

# When Cayuga Lake and Seneca Lake Have Frozen Over

by

Walt Gable, Seneca County Historian, Feb. 2009

Whenever we have a good “old-fashioned” winter, it is easy for Seneca County residents to begin to speculate if “the lake might soon freeze over.” The odds, while not great, are better that it could happen to Cayuga Lake than Seneca Lake. This is because Cayuga Lake has frozen over several more times in recorded history than has Seneca Lake. Cayuga Lake also froze over more recently (1979) than Seneca Lake (1912).



This 1927 picture shows a frozen Cayuga Lake near the village of Cayuga.

The infrequent freezing of Seneca Lake has led to a joke that people should put Seneca Lake water in their car’s radiator because this water never freezes. Apparently this comment was frequently mentioned to the trainees at Sampson Naval Station during World War II.<sup>1</sup> Arch Merrill in his 1951 book *Slim Finger Beckon* makes reference to this “modern legend.”

## Some Basic Information

Before going any further in this discussion, there needs to be clarification as to just what constitutes a “frozen over lake.” For our purposes in this article, “frozen over lake” will mean a lake whose surface is virtually entirely frozen over—allowing for some isolated “air holes” and/or areas nearer to shore where there is some “open water,” perhaps because of warm water being discharged. In other words, we will use “frozen over” to mean the same as “virtually completely frozen over.” If a portion of either Cayuga or Seneca Lake has ice extending from some place on the eastern shoreline to the western shoreline, when other parts of the lake are not frozen from shore to shore, this will not be considered as completely frozen over. Using this definition or clarification, Cayuga Lake probably froze over in 1796, 1816, 1856, 1885, 1904, 1912, 1936, 1962, and 1979<sup>2</sup>, while Seneca Lake probably froze over in 1855, 1875, 1885, and 1912.<sup>3</sup>

Some sources, however, will refer to Seneca Lake as having frozen over as many as nine times. This higher number probably includes comments made by Native Americans present in the area prior to European American settlement. There is some speculation, also, that Seneca Lake and Cayuga Lake may have frozen



over in the winter of 1779-80. In January and February of that winter, both the East River and the Hudson River in New York City, and the Long Island Sound were frozen over enough for carriages and cavalry troops to move easily across the ice. Because of the destructive raids of the Sullivan Expedition in the area between Cayuga and Seneca Lakes, there were virtually no Native Americans or European American whites in the immediate area to record any freezings over of Cayuga or Seneca Lakes that winter!<sup>4</sup>

The conditions necessary for the complete surface freezing of either Cayuga Lake or Seneca Lake, are (1) intensely cold weather, and (2) absolutely quiet atmospheric conditions for a prolonged period of time. Since these lakes have a large surface area and are situated in a trough between wide-swept hills, it is very seldom indeed that those conditions prevail for a sufficient length of time to permit the complete closing of the lake. In the case of the 1912 freeze over, for example, the freezing of the lake was preceded by six weeks of extremely cold weather, the temperature dropping as low as sixteen degrees below zero, and the entire period accompanied by high north and northwest winds. Freezing would have occurred earlier than it did except for the continued strong winds. When these winds abated, the lake froze over entirely during a single night.<sup>5</sup>

There is even a website where you can see a mathematician's attempt to determine the probability of Cayuga Lake's freezing over in a given year. Using his complicated formula, the mathematician came up with a probability of 2% for Cayuga Lake's completely freezing over in any given year.<sup>6</sup> This writer is not aware of any such mathematician's attempt to determine the probability of Seneca Lake's freezing over.

Interestingly, in modern times, Cayuga Lake has been remarkably ice-free. This may well be another aspect of the general global warming that many experts believe is taking place.<sup>7</sup> Mel Russo, a former high school science teacher and current owner of Senecayuga Properties LLC, has an article on his company's website stating that industrial heat discharge is a major factor in keeping Cayuga Lake from freezing over. According to that article, power plants and other industries are constantly removing the cool water from a few feet below the surface and discharging much warmer water at the surface. Because the lakes freeze from the top down, there is not as much likelihood, if what Mr. Russo says in the article is true, of surface water temperature getting low enough for the lake to freeze.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Freezing of Seneca Lake in 1855**

There is much information about a freezing over of Seneca Lake in 1855, This information gives us some idea of how it was an unusual happening.

