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

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

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.

An article titled “Be Kind To Iceman Is 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, 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.”

Horses powered saw, ca. 1910, Cedar Falls, Iowa, courtesy Cedar Falls Historical Society: Instead of teams of horses, saws such as this one were used to cut the ice.

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