



Bergen County, Where America Begins

A COMMERCIAL ICE AGE

Kevin Wright, correspondent. The recent arctic cold snap and great mounds of frozen precipitation inspire recollections of a century past when every cube of ice in a summer's drink was born of pond water in the deep freeze of winter. Then, a commercial ice-house stood upon the bank of nearly every pond and lake in northern New Jersey. Yet, they have entirely vanished, leaving barely a trace. I never lived in a house without a refrigerator, but I do remember my grandparents' generation quaintly and consistently referring to it as "the ice box." I learned of the various practical uses of natural ice (quite by hearsay, of course) as a child. My Grandmother Mullen, born in 1890, was so deprived of sleep by the sound of a dripping faucet that I heard her get out of bed in the middle of the night to silence it. I thought she was motivated by economy, but it turned out that she remembered how, when she was seven years old, her deceased grandfather, Nicholas Bird, had been laid out in the parlor - and her sleep had been disturbed by ice dripping into pans beneath the coffin. The succeeding generation had less haunting memories: my mother, raised in Leonia, vaguely remembers the iceman's truck making its rounds. And so The Iceman Goeth: while only five thousand mechanical refrigerators were manufactured in the United States during 1921, annual production reached one million in 1931 and approached three million by 1937.

Inspired by the season, I searched through my files for the cold facts, and found an article entitled *Harvesting Ice*, published in *The Bergen County Democrat* on



February 3, 1882: The writer a few days ago had occasion to visit one of the ice fields of Rockland County with a view to study, and inspect the peculiar operation of gathering and stowing an ice crop for summer use. The spectacle is quite an interesting one, as it exhibits the modus operandi of a busy, and very lucrative industry, which owns one of the manifold concerns that gives employment to a large number of men

during the winter months, providing, however, there is a favorable season. The

visit was made on a day when the mercury had a tumble below zero, and there was a boisterous, nipping blast from the polar north, sweeping over the broad lake, so keen that it seemed as if a relentless blizzard had determined to annihilate man and beast into his frigid breath. The workmen muffled, and heads swathed into tippets, shivering and scurrying round with athletic animation, were compelled now and then in consequence of the severity of the weather to suspend work and hasten to a convenient shanty where in there was a fire glowing with an inviting warmth for the special comfort of the workmen. As each man came hurrying in with a nimble step, a vigorous oscillation of the arms, and now and then, a humorous comment on the weather in the vernacular of the fraternity, he would, when on the inside of the place, cautiously keep a distance from the fire until he was thoroughly thawed out, in order to avoid a too sudden transition in the physical temperature. But he would gradually move up and, seated by the red hot stove, regale himself with a cup of hot coffee, or like some make a bee line chase for a hotel nearby for a drink of hot spirits. An elderly and demure sort of fellow, who seemed to be a sort of patriarch of the gang, having a Methodistic mien, and a sanctimonious accent, affirmed to the writer in conversation on the wisdom of taking in intoxicating beverages to ward off the cold that during his thirty-two years experience as a workman out doors, even in the severest cold weather, he had never had occasion to taste a drop of such beverages, and yet never for once succumbed to the cold. A testimony showing the advantages of total abstinence which a fellow veteran workman approved with the abrupt and decisive remark: "That's my case exactly. This 'ere drinking don't do a fellow a bit of good!" The broad lake, the scene of our observations with its serrated margins white with snow, was as smooth as polished steel and as transparent as crystal, having the appearance of an immense mirror set in a phantastic frame of marble. Now for the operations. The two nights previous had been intensely cold, so that it became an easy matter to flood the lake, which was frozen over, and thus increase the solidity and thickness of the ice to the requisite degree for cutting. The first thing essential in this process is to map out the field which is measured off into large regular squares and indicated with indented lines. These squares are then subdivided into lesser squares or blocks so that the field resembles a grand checker board. This system of laying out the field is done in order to guide the cutters in getting out blocks, so that when they are separated they will have regular dimensions, and a uniform size and can readily be packed in a solid mass when stored in the ice garner. Again this system is necessary for if these blocks were hewn out haphazard, with irregular contour, there would be a great wastage in fitting them for the household refrigerators, the receptacles of which are invariably square. The method of marking out a field is ingenious and yet quite simple. There is a machine used that has the appearance of an ordinary farm plow with a row of coarse teeth graduating in length from five inches to an inch. Attached to the shaft that contains the teeth is an arrangement which is made up of a stout bar of iron with a few pricklers on the outward end,

which proceeds the machine and moves along and under the control of the operator measures off and outlines the size of the block, which the marker scratches on the smooth surface of the ice. The standard size of the blocks were about twenty-two inches square, and eight inches thick.

The next thing is the cutting up of the blocks. This is done with the ice plow which works on the principle of a saw, and is drawn by a team of horses. This machine has a long horizontal blade with its nether edge dentated with sharp knives or cutters, which have a gradation from a foot to a quarter in length that makes a rapid clear incision in the ice about two inches or more deep sufficient to enable the workmen to pry apart and separate the blocks as carefully and expeditiously as a housemaid slicing pound cake. One of the most particular requirements in harvesting a good crop of ice is the skill and good management in stacking the blocks in the garner. No novice can undertake this job, it needs the greatest care and experience in order to secure the preservation and convenient delivery of the blocks. The field when cut up is separated in large cakes marked out as aforementioned, and these propelled by stalwart men with heavy boat hooks are floated to the chutes, where the blocks are detached, shoved up the chutes to the platform of the elevator, and thence carried to the top of the building, passed through an aperture for the purpose, and then they slide down a chute erected on the inside, and are stacked in files with a few inches space between them which serves as air chambers, and render their delivery when needed more conveniently accomplished. These garner have an immense stowing capacity, hundreds of tons, and with a gang of lively and experienced workmen can be filled in a remarkably short space of time when there is a necessity for it. The amount of ice stowed in an ordinary winter season is often sufficient to meet the demand for two summers. The buildings are constructed of wood. The exterior wall is generally a rough frame covered with hemlock boards, then on the interior is a narrow air chamber, and the inner walls formed of two partitions in which saw dust or some other refrigerant material [is placed] to keep out the heat. The entire building is hermetically closed up with the exception of the apertures at the top for the reception of the ice, and a door or two at the bottom for the ingress and egress of the workmen. The prospects of the supply for this year seems to be quite promising, both as to the quality and the quantity. One of the most extensive and best equipped concerns in this line in Bergen County is that of Mr. Wragg, at Fair View, where the ice procured from a good-sized pond of fresh clear spring water, situated near the railroad station. Mr. Wragg has four garner which are pretty well filled with ice that runs as thick as eight inches gathered during the recent cold spell. Then there are several smaller concerns on the Palisades, from Bulls Ferry up to Rockland County that supply the country around and about, doing considerable business.

R. R. Green.