To begin, the Town of Reading Clerk's Record contains the comment that:

"Feb 26, 1855, a company of men crossed over Seneca Lake on the ice to the Hector Mills. On the first day of March 1855, Roswell Holden, Henry Roberts, John Roberts and others crossed over on the ice, and measured the width of the Lake from Corbett's Point, on the west shore to Broad Point (Glen Eldridge), on the east shore, which was one and a quarter miles. Lev Shepherd, Octavius Roberts and others crossed over the same day, from the Roberts farm, on the west shore to the Woodward farm on the east."<sup>9</sup>

Referring to his diary entries, David C. Hillerman said, "'I find on looking over my diary kept at the time that Seneca Lake was frozen over as far down as Big Stream on Saturday night, February 24, 1855. The ice was about five inches thick: splendid for skating. The Lake was not clear of ice until the 15th of March, 1855.'" He added that on March 1, 1855 he and the Hon. Adrian Tuttle together skated across Seneca Lake from Tuttle's Point to Hector Falls, "pushing

before them in going and returning a cutter in which were Mrs. Hillerman and the lady who became Mrs. Washington Wilmot.”<sup>10</sup>

The diary entries of Otis C. Reading report similar information for other specific dates in the freezing in 1855. For February 25, 1855, he wrote, “Seneca Lake was frozen over as far as Peach Orchard.” His diary entry for two days later said, “The ice on the lake was six inches thick.” For March 4, 1855, he entered into his diary that he and his eldest son returned home from Watkins, walking on the ice of the lake from the steamboat landing to the Glen Salt Works site, then known as Big Point, and forming a portion of his farm.<sup>11</sup>

Hon. William C. Coon in a communication to the *Watkins Express*, stated, “In 1855, I was teaching school at Burdett, and left that village with some twenty others on the morning of Feb 28th. We skated across Seneca Lake from Board Point, (Glen Eldridge) and to Watkins and back. The ice at that time was five inches thick in the middle of the lake, and perfectly clear and solid.” The *Watkins Chronicle* commented that the Hon. Charles Cook of Havana (present-day Montour Falls) had been working to get Schuyler County court sessions to be held in Watkins. He jokingly kept saying that “Seneca Lake would freeze over before the courts would ever be held at Watkins.” Interestingly, they both basically happened in 1855!<sup>12</sup>

### **The Freezing of both Cayuga Lake and Seneca Lake in 1856**

Although it hasn’t happened in recent years, there have been several documented times of the lake surface completely freezing, normally for only a very few days at a time. To begin to talk about some of these instances, *The Ovid Bee* reported that in 1856 “from Kidders Ferry to Ogden (King Ferry) teams crossed the lake [Cayuga Lake] on the ice which had never been heard of before. People walked over and back. The proprietors of the ferry at Kidders Ferry have fitted out a small iceboat.”<sup>13</sup>

That winter of 1855-56 also led to the freezing over of Seneca Lake. According to Henry L. Jennison, an old resident of Starkey in 1904, Seneca Lake froze over and the ice lasted until April 5, 1856. It wasn’t until April 14<sup>th</sup> that Captain Henry Tuthill could resume his steamboat service on Seneca Lake.<sup>14</sup>

### **Seneca Lake Freezing Over in 1875**

Many newspapers across the state reported the news of Seneca Lake freezing over in 1875. For example, *The Utica Daily Observer* in its February 27<sup>th</sup> issue contained this article:

Seneca Lake, which within the recollection of the oldest settler has had the reputation of never freezing over, has this season changed the order of things, and is now covered with ice from one end to the other. An Ovid correspondent of the *Seneca Falls Courier* writes of the freezing up of Seneca Lake as follows: “For the first time within the memory of man we look down upon the wide expanse of Seneca Lake, and, with the exception of here and there an “air hole,” see nothing but ice. The steamboat made her last trip on the 5<sup>th</sup>. I hear that on Saturday last a large party skated from Geneva to Dey’s Landing, and that some of the party came as far as Dresden, and since that time crossing at all points north and south of Ovid has been the order of the day. Reports say that yesterday Miles Rappleye and two men drew him in a cutter from Long Point, on the west shore, to Lodi Landing, on the east. Although the lake is said to be frozen from head to foot, the thermometer has not been lower than 12 degrees below zero. On the 6<sup>th</sup> of February, 1875, it was 25 degrees below, and but little ice in this part of the lake.

