

“Did you know?”

Topic: Ice Harvesting

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Did you know that from the 1700's to the 1920's nearly every community of any size in the northeastern United States that was near freshwater harvested ice?

Many people or farmers during January and February called it a harvest and they called the ice a crop. January and February, is when the temps we're the coldest so that was the most common time you could find ice-harvesting being done. Ice harvesting was a very festive and well-attended community event.

Ice that was harvested was used far and wide. Ice harvesting helped the local economy and broke the monotony of the long winters. In 1805 Frederic Tudor, also known as Boston's ice king, and founder of the Tudor Ice Company. Frederic sent a shipment of ice to Martinique to help in the fight against a Yellow Fever epidemic. (First time ice was exported from U.S.).

Demand for ice increased more and more over time, and because it increased so much they started harvesting ice not only from fresh water but also from ponds, rivers, bays, and even canals. In 1880, the cities of the United States had a per capita consumption of ice of about two-thirds of a ton. By 1850, New York City alone used 300,000 tons of ice a year. By the 1900's, ice was as essential in summer, as coal was in the winter.

Methods and tools changed over time, of course. In the late 1700's men used axes, then the axe eventually gave way to the hand ice saw, which was later augmented by horse-drawn ice-cutting tools (in about 1825). As years went on ice became more of a demand. The introduction of the steam engine ushered in a further advancement (in about 1870). Eventually, the steam engine was replaced by electricity-driven machinery in about 1912.

Do you know what they used the ice for? Ice was used in many ways. Farmers used ice to keep milk, butter, eggs, and perishable produce from spoiling. Railroads also used ice to keep meat and milk from spoiling while being transported to markets and to cool perishables served in their dining cars. Hotels, restaurants and private homes used it in their iceboxes, for ice cream makers and to cool food beverages.

Today ice harvesting still exists, and the people that still do it, harvest in some of the same ways, just not as much as they did back in the day. Most ice harvesting is done on lakes and ponds, and is limited to a single day of the year. When people harvest ice today they bring out the old tools. The most common are the long saws and hooks. They float the pieces to the collection point on either the lake or the pond, grab it with a hook, and slide it onto a series of ramps or they sometimes pull it with a horse or tractor into an ice house, where the blocks of ice are stacked with layers of sawdust in between.

Now you know more about ice harvesting, and the ways they harvested and what they used the ice for.