

Ice Harvesting

In the “good old days” before refrigerators, gathering ice formed naturally on lakes and rivers was necessary for refrigeration but extremely hard work. Many of the region’s lakes, ponds and rivers were optimal sources of ice, which needed to be at least 10-12 inches thick to be cut into usable and durable blocks. Until the early 1930s, when large quantities of manufactured ice became available, natural ice was the dominant source of ice for both home and commercial refrigeration. Ice cut on the Mohawk River was used both locally (sometimes shipped along the canal) and sent to points as far as New York City.

Preparation of the ice field was the most important step of harvesting, and began with a wooden stake driven into the ice. A length of heavy cord was stretched from the stake to another stake about 200 feet away. A short pole was used to make a mark from one stake to the other; this line was a guide for the marking machine. Marks on the ice were made about 3 inches deep and 22 inches apart. Once the field was laid out, a small canal was cut extending from the far side of the ice field to an elevator on shore used to lift the blocks of ice. The canal, cut with a large tooth saw, was used to transport ice cakes. Typically, 50 cakes of ice could be cut, using an ice saw, out of each large channel leading into the canal. Two workers, stationed on a small wooden platform, lifted the ice cakes with two-pronged ice picks into the canal toward the elevator. The cakes were pushed along the canal by workers with poles. The channel had to be kept ice-free, which inspired various ingenious solutions, one of which entailed pulling a manned rowboat up and down the channel. Some of the ice harvest workers were farmers, who found ice harvesting a lucrative venture during the slow winter months. Horse teams and sleighs were also used to haul ice and equipment; farmers who worked with their own horse teams received \$1.00 a day for their labor in the 1890s.

Ice houses were located at the elevator for year-round storage of ice. Straw was used around the ice as insulation to keep it from melting. The ice was stacked in the icehouse, typically a double-walled structure, and covered with sawdust. Residual ice on the ice house floor had to be smoothed down to create an even surface for new ice. An ice shaver, a five-pointed instrument, was used for this purpose. During the hot summer months, home ice delivery from ice houses had to begin with the loading of wagons at 4 a.m. with 8 to 10 tons of ice. The driver of the route was in charge of cutting the ice cakes into smaller chunks of 25 to 100 pounds. Cutting was a skill that had to be practiced with expertise and care, lest the ice fragment into tiny pieces. Customers would display ice cards which indicated how much ice was to be left on the sidewalk in front of their houses. Ice was typically delivered to homes three times a week, at an average cost of about 50 cents per week in the early 1900s. Ice was delivered to apartment dwellers’ iceboxes, which sometimes entailed a climb of several flights of stairs with up to 100 pounds of ice. Almost every home customer wanted ice for food preservation, and on the hottest days of summer as many as 25 tons of ice were delivered in the morning hours between 6 and 8 a.m. Stores, breweries, and other small businesses requiring 100 to 300 pounds of ice at a time had the delivered ice carried manually, with workers hoisting the blocks of ice on their shoulders to iceboxes or other places where the ice was needed. Meat plants required significantly more ice, typically 75-100 tons, and refrigerator cars for rail transport had to be lined with ice seven or eight layers thick in order to keep their freight chilled.

Because of its proximity to both the Mohawk and Hudson Rivers, and convenient transport via both the canals and rail lines, Cohoes had numerous ice companies. Over the city’s history, there were scores of ice businesses, many in existence for only a brief period. Some, however, were long-lasting companies. Thomas Browne operated an ice business at

69 Olmstead St. from 1878 to 1892. The Hudson River Coal and Ice Company, located at Park Avenue near Ontario Street, was in business from 1904 to 1916. James Foreman opened his ice business in 1922 at 60 Central Avenue, remaining in business to 1945. Cyrille Bourgeois operated an ice business at 268 Vliet Street around the same time period, from 1923 to 1945. The Dotter family began its ice business in 1884 at Juncta, the site of the junction of the original Erie and Champlain canals. During the winter of 1885, the Dotters harvested 20 million pounds of ice from the rivers, shipping much of it to New York City. Members of the family later established their own ice businesses at various locations, but all in the same general area of the city. Solomon Dotter had a business at 25 Mechanic St. beginning in 1904. George Dotter started his business in 1897 at 34 Dyke Avenue. William Dotter's ice company was opened in 1900 at 25 Niver Street; it continued through 1933. The ice house for William Dotter's business burned in 1946. An even more spectacular ice house fire occurred on May 2, 1933 at the Arctic Ice Company on Delaware Avenue. The Arctic Ice Company was originally established in 1924 at 130 Remsen Street, moving to Delaware Avenue in 1926. The ice house had a 15,000 ton capacity, and the 1933 fire was so intense it threatened nearby structures, including the Van Schaick mansion. Following the fire, the Arctic Ice Company relocated to Niver Street, and closed in 1936. As the demand for natural ice diminished with the increasing availability of affordable electric refrigerators, surviving ice businesses operated as wholesalers.

Although many of these structures have been lost, some remnants of ice-harvesting history remain in the city. The Mohawk Ice Company operated at 23 Church Street from 1912 to 1926. The ice house, now converted to a residence, still stands half a block away.

JC/staff

Sources for this article include an account of ice harvesting written by Larry Hart, and information provided by Warren Broderick.



*An ice-harvesting crew on the Mohawk, with the tools of their trade.
(photograph from the Dorothy Onderdonk Collection)*

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