Another correspondent, writing from the Willard Asylum at Ovid, under date of Feb. 17<sup>th</sup>, says, “Drs. Carson and Wise, of the Asylum, in company with three young gentlemen from the vicinity, crossed Seneca Lake yesterday, on the ice between Willard and Dresden Bay. The oldest resident in this vicinity cannot recall a similar incident. This crossing was made on a line at least fourteen miles from the north shore of the lake. They started from the asylum and skated directly across a point opposite, and then returned. In some places, they found the ice quite thin, and in others large cracks allowed the water to come up and wet the feet of the venturesome skaters. No accident happened, however, and they crossed and doubled the track in safety. This feat has never been accomplished before, that is, in the memory of the above mentioned, respected, gray-haired and age-bent individual. During the severe cold weather of the winter of '57, an adventurous fellow made the attempt to skate across, but was rescued by the efforts of his dog—a large Newfoundland.”<sup>15</sup>

*The Auburn Daily Bulletin* carried basically the same story but added these comments:

No record exists of ice ever having before formed across the lake as thick as to bear up the weight of a person at such point [referring to the above-described crossing of the Dr. Carson group]. Our informant adds: “The lake is covered with ice to a point midway between north Hector and Lodi, and the west shore. The freezing of Seneca Lake is a fact worth remembering as it is an event not likely to occur again during the lifetime of any of us.”<sup>16</sup>

The *Geneva Gazette* on February 12, 1875 told the story of a boy that was run down and dragged some distance by an iceboat. “Let skaters understand that these crafts must necessarily have right of way. They can't instantly be diverted from their course.”<sup>17</sup>



### Winter of 1884-1885

The contrast of one lake freezing over (usually Cayuga) and not the other is illustrated well in the following comment made in *The Auburn Democrat* on February 21, 1884:

It seemed very odd on Friday morning to see Cayuga Lake frozen clear across, and one vast field of ice as far as the eye could reach; then coming 14 miles west, there was Seneca Lake showing open water and the waves dashing upon the beach. —*Geneva Advertiser*<sup>18</sup>

Carrie Coleman of the Coleman Hotel at Kidders wrote in her diary about the 1885 freezing of Cayuga Lake. She recorded that on Feb. 17, the lake was frozen over and many people skated on the lake, with one getting the mail this way. On March 4, the ice thawed in places but refroze the next day. On March 6 the ice roared and groaned as it froze harder. Iceboats were in use frequently. On March 27 she reported teams crossing on the ice but there was some thawing and water on the ice. Thawing continued so that there were open streaks on April 4.<sup>19</sup>

Maurice Patterson in his book *Between the Lakes* gave some more insight about the freezing over of Cayuga Lake in 1885. He wrote about the Busy Bee which was the ferry boat between King Ferry (the termination of Turnpike Road) and Kidders Ferry (the dock or landing place of Myron R. Cole). The Busy Bee was some sixty-six feet in length and seventeen feet

wide with gunwales four feet high. The distance across the lake for this ferry route was just over two miles. The Busy Bee made its crossing in as fast as nine minutes with a fully-billowed sail, but by horse (running the treadmill) it could take as much as one hour. Getting back to the point of this paragraph, in the cold winter of 1885, amazingly the boat froze in fifteen inches of ice. So, Captain Quick rigged up an ice boat and delivered the mail!<sup>20</sup>

Seneca Lake apparently was frozen over for a period of four weeks and two days.<sup>21</sup> Mrs. C.C. Pontius, a life-long resident of Dey's Landing near Kendaia on the east shore of Seneca Lake, in a 1928 article in the *Geneva Daily Times*, said that on February 10, 1885, a blinding snowstorm descended upon the lake and its environs, followed by a period of intense cold and in a short space of time the lake was frozen over as far as Lodi. The three steamboats that normally traveled the lake with two trips daily all winter had to cease operations until May 1<sup>st</sup>, as floating ice made navigation dangerous.<sup>22</sup>

On the evening of February 25, 1885, a grand carnival was held on the ice at Watkins, NY. About 1000 persons gathered for this carnival. Some came from Elmira and other distant places by train. Many people in the more immediate area surrounding Watkins came by sleighs.<sup>23</sup>

### **Spring Freezes**

Don't think that the lake freezes occurred only in the dead of winter. Otis C. Corbett in his diary entry for May 4, 1856 reported, "A skim of ice covers half of the surface of Seneca Lake which was never known to freeze till this and last year."<sup>24</sup> The *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle* reported, for example, that on May 12, 1904, "For the third time this month this section of the state was visited by unseasonable weather and heavy frosts last night. Cayuga Lake was skinned over with ice on smaller bodies of water ice formed to the thickness of a quarter of an inch."<sup>25</sup> Similarly, in its May 2, 1912, the *New York Times* reported, "For the first time in many years on May 1 there was a coating of ice on Cayuga Lake this morning, extending across the lake, about three miles from South end. Gulls were observed standing on the ice in mid-lake."<sup>26</sup> (Once again these might technically not constitute complete freezes-over of either lake.)

