

~ Denmark Historical Society ~

~ Newsletter ~

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Ice Harvesting - A Cool Job

Ever wonder how folks kept their victuals cold, kept the butter from melting and the milk from spoiling before there were gas and electric refrigerators? They used iceboxes. Next question: Where did this ice come from and what happened to it on the way to the icebox?

When winter arrived and farm work became less demanding, country men kept watch on the lakes and ponds and on the weather. January and February were the months for harvesting ice and the best ice was clear, dense and thick. That meant that as soon as it was safe to walk on the ice it had to be kept clear of snow as "snow ice" was porous and did not last. Gathered too early, it was not thick enough; gathered too late, it would not last.

Farmers often shared ice cutting and harvesting duties and gathered together much like for a barn raising. Families generally used the same pond or lake area each year. Some men would cut, some would haul, some would pack the ice in the icehouse. Each farm had its own icehouse and put in enough to last until the next harvest.

Thickness of the ice was measured through a hole with a footed measuring stick. The foot caught on the underside so an accurate measure could be made. A thickness of 12" to 14" made blocks that would last as well as handle easily but in a good ice year 16" was not unusual.

Men with shovels and horse drawn scrapers would clear the ice of snow. The next step was to lay out the "field". From a base line, perpendicular lines were sighted and marked in the ice. Once a line had been established, a man leading a horse would pull a "groover" along the line. This was a graduated saw blade attached to a handle similar to that of a plow. A second man would guide this from behind. It was common to use a tandem groover so that a parallel line could be made at the same time. At the end of the field the horse and groover would be reversed and one blade run back in the outer groove. In this way the blocks could be marked out in a uniform width. A second pair of groovers ran across these lines to create a grid. Grooves were 1 1/2" - 2" deep. Larger operations ran markers with multiple blades. In the grid the widest measurement ran the length of the field, the narrow measurement ran across the field.

While this procedure was under way, another group of workers were erecting a loading platform at the end of the field where the ice would come out of the water. In holes drilled in the ice the men would insert lengths of cut wood. These would freeze in fast and firm. A frame and platform would be built on top of these about the height of a sled bed. A "track" or "channel" was cut in the ice connecting the field and the platform wider than a block of ice so that the block could be moved along freely and a wooden apron was extended from the platform into the channel so that the ice blocks could be slid up onto the platform for off-loading.

Teams of men and horses cut the grooves successively deeper to about 2/3 of the ice thickness. Course-toothed saws with T type handles were used to make the final cut. "Sheets" of multiple blocks, also known as "floats", were broken out of the field with "busting bars" and chisels. Then the float was poled along to the channel. An ice pole was equipped on one end with a spike for pushing and a hook for pulling. Men standing along the channel would break the float into blocks or "cakes" and move them along to the men at the apron who would catch the moving or "live ice" and keep it going right up the apron. It was easier to keep the ice moving for once stopped it became "dead ice" and was hard to get moving again. Sometimes horses and grapples were used to move the ice floats. They wore special cleated shoes for ice work and pulled snow scrapers, markers, cutters and sleds. Boys were kept busy keeping the ice free of manure.

The sleds were drawn right down on the ice next to the platform so that the ice could be slid right onto the bed. Sometimes a second layer was lifted on with ice tongs. Ice cakes could easily weigh 300 lbs. so the horses had quite a load to pull to the icehouse. The floor of the structure was covered with a good layer of sawdust and as the blocks were moved into place more sawdust was packed between them and the wall. Snow was tamped down between the blocks and was laid down between layers. The space between the inside and outside walls was filled with sawdust as well. This made an insulating layer of about one foot thick. When all the blocks were in place, a thick layer of sawdust went on top. The ice

lasted this way even through the hot summer months without a roof although not all icehouses were roofless.

Steam engines powered up and down saws for some time before gasoline-powered saws with large rotary blades were introduced in 1918 making the cutting operation much less labor intensive. It was important not to set the blade too deeply. If it cut all the way through to the water, the operator was given a quick, cold shower. Some bigger operations used multiple-bladed saws that could cover larger portions of the ice field in one pass.

For fifty years ice harvesting was very big business in the state of Maine. Ice was shipped worldwide by schooner. The biggest harvest came from the Kennebec River. In 1826 Rufus Page of Richmond built an icehouse with a capacity of 1500 tons but it was not a commercial success for many years. By 1830 use of harvested ice was commonplace to preserve food. The demand for ice increased rapidly as populations grew and harvesting progressed from a small localized activity to a large industrialized business.

