“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

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Recommended Citation

https://scholarworks.uni.edu/rcapitol/2017/all/13

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.

"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.

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.

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

Ice House, ca. 1923, Cedar Falls, Iowa, courtesy Cedar Falls Historical Society: Currently the Cedar Falls Historical Society’s Ice House Museum, this structure measures 140 feet around and 30 feet high and is made of hollow clay tiles for insulation.

Ivy linear wood box, ca. 1930, Cedar Falls, Iowa, courtesy Cedar Falls Historical Society: Instead of teams of horses, saws such as this one were used to cut the ice.

Ice House, ca. 1923, Cedar Falls, Iowa, courtesy Cedar Falls Historical Society: 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.

An article titled "Be Kind To Ice!! Caution" from the Cedar Falls Record in 1914 gives some tips to consumers when engaging with their local iceman:
1. "Have the ice box open waiting for him"
2. "Don’t engage him in conversation"
3. "Be on hand to open the door and shut it after him"

Ice harvest in Des Moines, 1907, Des Moines, Iowa, courtesy NewspaperArchives.com: Harvesters would work quickly to keep the ice, and themselves, from freezing with their assortment of "bars".

"How would you like to be the ice man?"

Poster for the Iowa State Fair, 1906, Des Moines, Iowa, courtesy Iowa State Historical Society: "I try to imagine a house in the interior of Iceman "Be tips conversation" waiting him From the door Iceman for This to when hand him the it the after titled In ice Engage ice from and Dick Young gives the their Ice harvest in Des Moines, 1907, Des Moines, Iowa, courtesy NewspaperArchives.com: Harvesters would work quickly to keep the ice, and themselves, from freezing with their assortment of "bars".

Ice harvest on the Cedar River, ca. 1920, Cedar Falls, Iowa, courtesy Cedar Falls Historical Society: "Ice cutting was a cold job, but they hated to have it thaw because when it was damp or wet it froze together."

Ice House, ca. 1923, Cedar Falls, Iowa, courtesy Cedar Falls Historical Society: Currently the Cedar Falls Historical Society’s Ice House Museum, this structure measures 140 feet around and 30 feet high and is made of hollow clay tiles for insulation.

"With an army of 40 men at work, the ice goes into the storage house at the rate of 800 tons an hour. Each cake weighs 300 pounds." - From the Cedar Falls Record, 1927.

Ice harvest on the Cedar River, ca. 1920, Cedar Falls, Iowa, courtesy Cedar Falls Historical Society: "Ice cutting was a cold job, but they hated to have it thaw because when it was damp or wet it froze together." - John Huckleberry of Dallas Center, Iowa.

"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.

Ice House, ca. 1923, Cedar Falls, Iowa, courtesy Cedar Falls Historical Society: Currently the Cedar Falls Historical Society’s Ice House Museum, this structure measures 140 feet around and 30 feet high and is made of hollow clay tiles for insulation.

"With an army of 40 men at work, the ice goes into the storage house at the rate of 800 tons an hour. Each cake weighs 300 pounds." - From the Cedar Falls Record, 1927.

Poster for the Iowa State Fair, 1906, Des Moines, Iowa, courtesy Iowa State Historical Society: "I try to imagine a house in the interior of Iceman "Be tips conversation" waiting him From the door Iceman for This to when hand him the it the after titled In ice Engage ice from and Dick Young gives the their Ice harvest in Des Moines, 1907, Des Moines, Iowa, courtesy NewspaperArchives.com: Harvesters would work quickly to keep the ice, and themselves, from freezing with their assortment of "bars".

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

"Ice House, ca. 1923, Cedar Falls, Iowa, courtesy Cedar Falls Historical Society: Currently the Cedar Falls Historical Society’s Ice House Museum, this structure measures 140 feet around and 30 feet high and is made of hollow clay tiles for insulation.

"With an army of 40 men at work, the ice goes into the storage house at the rate of 800 tons an hour. Each cake weighs 300 pounds." - From the Cedar Falls Record, 1927.

Ice Harvest, 1940, Dubuque, Iowa, courtesy Iowa Public Television: By the late 40s most ice was manufactured in plants.

Ice elevator, ca. 1915, Cedar Falls, Iowa, courtesy Cedar Falls Historical Society: An electric motor would assist in carrying blocks of ice from the river to the ice house.

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.