A 1905 *New York Times* article explained that there have been some spring freezes on Seneca Lake because of melting snow cooling the surface temperature of the lake. The article went on to say that if the lake is not too much disturbed by winds, the lake surface can have a very thin coating of ice even if the air temperature is from 15 to 25 degrees above zero (Fahrenheit). The article stated that there was such a thin film of ice on the lake's surface on the mornings of May 5, 1861; May 15, 1872; May 6, 1873; and April 26, 1884.<sup>27</sup>

### **Seneca Frozen in 1905?**

An article in the *Geneva Advertiser-Gazette* suggests the possibility that Seneca Lake was frozen over in 1905. The article stated, "The lake was frozen over...from February to April 1<sup>st</sup>....It is strange that on the 29<sup>th</sup> of March, 1905, while the thermometer reads at noon 64 degrees in the shade, ice nearly a foot thick covered the north end of the lake for a distance of two miles from the beach." The article went on to say that that was a remarkably cold winter, and that Captain Smelzer's steamer was frozen in near Willard.<sup>28</sup>

As other sources do not give 1905 as one of the times that Seneca Lake completely froze over, this writer speculates that the entirety of Seneca Lake did not freeze over—only some parts, especially at the north and south ends.

### **Lake Freezings in 1912**

Perhaps the most noteworthy lake freezings occurred in 1912. In February of that year both lakes froze over. The winter began mildly enough. The *Geneva Advertiser-Gazette* reported that farmers were plowing their fields until December 28, 1911.<sup>29</sup> January 1912 was the coldest January on record, with ten days of temperatures below zero.<sup>30</sup> (The picture at right is from a 1912 postcard. The man holding the safety pole is Nelson Longstreet who skated the entire length of the lake. The postcard came from the Stomping Grounds store in Geneva. The picture at left below shows children on the ice at Willard on March 10, 1912. The heavy snow ruined ice skating. The photo is courtesy of William Sebring, the Romulus Town Historian.)



Once again, newspapers across the state report on this. *The Watertown Daily Times* reported that “For the first time in 27 years Seneca lake is frozen over completely, the last gap of open water having been closed yesterday. People along the lake are feeding the wild ducks which are numerous and hungry.” In terms of Cayuga Lake, that same paper reported that “Cayuga lake is frozen over from end to end for the first time since 1887. The last open space was covered with ice Saturday night when the thermometer registered thirteen below at the Cornell station. With the exception of one day in January it was a record for eight years.”<sup>31</sup>

The *Geneva Advertiser-Gazette* stated on February 13, 1912, that “Dozens of people crossed the frozen waters of Seneca lake this afternoon from Connelley’s point, near [Dundee], the wise ones stayed close to shore, but a Hobart College student claimed to go down the center of the lake, making the trip in four hours. That newspaper thought the “freeze” was cause for community celebration.”<sup>32</sup>

We can turn again to Carrie Coleman’s diary to learn still more about the freezing over of Cayuga Lake in 1912. This is what she wrote in her diary:

February 4, 1912—Cayuga Lake has not frozen over since 1885.

Feb. 12—A great many people are skating and walking on the lake.

Feb. 14—At least 200 people were here at Kidders on the ice. Charlie White is out with his iceboat. Two other iceboats and many skaters came over from the other side. Lew Craft and Asa Yarnell of Sheldrake skated over the lake and back.

Feb. 16—Hundreds crossing the lake, skating and walking.<sup>33</sup>

The *Seneca County Courier* said, "The lake (Cayuga) itself presents in its icy slumbers a rare scene of beauty and interest. At the north end of the lake the ice is 25 inches in thickness."<sup>34</sup> The 1912 frozen lake conditions attracted people from Auburn who traveled by train to King Ferry and skated or rode on iceboat over the lake. The ice did not break up until St. Patrick's Day."<sup>35</sup>

Betty Smalley in 1991 wrote a lengthy article about the 1912 freeze over of Seneca Lake. In that article she wrote:

On Friday the 9th of February 1912, Fred Dean of Dresden, Del Beard of Himrod, and Clyde Jones and Lon Pridmore also of Dresden made a daring and history making journey across Seneca Lake on ice skates. They tied themselves together with 50 feet of clothesline as a safety measure.

