

## When Cayuga Lake Freezes Over

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 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 small iceboat."<sup>1</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>2</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>3</sup>

We can turn again to Carrie Coleman's diary to learn about the freezing over of the 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.

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>4</sup>

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>5</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>6</sup>

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>7</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.

People living along Cayuga Lake virtually each year have to plan for the possibility of an ice problem. The lake level is drawn down for the winter months, causing “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 avoid low-lake-levels worries such as freezing of a pipe exposed to the cold winter air. People living along the shores on the north end of the lake have to be prepared for the annual freezing of the more shallow parts of the lake—boat hoists and docks are typically pulled up on shore for the winter. I can also remember from my youth the spectacle of seeing people spinning their cars around in circles on the ice near Cayuga Lake State Park. Even residents further south sometimes have the worry that strong winds can break up the ice on the more northern portions of the lake and bring it crashing into their docks and boat hoists.

The problems mentioned in the previous paragraph, in all fairness, pall in comparison to the hardships that lake residents had to contend with a hundred years ago or more. One can easily understand how new technology has made it much easier to get around even in the winter months as well as to install better water in-take pipes, hardier docks and boat hoists, etc. The lake is also not used to transport the mail today. We may nostalgically look forward to having another opportunity to enjoy another instance of the complete freeze-over of Cayuga Lakes, but I doubt that any of us would want the cold temperatures that would make it possible for the lake to freeze over and remain so for an entire month like it has at least once 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 or more ago.

**Note:** If anyone reading this article has documentation of when Cayuga and/or Seneca Lake has frozen over, or any documented “stories” of interest about life during these instances, it would be greatly appreciated if such information would be shared with Walter Gable, Seneca County Historian (315-539-1785 or [wgable@co.seneca.ny.us](mailto:wgable@co.seneca.ny.us)).

---

<sup>1</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).

<sup>2</sup> *Bits and Pieces*

<sup>3</sup> Maurice L. Patterson, *Between the Lakes: The History of South Seneca County*, Interlaken, NY: Heart of the Lakes Publishing, 1003, p`10.

<sup>4</sup> *Bits and Pieces*

<sup>5</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 sleighs or on ice skates.” This is the widest part of Cayuga Lake—some 3.45 miles.

<sup>6</sup> Jane Marsh Dieckmann, *Wells College: A History*, Aurora, NY: Wells College Press, 1995, pp 304-5.

<sup>7</sup> *Bits and Pieces*