



Filling the ice house at the Chantry cheese factory around 1930, photo courtesy of Rideau Lakes History and Genealogy.



This is the equipment used to help cut ice as part of the local harvesting business.



This long saw is on display at the Drive-shed by Delta's Old Stone Mill and was used in the ice harvesting business.

ICE HARVESTING, An Important Industry in Days Gone By

By Sally Smid

We take a lot of things for granted in this modern age, such as reaching into the fridge for milk or into the freezer for some ice cream. Before mechanical refrigeration, snow and ice, cool streams, springs, caves and cellars were used to refrigerate food. Frigidaire's first self contained unit was available in 1923, but was not perfected for some time. This made the ice harvesting industry very important for a period of time.

Very cold winters, as the one we've just experienced, would help ensure an adequate ice supply, but there were also warmer seasons or "open winters" which resulted in "ice famines", a shortage of ice.

The business of ice harvesting, also known as the "frozen water trade", involved specialized ice-harvesting tools for procuring ice from local waterways. It also included a network of ice houses. The industry created a reliable supply of jobs for off-season farmers. On Jan. 31, 1946, the Prescott Journal reported: "Harvesting of the 1946 ice crop on the river is expected to get underway. Despite the unusual mild spell in early January, the ice

is said to be from 11 to 12 inches thick and as clear as crystal throughout. Bartons and Wards will again be cutting west of the Town while Paul Curry will be harvesting in the channels to the east."

The process began with an oblong grid that was etched onto the ice with a marking saw, then came the task of sawing. When a large, rectangular raft floated free, long-handled bars were dropped to break the blocks. The cakes, often weighing more than 300 pounds, could be steered using a pike pole to direct the ice through the water. They were loaded onto a horse-drawn sled, or a truck in later years, and taken to nearby ice houses for storage. There are memories of the "ice man" making regular home deliveries. Sawdust had to be washed off of the blocks which were carried with ice tongs. The blocks had been buried in sawdust for storage in the ice house. The blocks would need to be trimmed to fit into the iceboxes.

During the latter half of the 19th century ice boxes were in use in homes. These were wooden boxes lined with tin or zinc and insulated with various materials including cork,

sawdust, and even seaweed to hold blocks of ice in an upper chamber and "refrigerate" the food. A drip pan collected the melt water and had to be emptied daily. Natural ice was harvested and distributed for commercial and home use. Ontario's many cheese factories were some of the largest clients. There are memories of dripping train cars in the yard of the B&W that could be identified as being filled with cheese packed in ice.

Breweries also made use of the earliest factories. Often a dairy, meat, ice business or the local Co-op offered customers a frozen food locker service. Meats, poultry, fish, fruits, berries and vegetables could be prepared on site or at home and then could be kept frozen in rented lockers. By the mid-1940s, most consumers agreed that freezing vegetables and berries was an attractive alternative to the "hot work" of canning.

With the arrival of modern fridges and freezers, the ice harvesting business came to an end. It is only the very senior community members that can recall cutting lake ice and the old "ice boxes", an often forgotten part of our local history. **LH**