

## Ice Harvesting on Cayuga Lake

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 were 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>1</sup>

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 was 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>2</sup>

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>3</sup>

On occasion, the lake has frozen completely over, but normally this lasts just a few days. 1885 was an exceptional winter with severely long cold spells, and Carrie Coleman wrote in her diary that on March 6th the ice roared and groaned as it froze harder than the day before. Iceboats were in use frequently. On March 27<sup>th</sup>, she reported [horse?] teams crossing the ice.<sup>4</sup> In the same cold winter, Maurice Patterson wrote about the Busy Bee ferry boat, which made the crossing between King Ferry and Kidders Ferry, a distance of just over two miles. The Busy Bee could cross in as little as nine minutes with a fully-billowed sail, but by horse (running the treadmill) it could take as long as one hour. In the cold winter of 1885, amazingly the boat froze fast in fifteen inches of ice. So, Captain Quick rigged up an iceboat and was still able to deliver the mail!<sup>5</sup> [In cold winters like that one, there was no shortage of available ice for the cities.]

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>6</sup>

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 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, 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.

[Note: This article appeared in the 2004 winter issue of the newsletter of the Cayuga Lake Watershed Network. At their request, I had prepared an article on the freezing over of Cayuga Lake and an article on ice harvesting. They combined the two lengthy articles into this one article.]

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<sup>1</sup> Lorraine Withers, “More Little Known Facts of Seneca Falls,” April 2003 newsletter of the Seneca Falls Historical Society

<sup>2</sup> Carol U. Sisler, *Cayuga Lake: Past, Present and Future*, Ithaca: Enterprise Publishing, 1989, pp 115- 116.

<sup>3</sup> Sisler, p. 116

<sup>4</sup> *Bits and Pieces of 200 Years*, compiled by the Ovid Bicentennial History Committee, Ovid: W.E. Morrison and Co. Printers, 1994, p 104

<sup>5</sup> Maurice L. Patterson, *Between the Lakes: The History of South Seneca County*, Interlaken: Heart of the Lakes Publishing, 2003, p. 10

<sup>6</sup> Withers