

FAKE SNOW

by Derek McCormack

A woman walks down Fifth Avenue in New York City. Christmas is coming. It's not here yet. The day's sunny. Warm.

Snowy. She's outside Lord & Taylor, the upscale department store. She stares at the show windows. In there, it's Arctic. Snow is squalling. Mannequins wear winter coats.

The windows are the work of Dana O'Clare, Lord & Taylor's display director. In 1938, he blasted a soundtrack of storm winds out onto the sidewalk. "Blizzard windows," he called them, the first windows anywhere to combine sound effects and motion. O'Clare was twenty-five years old at the time. A show card in a blizzard window read: "It's coming – sooner or later."

Born and bred in Montreal, O'Clare's blizzard windows were a *succès de scandale*. The Fifth Avenue Association decried them, worried that motion in displays would "cheapen" the street. *Display World*, a trade magazine published by and for window trimmers, disagreed. It claimed that theatrical windows such as O'Clare's "made not only the store's customers conscious of display as a vital, interesting factor in selling merchandise, but the general public, the store's employees, and the trade."

O'Clare frosted his windows with a solution of beer and Epsom salts. A hidden hair dryer blew around barrels of bleached corn flakes.

Most Canadians made fake snow on a smaller scale.

"The effect of snow is easily obtained," said the *Montreal Gazette* in 1882, "and gives a very seasonable air to the decorations." The *Gazette* recommended glass flakes. Fragments of frosted glass, sold by stationers. Canadians sprinkled them onto Christmas trees.

Do-it-yourselfers made it themselves. "Pound roughly, or crush with a garden roller, any pieces of glass, such as old bottles, which have been saved up during the summer for this purpose."

Glass snow could cut. Hands. Paws. Cotton was safer, and cotton batting was cheap. In 1885, a factory in Marysville, Quebec installed cutting-edge cotton batting machines that spun out up to 200 pounds per day. *The Gazette* recommended tying tufts of cotton to the tops of tree branches, then teasing. "It must then be pulled out and made to look as light and natural as possible, hanging down in irregular points and masses over any projecting parts."

A magazine article suggested using jeweler's cotton. It was "thinner, easier to handle, and will split in the middle and not present that 'pressed-down' appearance." It cost more, but "about one-half the quantity will suffice, and the showing with this imitation snow makes the most brilliant appearance possible."

Decorators recommended cotton. Fire chiefs didn't.

"The tree should not be decorated with any inflammable material, such as paper, or cotton," said one safety expert. "Don't use cotton to represent snow."

Alternatives? Borax. Or ammonia. In the early 1900s, Canadian stores carried "Snowflake Powdered Ammonia" made in London, Ontario. It whitened trees, smelled strong.

"Glittering snow," said *The Halifax Herald*, "is produced by carefully scattering the tree ... with the thin shavings of powder of a tinner's shop."

Another option was popcorn. "Each tiny sprig of the tree was tipped with a popcorn flake," wrote a Prairie reporter in 1907, "fastened on with a pin, and it took several papers of pins to 'snowflake' this tree, but the effect repaid for the trouble."

Popcorn took patience. The impatient splashed trees with spirit gum, followed by fistfuls of flour.

I own an old Epsom salt tin. It's illustrated with a Christmas tree.

"Epsom salt," the tin says, "increases stiffening properties of starch. And makes cheap artificial snow on Xmas trees."

Epsom salt does look like snow. Its crystals are prismatic, like snowflakes. They're needle-shaped, like some snowflakes. But they're uniform – no two unlike.

“Artificial snow on the topmost branches of the tree will add to its wintry appearance,” said the *Manitoba Free Press* in 1903. It recommended mica, also known as diamond dust and as “Santa Claus snow”.

Mica’s a sort of salt. A silicate, really, salt and silicon mixed. In nature, it helps minerals form. It’s lightweight, cheap, nonflammable, and safe, unless you breathe it. Mica dust scars lungs. Fibrous tumours form. Pneumoconiosis, it’s called, or Silicosis. Coal miners get black lung. Mica miners get white lung. Snowmen, inside out.

“Don’t put cotton under the tree to resemble snow,” a fireman wrote in 1928, “nor on the tree itself. Use asbestos snow and mica.” Asbestos snow was known as “snow drift.” It looked freshly fallen. It was fireproof. Heat it up and it glowed Christmas-red.

“The uses to which asbestos has been put are many,” said a newspaper article of 1908, “and new uses are daily found for it.” Asbestos tape, cement, mill board, wicking, casketing. Asbestos insulated houses, and pipes, and wires. Asbestos textiles for firemen’s clothing and fireproof gloves. Asbestos flooring deadened sound and discouraged vermin.

Mesothelioma – lung cancer caused by exposure to asbestos. It killed thousands of Canadians a year. Still does. No doctor diagnosed it until 1960 .

I shake an antique snowdome. SOUVENIR OF CANADA. A polar bear's inside. It's ceramic. Snow squalls. Snowdome snow's known as "flitter." Plastic's the most popular flitter. Tinsel's used, too. This snowdome's old, it's full of antifreeze. The snow's made from bone chips, byproduct of abattoirs.

I light a cigarette. I don't smoke, this is an experiment. I'm testing a snowstorm tablet. "Snowstorm in a room," the package calls it. Comic books used to advertise snowstorm tablets. Irwin Toys sold them in Canada. I bought mine at a joke shop. I slip it into the business end of the cigarette. I take a drag. Nothing.

Then *bam!* It ignites. White powder spurts. Another drag. My throat hurts. The powder's metaldehyde. A molluscicide, deadly to slugs.

I shake a can. Snow in a can, an aerosol. Instructions: "Decorate windows, wreaths, nativity scenes." Was there snow in the manger?

The warning label is a skeleton hand. DANGER. EXPLOSIVE. Canned snow's a chemical cocktail. Butane and propane keep the snow pressurized. Ethyl acetate keeps it soft.

This is the kind of snow I had as a kid. Stores sold it in "fluffy gleaming colours or white." It's made of stearic acid, from cows. Boil cow carcasses and jelly rises. It's crammed into cans, then perfumed. To smell snowy.