It took them 27 minutes to make the trip to Willard, because they checked the thickness of the ice occasionally; it was 3 inches thick in the middle of the lake. They walked into the village and Fred called his wife who didn't know where he was. She said, "If you see a policeman over there, you'd better have him lock you up!" The trip home took only 15 minutes.

Fred had been watching the lake from an upstairs bedroom window all that week. On Wednesday there was only a small strip of open water in the middle of the lake. This strip was filled with thousands of wild ducks. Many were frozen in the ice. On that day, he skated as near to the ducks as he dared, to look the situation over. He returned home, went to the store to tell other fellows that the lake was going to freeze over and to interest them in skating across. One came back to the lake with him and they both went out to see the ducks. They then skated to Geneva and back, checking the streak of open water.

Thursday there was a dark streak in the lake which he believed was open water. It was Friday that he skated out and found the ice would hold him. He rushed back, collected his friends, and they went across. He skated across again on Saturday, and often throughout the next week.

The February 17, 1912, issue of the *Geneva Times* reported several ice related happenings:

- G. Allen Burroughs, a junior at Hobart, skated to Watkins. He left at 2:10 p.m. and arrived in Watkins at 6:10 p.m. He skated down the center of the lake and found a continuous sheet of ice. He saw hundreds of ducks frozen in the ice or bewildered wondering what had happened. He returned by train.
- William Smith young ladies were cautioned not to go on the ice during the present warm period.
- Edward S. Gordinier, a well-known boatman, cut a large circle of ice about himself, but failed to step out of the circle before it sank with him aboard. He suffered severe wetting and lots of kidding from his friends.
- Many local sportsmen were building ice boats. A good sized fleet will be seen on the lake.<sup>36</sup>



It needs to be pointed out that this was the first freezing over of the lakes since automobiles became popular, to the point that many owners of their new car couldn't resist the opportunity to take it out onto the frozen lake—be it Cayuga or Seneca Lake—and have a picture taken. (The picture below left is provided by Noel Clawson and was taken on Seneca Lake near Valois. The picture below right is provided courtesy of the Schuyler County Historical Society and is taken on Seneca Lake just north of Watkins.



Those stories of the 1912 freezing of the lakes sound like a lot of fun. There was tragedy as well. *The New York Times* reported on February 19, 1912, about this tragedy on Cayuga Lake:

“Cayuga Skaters Drown--Ice Breaks Under Students on  
Cayuga Lake—Companion's Aid Fails”

Ithaca, NY, Feb. 18. – Two Cornell students, Terry A. Converse of Buffalo and Charles W. Getman of Richfield Springs, NY, were drowned on Cayuga Lake this afternoon. Both were juniors in the College of Civil Engineering. Rodney Newman of this city, a preparatory school athlete, who was with them, broke through the ice four times attempting a rescue, but was forced to save himself.

Getman and Converse, learning that Cayuga was frozen over from end to end this year for the first time since 1885, determined to take advantage of the Sunday holiday for a skating trip. With Newman they left Ithaca this afternoon, and, being good skaters, made fast progress up the lake. At Atwaters, Newman wanted to stop, but the other two urged that the skating be continued, and the party went on. About a mile and half south of King Ferry the accident occurred. The lake here is three miles wide. When the men were a mile from shore, Newman is said to have been about fifty yards behind the others. He saw the ice under them give way, and both men were plunged into the water. He skated up to them and tried to help them out, but broke through into the lake himself. Three times the ice gave way under him. He finally managed to get out himself and skated to shore for help.

Newman ran in stocking feet to King Ferry, but when a rescue party got out, neither Converse nor Getman could be found.<sup>37</sup>

Similarly, both the *Geneva Advertiser-Gazette* and the *Geneva Daily Times* on February 19, 1912 reported several ice skating fatalities. “The first was a young man named Robert Holdridge, a telegraph operator at Starkey. He left Watkins to skate to his office, broke through the ice near the salt works and did not come from under it....Two other men at Watkins who are known to have been skating are missing and it is feared they are drowned.”<sup>38</sup>

Waterfowl undoubtedly suffered from the complete freezing of Seneca Lake. An Auburn newspaper on February 13, 1912, stated, "People along the lake are feeding the wild ducks which are numerous and hungry."<sup>39</sup> Susan Brind Morrow, who grew up in Geneva, in her book *The Names of Things: A Passage in the Egyptian Desert* recalls that her first grade teacher told the story that "a thousand swans [who] came down on the lake to land and froze to death. Their feet stuck to the ice and they could not take off again."<sup>40</sup>

