

Because people wanted fresher fruit, vegetables and meats, the harvesting of natural ice became a major American industry. From 1800 to 1930 nearly every community of any size in the northern United States had its local natural ice company because people wanted something better. Likewise, almost every farm had an ice house in which ice was preserved for home use. However, with the advent of electric refrigeration in the 1920's this once important natural ice industry practically "melted" away over night. The harvesting of ice is now a thing of the past like gas street lamps and Passenger Pigeons.

The ideal times for harvesting ice were the months of January and February. Farmers typically took crops of ice from ponds or creeks while commercial ice companies such as Davis & Stevenson in Albion had their own ice pond which they kept clean of snow so the ice would freeze better. The Davis & Stevenson ice pond and ice house were located on West Avenue in Albion near the corner of Hamilton Street. The ice house was insulated with sawdust and had a conveyer which raised the ice from water level up to different levels in filling the storage building or ice house.

In a photo taken from atop the Albion Cold Storage across West Avenue we can see the conveyer with men working at it. The ice field is in the background and the ice house is to the far right. About in the center is a little building which was used to house the steam engine that operated the conveyer. In the distance behind the ice pond is an orchard.

Ice was generally marked out first with an ice plow drawn by horses which scored the area to be harvested in even square cakes. This crisscross marking then left grooves about two inches deep which were then easy to follow the rest of the way through with an ice saw. The size of these cakes was usually twenty-two inches square and varied as to thickness depending upon the year. Harvesters usually sought and preferred ice which was fourteen to sixteen inches thick. As a general rule, the weight of each cake was over 300 pounds. These were later subdivided into blocks weighing 25, 50 or 100 pounds.

Davis and Stevenson made their ice with village water in a half acre pond which was about two feet deep in the south end sloping to six feet deep at the north end where the conveyer was located. Two ice crops were necessary to fill their commercial ice house. Donald Stevenson indicates that his father's and grandfather's business used horsedrawn ice saws and that the pond was kept clean of snow by scrapers. He also notes that it was a favorite spot for ice skating and hockey games during the winter months. Ice companies in many villages along the NYC Railroad had a booming business icing railroad refrigerator cars, particularly in this area where perishable fruits and vegetables such as peaches and lettuce were

shipped.

A refrigerator car would hold 11,200 pounds of ice distributed between the two end bunkers in each car. Following World War II trucking took over the need for icing railroad cars and consequently the cold storage business suffered.

There were hazards in harvesting ice as in any other industry. Men or horses would slip into the freezing water which called for immediate rescue by the other workers. In rescuing a horse a rope was pulled tight around the neck so the animal could breathe in but not out. When it passed out, the inflated lungs lifted it to the surface. Then other horses on solid ice could haul it out. Horses almost always recovered but were often leery of the ice afterwards. When a horse urinated or had a bowel movement on the ice, this was immediately scraped off. Sometimes formaldehyde was used on the spot of urine to kill any germs or contamination.

The typical farm ice house was a small wooden building, perhaps 10x12 feet in area. The greatest problem in the preservation of ice was dampness. Therefore, ice houses were usually located in areas exposed to a free circulation of air. Double walls filled with straw, hay or sawdust helped to insulate the building. When harvesters brought ice into the ice house from bobsleighs, they packed about one foot of sawdust around the ice for insulation. Sometimes about twenty inches of hay was placed over the top of the ice. This did not adhere and kept the warm air from it. A ton of ice occupied about 45 cubic feet of space. These techniques for preserving ice would, under normal conditions, made it last throughout the summer season. It was taken out in small cakes at a time and used in the kitchen ice box.

Of course, people who lived in villages depended upon commercial ice for their ice boxes. Davis & Stevenson delivered ice three times a week first by horsedrawn wagon and then later by truck.

We note a picture here c. 1910 showing an ice delivery wagon once owned by Fred Davis before he went into business with his son-in-law Alexander Stevenson in 1918. Note the one employee with a large cake of ice. The wagon also advertises spring water. The building in the background was the Albion House, a hotel once located on Clinton Street across from the depot.

Ice was sold by the weight and on the average would have cost the customer of sixty years ago around \$2.00 per month. According to Don Stevenson 1930-31 was the last year their company harvested natural ice because around 1932 they began making artificial ice in a building on Hamilton Street at the railroad. However, electric refrigeration took over the general market by World War II and the year 1944 saw the end of the Davis & Stevenson ice business in Albion. By 1940 the old ice house was razed and eventually the pond was filled in.

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