

ICE HOUSES

by Karin Giannitti

When we fill our glasses with ice cubes on hot summer days, and enjoy a dish of ice cream or a cold glass of milk, we seldom think of the marvelous invention - the refrigerator. The luxury of ice in the summer that we take so much for granted dates back to ice-stores built in Mesopotamia 4,000 years ago, and wine being chilled by snow from ancient Greeks. This luxury, however, was a rarity until the 17th century when primitive refrigeration became fashionable.

The British were the first to construct a building for ice storage. These houses consisted of massive semi-subterranean brick vaults built mostly by the rich. By the end of the 18th century, ice cream had become a well-known treat, and the quantity of ice needed gave rise to a demand for imported ice. The Americans who were already involved in the use of ice, became heavily involved in ice trading and put their stamp of ingenuity to ice storage at home. We moved from the massive buildings of the British to a simpler every-home-can-have-one, insulated sheds and boxes.

Ice harvesting was originally done by farmers using crude equipment such as axes and



Ice House of Mary Gjuresko

cross-cut hand saws. There were ice depots in some cities and towns supplied by the farmers, but transportation was woefully inadequate. Ice was generally sold to consumers as irregularly shaped fragments in bushel baskets. In rural areas, ice houses were owned by individual farmers or cooperatively by a few families living close together. More often than not, the house was located next to a stream or pond.

Commercial ice harvesting took place during the months of January, February and March. The thickness varied from six inches in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Southern New York State, up to 15"-30" thick in Maine.

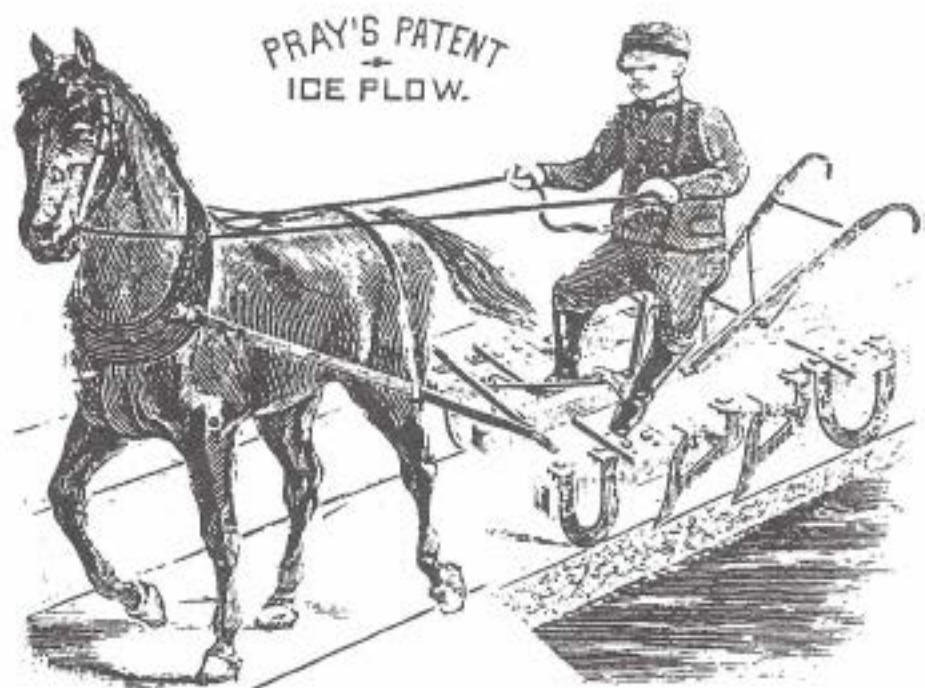
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The ice was cleaned if there was snow cover, and then planed if it was rough. Holes were drilled to determine the thickness and, once the best spot was selected, the field was marked off in squares using a narrow blade drawn by horses and steered by plow handles.

The ice cutter, or ice-plow was used next. The plow was designed to cut about two thirds the depth of the ice. The sheet of about twelve blocks would then be channeled from the field to the ice house. These sheets were either pulled by a team of horses, or poled along by an ice cutter using a "hook".

When the sheet arrived at the house, it would be separated and packed away in layers with cracks between the layers. This allowed for melting and prevented the cakes from freezing into one solid block. After the house was filled, the top of the ice was covered with straw, hay or sawdust. Melting still ranged from 25% - 50% during the summer. The whole process to fill a large house (25,000 tons) would require a minimum of one hundred men and ten to twelve horse teams. The harvest usually took fifteen to thirty days.

The early to mid 1800s saw the invention of the ice box - a wooden box, usually oak, approximately 25" x 40", lined with *zinc*.



The top of the box lifted up and a large block of ice was placed inside. The inherent quality of cold air falling, kept articles cold in the box below, accessible through a door on the front.

Technology continued to grow and by the early 1900s the “Iceless Ice Box” was becoming the newest rage. A cooling element, purchased separately, was placed in the refrigerator and attached to an electric current. This would allow the refrigerator to maintain a constant cold temperature. In an article in the Westport Herald from February, 1924, these new coolers were declared, by the few who owned them, to be the “final word in household efficiency”.