The "big freeze" of 1912 ended by St. Patrick's Day. At 9 a.m. that day, Earl Shannon sailed his ice boat on the lake. Then at 2 p.m. the same day, he piloted his motor boat over the same course over which he had ice boated in the morning.<sup>41</sup>

### **More Recent Lake Freezings**

In her diary, Thelma King Steele recorded the freezing of Cayuga Lake on February 23, 1936. "Several people skated across the lake and back. Charlie White and Harry Blew sailed to Union Springs and brought a horse back on the iceboat, tying the horse's legs together and tying the horse to the mast of the boat."<sup>42</sup>

Betty Henderson Seuffer, who was residing in East Varick in February 1936, provided this information in 1991 from her diary entries: "On February 22, 1936, two gentlemen by the names of Bob Shaffer and Hempford Falkinberg started out to skate across the lake; however they fell through the ice, fortunately being rescued. On February 23, the following day, Leon Deal, Allero Gustafson, Clair Emens, George Deal and Stanton Schwartz, among others, did skate across the lake and back with no mishaps."<sup>43</sup>

I can remember the lake freezings of 1962 and 1979. The frozen-over lake was clear as glass in 1962. It was an adventure for several in our family (I was a high school sophomore) to walk upon the clear ice out from shore near Red Creek (about 1.5 miles north of East Varick). It was fascinating to see the lake bottom so clearly even more than 150 feet out from shore. The family dog, however, seemed petrified, having no understanding of how the big lake in which he had paddled around just the previous summer could now be safe to walk on. While the lake ice was clear in 1962, the 1979 freeze-over in the East Varick area was much rougher, making it very difficult to see the lake bottom. In both cases, the frozen lake condition lasted only a very few days. As soon as the wind got strongly in the south/southeast, the ice cracked and broke up into sections, putting an end to our infrequent fun.

### **Wells College Students**

Wells College students got a special treat when Cayuga Lake froze over. The tradition is that the college president had to declare a school holiday when this happened. In 1875 the lake stayed frozen for more than a month<sup>44</sup>, although no school holiday was declared. Nevertheless, college student Emma Lampert skated across the lake and back, and numerous excursions in horse-drawn sleds were reported. The tradition, however, has been documented for other years. The lake was declared frozen—with the resulting school holiday—in 1912, then in 1918 and 1934 by President Macmillan, in 1948 by President Greene, in 1962 by President Long (the students were treated to hot chocolate at Taylor House that day) and by President Farenthold in 1979. Interestingly, there was a "close call" in February 1994. Mary Plane called her husband from across the lake, saying "it looked right" and the chimes ringer was alerted (apparently the announcement of cancellation of classes was done by the ringing of the chimes in the early morning). Alas, when morning came, President Plane, "a scientist after all, saw the ice was melting. The chance had passed."<sup>45</sup>

## Ice Harvesting

Probably no talk about the freezing of these two lakes would be complete without talking about ice harvesting on these lakes. With our modern-day refrigerators, today we can hardly appreciate the importance of ice to keep food fresh. Where did people in large cities get their ice at the turn of the century, especially the huge populations of Philadelphia and New York? Since there was no large body of pure water in these urban settings, New York City turned northwards to the clear, clean water of the Finger Lakes. Ice was harvested on Cayuga Lake right up to the late 1930's. At the height of this harvesting in 1886, more than two million tons of ice was harvested. It would take hundreds of



men and horses, and scores of boats and railroad cars to gather this ice and get it to the major cities.<sup>46</sup> In 1907, about 15,000 tons of ice were cut from Cayuga Lake and shipped to New York City by freight cars.<sup>47</sup> (The picture above is courtesy of Noel Clawson. The picture at left is courtesy of the Seneca Falls Historical Society.)

In the earlier days of ice harvesting, workers used axes. Later on, such technological improvements as the steam-powered ice saw, and still later the electrically-powered saw were introduced. At the village of Cayuga, about 500 railroad cars were filled with the frozen blocks and transported to eastern cities with each car carrying 25 tons of ice. The Independent Ice Company of Geneva, New York, had an ice harvesting complex at Wayne's Point, south of Cayuga village. The well-insulated icehouses were forty feet high and 250 feet long. Ice blocks were laid out on the sand-packed floor, with sawdust sprinkled over each layer, until the house was full.



