time she volunteered tidying up Rockford's cemetery. Her husband was buried there 30 years ago and now Mrs. Johnson will be laid to rest there as well.