

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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At the dawn of recorded history we find that Persian monarchs drank wine cooled by snow. The Romans also used snow for cooling things in summer. Marco Polo found the Chinese using milk and water ices as desserts in the Thirteenth Century. In fact, the Moors of Spain knew how to preserve ice. Until the beginning of the 19th century America was content to cool its food and drink in cold cellars or spring houses. Often spices were used to camouflage meats after their freshness was gone. But because people wanted fresher meats and vegetables the harvesting of 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 than dried and salted meats. 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 and Stevenson in Albion had their own ice pond and ice house for storage, from which deliveries were made. The photograph here shows Joseph Achilles around 1925 cutting out cakes of ice 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 the 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 ice company had a conveyer built out to water level so the ice could be hauled into the ice house. Their ice was made with village water in a half acre pond off West Avenue in Albion. 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 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.

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 leary of the ice afterwards. When a horse urinated or defecated 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 10 x 12 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 Bob Sleigh's 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, make it last throughout the summer season. It was taken out in small cakes one 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 and Stevenson delivered ice three times a week first by horsedrawn wagon and then later by truck. It 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 or 1931 was the last year their company harvested natural ice because around 1932 they began making artificial ice in a building on Hamilton Street. However, electric refrigeration took over the general market by World War II and the year 1944 saw the end of the Davis and Stevenson ice business in Albion. Today some of the larger cold storages still remain where ice was once preserved and manufactured, but very few of the old wooden farm ice houses remain. However, one of these which still stands in excellent condition although not used in many years, is on the farm of Lee Harding just north of Childs.