In the early 1900's, once the cut ice made it to the city, an ice deliveryman would make his rounds from house to house. Typically, a housewife would place a card in the front window of the house, indicating how many pounds of ice were wanted. He would use tongs to lift the ice block onto scales, chip it down to the desired size, carry it to the house and place it in the ice box. It was also reported that the children would be near-by, gathering up the ice chips on which to suck.<sup>48</sup>

Upstate New York ice was highly prized because it was usually cleaner, harder and slower to melt. In a January 13, 1868 diary entry, Edwin B. Morgan of Aurora reported that the ice on Paine's Creek was so clear that one could read a letter through 2.5 feet of it! Weather

determined the size and the quality of the ice harvest. The colder the weather and steadier the freezing, the cleaner and denser the ice. A thaw or a rainstorm could ruin the ice crop. Many farmers felt that if they had a good harvest two years in a row, they were fortunate. Morgan's diary entries also note concerns about warm winters when there wouldn't be enough ice to meet demand.<sup>49</sup> In 1919, an iceless winter forced all ice businesses in the county to close.<sup>50</sup>

The ice harvesting business on Cayuga Lake was ended before World War II. In 1910 ice was first manufactured artificially. The first electrically-operated refrigerator was produced in 1915. With these developments, there was little need for commercial ice harvesting. A disastrous fire in December 1936 destroyed the seven ice-houses of the Independent Ice Company at Wayne's Point. The loss was estimated at \$25,000. The company decided not to rebuild, and ice harvesting on Cayuga Lake became a thing of the past.<sup>51</sup>

### **Concluding Comments**

Nowadays, people living along Cayuga Lake do not envision freezing conditions as providing a potential resource—except for the ice fishermen--but rather “an ice problem”. The lake level is drawn down for the winter months, challenging “lake residents” to get their boats out of their hoists and stored for the winter before the lake level gets too low. Those wishing to draw water from the lake for use in their homes have to make sure that their water intake pipe is far enough out into the lake to remain submerged during low water levels. Residents further south on the lake worry that strong winds will break up the northern ice and bring it crashing into their docks and boat hoists.

In all fairness, the current problems mentioned in the previous paragraph pall in comparison with the hardships that lake residents had to contend with a hundred years ago or more. We may nostalgically look forward to having another opportunity to enjoy a complete freeze-over of Cayuga Lake and/or Seneca Lake, but it is doubtful that any of us would want the cold temperatures that make it possible for the lake to remain frozen for an entire month, as in the past. Perhaps that is simply because of the high energy costs now. It could also be an indication of how we have lost some of the “hardiness” that people had a century ago.

