

DEALING WITH THE DARKNESS

In Pumpkinville, the loss of light – and heat – challenges a group of elderly residents who are determined to remain in their homes.

By JACK BEAUDOIN
Staff Writer

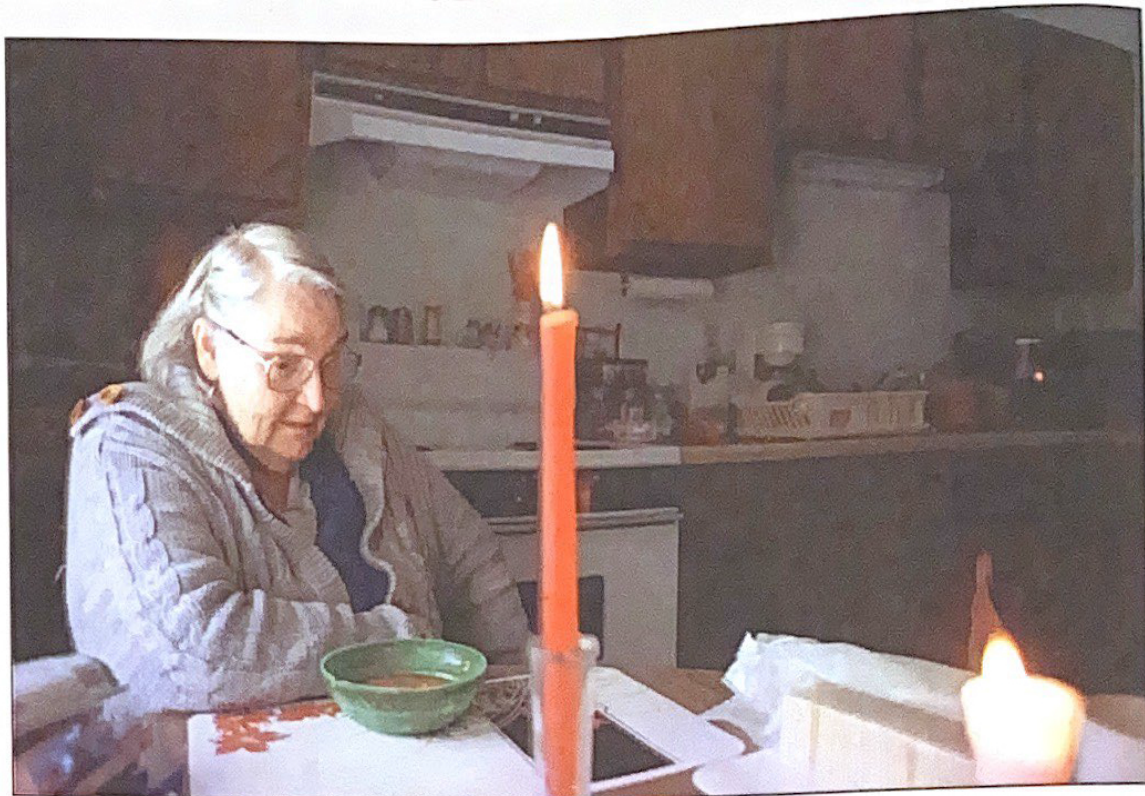
The 18 elderly residents of Pumpkinville went to bed Friday night wondering if the ice storm plaguing the rest of the state would spare them yet another day. At precisely 1:58 a.m. today, they got their answer.

Complete and utter darkness. "My husband Vinal sat up in bed and swore he'd gone blind," said Beverly Goss, who has lived in the independent living apartment complex for two years. "I told him, 'Nonsense, the power's gone out.'"

Edna Swain, 71, was awake, too. "I couldn't sleep for the trees," she complained. "They kept me up all night – breaking off, you know, you could hear 'em."

An hour later, many of the other residents heard something else – Rick Russell, a Red Cross volunteer, walking through the complex shouting to residents to see if they needed to be evacuated.

"I had my search light on and I was flashing it in windows, just in case anybody wanted to talk," said Russell, who sells used cars for a living. "I was concerned that some people in Pumpkinville and in Cornish Station (another apart-



Edna Swain of the Pumpkinville complex in Cornish "couldn't sleep for the trees" crashing. But she and her fellow residents declined to leave the complex.

Staff photo
by Gregory Rec

ment complex in Cornish) might need oxygen."

There were no takers. Nor was anybody ready to leave at 6 a.m., when Russell came back through on a second pass.

But by noon today, 10 Pumpkinville residents huddled around a wood stove in the complex's community room, waiting for the next kettle of hot water to sing. They were debating whether to take flight to the South Hiram Elementary School, or stay put.

The apartments were heated by gas, but the Monitor heater would-

n't fire up and exhaust properly without electricity. So residents who decided to stay would have to make do without heat, without hot water and without lights.

"It's already down to 60 degrees in my apartment," said Lilliette Beleckis, 84.

"They shouldn't be in the apartments if there's no power," opined Ray Haskell, a disabled veteran and junior member of the community at just 61 years of age. "When we lose our power, we've had it."

Haskell, of course, was only speaking about his neighbors. He

himself planned to sit tight, stoke up the wood fire and keep an eye on the apartments.

But Lily Collomy, 80, wasn't ready to leave the apartment she has lived in for 17 years. "We've had power out before, but nothing like this," she said. "I was a little nervous when I woke up. I guess we all were – but, you know, we like to stay in our own places."

Swain didn't know what to do. Unlike her neighbors, she couldn't go into the community room because the wood smoke would irritate her asthma. So she sat at

her table, bundled up in three layers of bathrobes, burning candles for light, waiting for Central Maine Power to work its magic.

And then at precisely 1:26 p.m., 12 hours since the lights went out on Pumpkinville, the complex's transformer resumed its thrum. A light bulb flickered once and then lit up a storage shed. Throughout the units, lights suddenly snapped on, as if a troop of phantoms had thrown dozens of switches.

In her kitchen, Edna Swain let out a little cheer. The digital clock on the shelf flashed.