

This Week in Saratoga County History

Ice Harvesting in Saratoga County

Submitted by Paul Perreault, February 10, 2022

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Ice Harvesting in Clifton Park – Early 20th Century

Before refrigeration, food had to be eaten in a short time before growing bacteria could cause disease. Drying, smoking and salting were used but each had their limitations. In the ancient world, ice was a luxury available to those with great power.

Prior to the nineteenth century, ice harvesting was a local and small time operation. Ponds were the best source, because still water freezes first, but all sources of water were employed. January or February was considered the best month for harvesting. Often communities or groups of farm families would work cooperatively, dividing the “crop” proportionally. In addition to hard work, the “icing” was a social occasion and opportunity for locals to pass gossip and news.

The ice had to be at least 5” thick to support the weight of the workers and horses and preferable up to 10” thick to producing the desired blocks. Work could begin as early as 4 or 5 am and continue sometimes into the night under lantern light. The harvesting was usually done within a few weeks so the men had to work rapidly to beat any change in the weather. Farmers, rock quarry men and brick makers were ideal sources of labor and they were well payed and respected.

Saratoga County was perfectly positioned to play a leading role in this industry. Surrounded by the Hudson and Mohawk Rivers, with easy availability to the New York City market and harbor, and blessed with beautiful lakes such as Saratoga, Round Lake, Ballston Lake, Loughberry Lake and many smaller lakes and ponds, and the large market provided by the hotel trade in Saratoga Springs. There were many small enterprises within the County and a few large ones. Perhaps the most important was in a basin of the Hudson in the Town of Saratoga called Coveville. Near the Hudson/Champlain Canal, just south of Schuylerville off Route 4, it provided the calm water of a pond, good for repeat crops of ice and the convenience of access to the Hudson and the markets in Albany and beyond. The most successful harvester at Coveville was the famous or “in famous” Jesse Billings of Northumberland. Jesse, one of the most successful and richest man in the County in the late 19th century, was also accused of putting his wife on ice, so to speak.

Other sources around the County were Round Lake, Ballston Lake, Loughberry Lake, the Sacandaga River and the Mechanicville Reservoir. The Saratoga Ice Co. operating on Loughberry Lake was one of the biggest in the County. They had the capacity to store 6,000 300 lbs. cakes a year.

News of the ice harvest in Saratoga County and in the Adirondacks was important news, and was often reported in the New York Times. For instance, on March 9, 1890 the following appeared “The freezing weather has revived the ice boom over at Saratoga Lake, which had been almost exhausted. At one point today they were harvesting fifty cakes every three minutes. Round Lake has afforded a big harvest this week of 8 to 10 inches of good quality. At Loughberry Lake stacking is still going on. The ice traffic is again choking up the railroads.” The Daily Saratogian of Feb. 13, 1906 reported that work had begun and gave the name of a number of firms engaged. In years when the ice of the lower Hudson was poor, large companies from near the City would rent out the local facilities.

The whole industry came crashing down with the invention of the home refrigerator. Although mechanical refrigeration had been used sporadically throughout the 19th.cntury, it was not until 1913 that a product was introduced for the home market. Various improvement were made up to WW II when manufacturing was put on hold but after the war refrigeration became practically universal.