

Let's Talk "ICE" – Part 2

By: Karen Ferguson, Town of Kirkwood Historian

When we refer to farming, we typically think about livestock and agriculture. However, ice farming was also an essential task for early settlers. Farmers used to harvest ice from ponds, lakes and rivers and store it underground or in smaller buildings called ice houses.

January was typically the month to harvest ice. After January, the ice would be too wet and porous and wouldn't be considered good. The best ice would be fine, solid and clear so that it would last longer. Farmers would use horses fitted with spikes on their horseshoes to assist them. A team of horses would first clear a section of the ice by pulling a scraper across the surface to remove any snow. Men would then use 6-foot length saws and manually cut long rectangular blocks out of the cleaned square section. These large rectangular blocks would then be cut into smaller square blocks. A good block would be about 10-12 inches thick. The men and horses would have to be very cautious about not falling in as the water would splash out making the surface slippery as they were cutting and the ice would begin to float. Many times they would have to take a break and warm up by a nearby fire. Once all the cutting was done, the blocks were pulled from the water with huge ice tongs and loaded onto the nearby horse-drawn wagons. To prevent other people and animals from falling into the area that was cleared of the ice, a barrier of tree limbs would be placed around the hole.

Once the wagons returned home, the ice would be stored in the ice house. The blocks of ice would be stacked on top of each other with each layer being completely covered in sawdust to insulate it and keep it from melting. If the harvest was plentiful, the ice would last well into the summer months.

In the mid 1800s, the commercial sale of ice became a major industry and lasted until the early to the mid 1900s when it was eventually replaced by modern refrigeration. In doing research, I came across several newspaper clippings that discussed the commercial ice production in the early 1900s. The harvest of ice in 1917-1918 was considered one of the best as reported by the Cutler ice company with ice being cut into blocks 32"x32"x22" squares. However, the following year of 1918-1919, ice production was considered the worst in history due to unusually warm weather. An ice famine was declared by some city officials.

On February 12, 1919, this statement appeared in the newspaper: *"We are praying for colder weather in order to harvest some ice," said Dr. Charles G. Wagner, superintendent of the Binghamton State Hospital today. Dr. Wagner added that while the State Hospital has its own ice plant with a capacity for making 4,000 tons, for the institution to rely entirely upon the output of artificial ice would mean the necessity of cutting down considerably on consumption. "We usually harvest 2,000 tons from the river," Dr. Wagner said. Up to the present time, the State Hospital superintendent said, it has not been possible to obtain any ice from the river this season.*

I discovered this postcard in the Kirkwood Historical Society Schoolhouse #2 Museum. It shows the ruins of an icehouse located in Kirkwood. I have not been able to narrow down the exact location of it or any other information about it. If this picture looks familiar to you or you know some history about a local ice house, please contact me at historian@townofkirkwood.org

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Let's Talk Ice – Part 3 will be published in February 2024 and will be about Ice Jams and the destruction of the Kirkwood-Conklin Bridge in 1910.