"Long Cold Days": The Natural Ice Industry, 1880 to 1940

Andrew Olson
University of Northern Iowa, olsonabb@uni.edu

Copyright ©2017 Andrew Olson
Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.uni.edu/rcapitol

Part of the Labor History Commons, and the United States History Commons

Recommended Citation

This Open Access Poster Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors Program at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research in the Capitol by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.
On January 20th, 1907 the ice fields of Des Moines were alive with ice harvesters. "Every available man was called into service, busily in the store houses filing ominous looking saws and dragging huge ice markers." This scene was common all across not only Iowa and fellow Midwestern states, but in all places where it freezes in America. From Council Bluffs to Dubuque, Clear Lake to St. Louis, or Cedar Falls to Des Moines, natural ice was harvested from local bodies of water and used to refrigerate perishable goods for public consumption.

"Long Cold Days": The Natural Ice Industry, 1880 to 1940.
Andrew D. Olson-University of Northern Iowa

"Ice, of course, offers the most simple source." - Iowa Homestead, 1919.

Thousands of laborers would join in the arduous task of harvesting frozen water which was then stored in an "ice house," which were typically just barns with increased insulation, drainage, and ventilation. Then during the hotter months the "iceman" would hitch his team of horses to his trusty wagon and deliver ice to almost every home in the community. Thousands of tons would be harvested, delivered, and ultimately melt.

"Ice cutting was a cold job, but they hated to have it thaw because if the ice was put in when it was damp or wet it froze together."- John Huckleberry of Dallas Center, Iowa.

"Horses are as scarce as they are in the Subway, for power-driven machines have now taken their place.

"We used to trade in their old wood boxes. We sold them to the Amish or took them to the dump." - Dick Young of Young Ice and Fuel Co., Waterloo, Iowa.

Over the years industrialization would not drastically change the process of the natural ice harvest as horses and manpower were aided by technology. Eventually mechanical refrigeration, the rural electrification subsidies of the New Deal, consumers that demanded a more reliable product, and mild winters caused by the drought that occurred during the Great Depression led to the demise of the natural ice industry.