

THE WINTER ICE HARVEST

Today when we want to keep something cold, most of us open the freezer or refrigerator door and put the item inside. Easy. But before modern refrigeration existed, people needed another way to chill food, particularly in the hot summer months. Ice was the obvious answer, but the only way to get it was to cut it from frozen lakes and ponds, or buy it from someone who did.

Now imagine the year is 1890. It is a warm summer day. You hear the sound of a horse-drawn cart on the road nearby. It is the iceman on his run delivering ice to the neighborhood families. He stops his team in front of your home, leaves his seat by the horses, and reaches into the rear of the cart with his huge iron tongs. Out comes a large, shining block of ice. He swings it over his shoulder and onto his rubber-padded back. Entering your home, he lowers the great chunk into your icebox. You thank him and pay him.



For many men living in the late 1800s and early 1900s, ice cutting was a winter job. All over Vermont and much of the northern United States, the ice harvests began when January's temperatures solidly froze the lakes and ponds. Icehouses dotted the shorelines and were the scene of plenty of activity during the cold months.

When the ice reached a thickness of between 14 and 28 inches, it was ready to cut. Teams of bundled men would head out in the morning while it was still dark, often in subzero weather, to begin the long day of harvesting. Before cutting the ice they first

prepared its surface. A horse-drawn scraper removed the rough snow crust. Then the men marked the area to be cut. A grid pattern was scored 5 inches deep into the ice in rectangles 22 inches wide by 44 inches by dragging a circular saw over the surface. Next the men, using large hand saws, finished separating the blocks by cutting the rest of the way through the ice. They knocked the blocks free of each other with a breaking chisel and pushed them into a narrow channel which flowed toward the shoreline. Here they loaded the heavy rectangles of ice into an icehouse. Storing the ice properly required as much skill as cutting it. Sawdust or hay insulated the blocks and kept them from melting through the hot days of summer.



Few of us today have ever had a chance to see ice harvested nor have many of us used an icebox in our own homes. Instead of chipping off a chunk with an ice pick when we want an ice cube, we simply reach into our freezers and remove a cube from a tray.

However, ice harvesting has not totally been forgotten. If you would like to see the process in action, travel to Sunset Lake in Brookfield during the last weekend in January for the Annual Ice Harvesting Festival.* This lake was once the scene of central Vermont's largest commercial ice operation. Perley Davis, proprietor of the Brookfield store at the time, ran the ice business and set high standards for the quality of his "crop." The ice was said to be so clear that one could read a newspaper through 20 inches of it.