

Winter's Bitter Harvest: Ice Harvesting and Fairport Harbor, Ohio



In the years before mechanical refrigeration, the ice on rivers, estuaries, lakes and ponds were a crop. When January rolled around and the ice was ripened, harvest time was here. It was difficult and dangerous work, but ice served many purposes during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The growing meat packing and brewing industries needed ice. People needed ice at home, too! Wooden iceboxes or large wooden coolers were common well into the 1940s. If weather conditions permitted, and a suitable ice field was at hand, 125 workers could make 25-30,000 blocks of ice per day-the equivalent of 2 acres.

Ice harvesting the old fashioned way began with the selection of the perfect ice field. Water quality and aeration were paramount. Ponds or pond ice were often avoided as murky holes or poor water-cooling properties existed. Most merchants looked for shallow, slow moving water which would hopefully produce solid, clear ice. Next was to keep the perfect ice field clear of snow which tended to slow the freezing process.

Horses were important to early businesses. Once the ice field was set, a specially designed horse drawn 'ice marker' cut lines of a set depth into the ice (8-10" thickness). Blocks were of various length but usually 2' wide by 6' long. Assuming your horse did not fall into the water, often an issue, the next step involved a horse drawn ice plow to cut into the thick ice. Two men followed using a cross-cut saw to finish the actual cutting. Blocks were then broken apart and set on a journey towards the shore and a pick-up. This meant cutting a channel through the ice, wide enough for the newly cut blocks or 'ice cakes' to float. Men pole the blocks along the channel to their final destination.

Assuming the night didn't freeze your channel over and your key men worked all night accordingly, one must now get the blocks out of the lake or river. Remember this is well before steam-powered conveyor belts were the norm. Did we say difficult and dangerous? Once loaded onto sleighs, wagons or trucks the ice was moved into specially constructed buildings for summer storage. Blocks were cut into 22x22' sections and placed between a 2' bed of wild hay or straw. At ceiling level another layer of hay or straw provided additional insulation. By the early 1900s sawdust became a common and effective insulator.

Fairport had three noted ice houses during its history. 1874 saw the establishment of the Hart Pincus Ice House. Pat McCrone followed with his Ice House & Stable in 1890. The McCrone House -The Lake Erie Ice Company followed in 1898. Ice Harvesting was a million-dollar business in its Lake Erie heyday, but sanitary issues (think horses on ice) and the dawn of the Industrial Age changed this winter crop business model. Except for a brief return during WWI, the old ways have disappeared into history and local lore.

Source-1995 article by Gene Purcell, Sandusky Ice Harvest Museum exhibit, Fairport Harbor History Book-1976.

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