

THE ANNUAL ICE HARVEST ONCE A MAJOR ADIRONDACK INDUSTRY

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I enjoy writing this column for many reasons. One is the several new and interesting people I would never have met otherwise. Learning of new aspects and facts about the area I have called home these many years is another.

One such aspect is the role ice harvesting once played in the local economy. In fact, during the winter months it was the leading industry.

The two principal markets for local ice were the New York Central Railroad and Utica Ice Company. Local businesses and resort hotels used up the balance of the supply.

White Lake supplied the needs of the Utica Ice Co. A railroad spur ran out to Ice House Point alongside a huge ice house that supplied ice all year long, It employed up to 100 men during the winter and nine full time. It burned from a lightning strike on July 3, 1928. Artificial ice had just started to become competitive at that time, so it was never rebuilt. Some of the old timers still argue the relative merits of natural verses artificial ice. An excellent video is available at the Woodgate Free Library on the history of the Ice House and the Woodgate Post Office.

Old Forge and Raquette Lake supplied the NY Central with ice. It was loaded directly into the rail cars on tracks adjacent to the lake. The operation was run by Maurice Callahan with Sam Banatta as his foreman.

The ice was taken from Old Forge Pond with seven cars being loaded simultaneously. When 60 cars were loaded, Callahan would tell the men to go home and rest up for the next day. Rivalry between the crews, Ken Rivet informed me, produced a record 85 cars loaded in one day

Local kids started the ice harvesting operation by shoveling a place to skate. Ken explained the custom of how the person who cleared the ice owned it. Callahan paid them for their work and the older kids were hired to help on the harvest. It was one of the first ways local kids earned spending money.

After the harvesters had exhausted the supply at Old Forge, the action moved to Raquette. Edgar Lamphear is one of the remaining participants around today. It was one of his first work experiences.

There were several smaller operations that moved from lake to lake supplying the needs of the smaller customers. Len Harwood was one of the more notable operators.

Ice harvesting was not the only advantage taken of the frozen lakes. They were often the best access for logging and moving construction materials. Many a horse and vehicle went down and both men and horses paid with their lives.

Edgar recalled three sleigh loads of logs crossing Raquette. They were evenly spaced a safe distance apart. Suddenly, there were only two. The middle sleigh had broken through. The teamster quickly cut the tugs on the harnesses. The following team was quickly unhitched and rushed up to pull the floundering horses from the lake. After a quick rub down and brisk run, the horses were none the worse for wear.

There were many such episodes throughout the Adirondacks that were just accepted as a way of life.