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- <sup>1</sup> John Marks, “Big Freeze made news, but only for a few weeks,” *Finger Lakes Times*, February 19, 2012.
- <sup>2</sup> <http://74.125.47.132/search?q=cache:mmRRsUKONucJ:www.mpimet.mpg.de/fileadmin/s...>
- <sup>3</sup> *Bits and Pieces of 200 Years*, compiled by the Ovid Bicentennial History Committee, Ovid, NY: W.E. Morrison and Co. Printers, 1994, p 104 (article written by Naomi Brewer, based partially on information taken from the diaries of her great-grandmother Carrie Coleman and those of Thelma King Steele), pp 112-13.
- <sup>4</sup> Robert E. Doran, “Frozen Seneca Lake,” *Finger Lakes Times*, March 13, 1979.
- <sup>5</sup> Alvin R. Cahn, “The Freezing of Cayuga Lake in Its Relation to Bird Life,” *The Auk: A Quarterly Journal of Ornithology*, October 1912, p. 437.
- <sup>6</sup> <http://74.125.47.132/search?q=cache:mmRRsUKONucJ:www.mpimet.mpg.de/fileadmin/s...>
- <sup>7</sup> [http://cayugafisher.net/pages/water/water\\_isothermal.php](http://cayugafisher.net/pages/water/water_isothermal.php)
- <sup>8</sup> Mel Russo, “Will Our Lakes Freeze Over Completely?” [http://www.senecayuga.com/about\\_freeze.php](http://www.senecayuga.com/about_freeze.php)
- <sup>9</sup> “Seneca Lake Ice Sheets: The Freezing of its Waters in 1855, the first Event of the Kind Known to White Men” (<http://www.yatespast.com/articles/dyksenecaice.html>)
- <sup>10</sup> “Seneca Lake Ice Sheets...”
- <sup>11</sup> “Seneca Lake Ice Sheets...”
- <sup>12</sup> “Seneca Lake Ice Sheets...”
- <sup>13</sup> *Bits and Pieces of 200 Years*, p 104 (article written by Naomi Brewer, based partially on information taken from the diaries of her great-grandmother Carrie Coleman and those of Thelma King Steele).
- <sup>14</sup> “Seneca Lake Frozen Across,” *The Rochester Democrat & Chronicle*, February 18, 1904.
- <sup>15</sup> “Seneca Lake Frozen Over,” *The Utica Daily Observer*, February 27, 1875.
- <sup>16</sup> “Seneca Lake Freezes Up,” *The Auburn Daily Bulletin*, February 22, 1875.
- <sup>17</sup> Robert E. Doran, “Frozen Seneca Lake,” *Finger Lakes Times*, March 13, 1979.
- <sup>18</sup> *The Auburn Democrat*, February 21, 1884.
- <sup>19</sup> *Bits and Pieces*
- <sup>20</sup> Maurice L. Patterson, *Between the Lakes: The History of South Seneca County*, Interlaken, NY: Heart of the Lakes Publishing, 1003, p 10.
- <sup>21</sup> “A Peculiar Body of Water That Is Seldom Covered with Ice, and Never Till Lake in the Winter,” *New York Times*, February 17, 1895.
- <sup>22</sup> “Seneca Lake Frozen Over Three Times in 60 Years Says Life-Long Resident,” *Geneva Daily Times*, March 24, 1928.
- <sup>23</sup> “A Peculiar Body of Water...”
- <sup>24</sup> “Seneca Lake Ice Sheets...”
- <sup>25</sup> “Heavy Frost Injures Fruit,” *The Rochester Democrat & Chronicle*, May 13, 1904.
- <sup>26</sup> “Cayuga Lake Frozen Over on May 1” *The New York Times*, May 2, 1912.
- <sup>27</sup> “A Peculiar Body of Water...”
- <sup>28</sup> “Seneca Frozen in 1905,” a 1912 article in the *Geneva Advertiser-Gazette* (exact date not noted for this clipping in the Seneca Falls Library)
- <sup>29</sup> John Marks, “Big Freeze...”
- <sup>30</sup> Betty Smalley, “Seneca Lake Freezes,” January 1991. (mhtml:file://D:\Seneca & Cayuga Lakes Frozen Over\Seneca Lake Freezes by Betty Smal...)
- <sup>31</sup> “Seneca Lake Frozen,” *The Watertown Daily Times*, February 12, 1912.
- <sup>32</sup> John Marks, “Big Freeze...”
- <sup>33</sup> *Bits and Pieces*.
- <sup>34</sup> *Seneca County Courier*, (exact date no noted for the 1912 clipping in the Seneca Falls Library)
- <sup>35</sup> *Bits and Pieces*
- <sup>36</sup> Carol U. Sisler, *Seneca Lake: Past, Present and Future*, Ithaca: Enterprise Publishing, 1995, pp 131-32.
- <sup>37</sup> “Cornell Skaters Drown,” *The New York Times*, February 19, 1912.
- <sup>38</sup> John Marks, “Big Freeze...”
- <sup>39</sup> “Seneca Lake Frozen Over,” *Auburn Semi-Weekly Journal*, February 13, 1912
- <sup>40</sup> Mhtml:file:J:\Seneca & Cayuga Lakes Frozen Over\Seneca Lake—Frozen in Time.mht
- <sup>41</sup> Betty Smalley, “Seneca Lake Freezes,”
- <sup>42</sup> *Bits and Pieces*
- <sup>43</sup> Mary Worrell’s column, *The Ovid Gazette*, March 25, 1991.

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<sup>44</sup> Carol Sisler on page 46 of her book *Cayuga Lake: Past, Present, and Future* (Ithaca, NY: Enterprise Publishing, 1989) states that Edwin B. Morgan (who gained much wealth from his stockholdings in Wells, Fargo and Co, and other companies) notes in his diary that the lake froze over on March 19, 1875, encouraging residents of both shores to “enthusiastically dash across the lake in horse-drawn sleights or on ice skates.” This is the widest part of Cayuga Lake—some 3.45 miles.

<sup>45</sup> Jane Marsh Dieckmann, *Wells College: A History*, Aurora, NY: Wells College Press, 1995, pp 304-5.

<sup>46</sup> Lorraine Withers, “More Little Known Facts of Seneca Falls,” April 2003 newsletter of the Seneca Falls Historical Society

<sup>47</sup> taken from “Some Interesting Facts About Seneca County”

<sup>48</sup> Carol U. Sisler, *Cayuga Lake: Past, Present and Future* pp 115- 116.

<sup>49</sup> Sisler, p. 116

<sup>50</sup> taken from “Some Interesting Facts About Seneca County”

<sup>51</sup> Withers