

Looking Back #8

Ice Harvesting in Charlevoix

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Ice cutting on Lake Charlevoix with a converted automobile engine.

The engine's radiator is facing the two men.

The earliest recorded mention of ice cutting in Charlevoix is found in a scant few lines of the March 19, 1870, *Charlevoix Sentinel* newspaper. There, readers were assured that enough ice had been harvested to satisfy the town's needs until the following winter. But as regional businesses grew and commercial demand for ice increased, the always hazardous job of ice cutting required more skilled manpower and additional horse power. In February, 1876, 5,000 tons from Round Lake alone were taken by a Wisconsin firm for shipment to the Chicago market, to be transported by schooner once the lake ice melted.

Before engines came into use, all heavy work was done with horses. They hauled snow scrapers to clear the ice, then dragged ice plows with nine-foot blades to incise guide grooves. The men who did the cutting first used squaring instruments for precise markings. Starter holes were drilled out. The incised ice was scored with saws into 18-inch squares, down to three to four inches from the ice's bottom. To saw all the way through was to risk flipping both men and horses into freezing water. After the ice was cut, released, and guided to sledges, the horses pulled the harvest to shore for storage. For decades, all cutting was done by hand until circular blades were attached to converted auto engines, as seen above.

Long-bladed one- or two-man saws finished incising the ice, breaking them free. Each cake of ice was guided by long pike poles through an open water channel to a powered conveyor belt which delivered them to trucks or onto horse-drawn sledges, as seen below. Transported to windowless warehouses, the cakes were separated and insulated by layers of tons of sawdust from the area's many lumber mills where they could keep, unmelted, even through the hottest of summers.



Ice is guided with pike poles to a conveyor belt that will hoist them up onto a horse-drawn sledge, sometimes as fast as one per second. Photo take just off Depot Beach.

The men had to work fast to hoist the ice blocks into position on the sledge with huge tongs. A block could weigh up to 150 pounds.



At far left, a man saws into the ice with a single blade, while at right a circular motorized saw does the job north of Depot Beach.



After the arrival of the railroad in 1892, Charlevoix ice reached all over the country, often loaded directly from Lake Charlevoix into boxcars (above). The railroads themselves were big customers, as well as the big city hotels.

Ice cutting as a business lasted in Charlevoix up through the middle of the 20th century, when modern electrically powered refrigeration systems finally came to replace the old-fashioned ice box and weekly home deliveries from the local iceman. A few longtime residents still remember chasing after a delivery wagon on a hot summer day, grabbing loose chunks and shards of ice off its end and sucking on them until their hands went numb.