Many Northern states with an abundance of lakes and rivers harvested ice commercially but Maine was the largest ice-producing state and 9/10 of Maine's commercially harvested ice was shipped to other states, especially those on the Atlantic seaboard, often for redistribution. Winter of 1879-80 saw the wholesale price of ice in New York City \$4 -\$5 a ton. Ice could be cut for \$.20 a ton, loaded on a schooner at \$.50 a ton, freighted to New York and unloaded for \$1.50 a ton. It was big business for Maine men in mid-winter and all available men took to work harvesting ice in January and February. Until 1900 ice was shipped almost exclusively by schooner. By 1910 barges had taken the lead. The first refrigerated railroad car was built in Detroit in 1867 enabling trains to transport produce, meats and dairy products across the country anywhere there were tracks.

Large companies entered the Maine ice fields. In 1880 1,426,000 tons were cut, in 1890, 3,000,000 tons. Ice was called "white gold". The town of Dresden on the Kennebec had eleven big icehouses. Huge warehouse structures with their loading wharves lined the banks in many other river towns as well.

The success of the Kennebec ice harvest and return to investors depended on the weather up and down the Eastern seaboard. A good harvest needed a good freeze and relatively stable winter temperatures without severe fluctuations. Weather conditions on the Hudson River in New York State were also a controlling factor. Demand for Kennebec ice went up when the Hudson River harvest was poor and vice versa. Another important factor was summer weather conditions. During the "ice boom" of 1870-1895 it was not unusual to see 15 to 20 vessels at a time lining the river shores loading ice

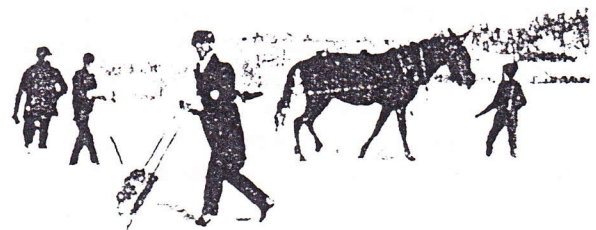
for delivery to points south. New England ice companies built icehouse in such far away places as Havana, the West Indies, South America and India where the ice was distributed to even more remote destinations.

In towns and cities the horse drawn ice cart was a common sight. The iceman had a regular delivery route. Housewives had a 10"x 10" card which they hung in their window when they needed ice. Each corner was marked, 25, 50, 75 or 100 so the iceman would know the size of the block to bring to the back door. He usually had a set of scales on his cart but he was often as accurate guessing the weight by sight and heft of the block. At each stop he would grab the block with his tongs and swing it up on his shoulder which was protected by a sheepskin or rubber cape. Children loved to follow the cart to get ice chips to suck on in hot weather. Small towns without an ice route often had an icehouse where people would go to pick up their own ice from the iceman.

The organization of the ice trust and the manufacture of artificial ice introduced in the early 1900's hastened the demise of the once profitable business in Maine and other states. In 1886 the natural ice industry reached its peak when the US harvest was 25 million tons. 1919 saw the last cargo of ice out of the Chelsea, Maine icehouses and, with the advent of mechanical refrigeration, there was no significant commercial harvest by 1925.

Dozens of companies made iceboxes in the 1800's, the oldest known was D. Eddy & Son of Boston who made iceboxes in the 1840's. John E. Cotton of Fairfield, Maine began the Maine Manufacturing Co. in 1874 making iceboxes through 1950. By 1925 the company was producing 40,000-50,000 annually. Kelvinator introduced the first electric refrigerator in 1913 and the icebox became more obsolete as the electrics gained popularity.

The iceman no longer cometh. Icehouses have been torn down or used for other purposes. Iceboxes are more often found in older camps or antique shops now and modern refrigerators even have freezer compartments. We can go to the convenience store and buy ice by the bag or by the block for our summer coolers. Yes, times have changed, but it was not that long ago that our farmhouses used ice from Denmark ponds and lakes to keep the meat and cool the milk. At our house, it was 1952.





E.P. Ingalls House Taken By Fire

Early Thursday morning January 26th fire struck one of Denmark's oldest houses, the E.P. Ingalls house on the Fessenden Hill Road. It had been the home of Edna Holmes for more than sixty years where she moved as a new wife and raised her family. The fire, started in a chimney, was discovered in a closet and spread quickly in the old wood from the back wing to the walls and eaves of the main house. Within an hour flames were leaping from the second story windows. Firefighters from Denmark, Bridgton, Brownfield, Hiram and Sebago worked together to control the fire. Water was brought in by tank trucks over narrow, icy roads and pumped down to the house from the junction at New Road. Metal sheathing enclosed the flames under the roof hampering control of the blaze and the heat and smoke deterred efforts to remove the sheathing with long poles and hand tools. It was eventually torn off panel by panel using a water cannon from the ground.



The first alarm had the trucks rolling in around 8:00 AM. By noon the firefighters had beaten the flames and were cleaning up. Denmark Fire Chief Ken Richardson said that if it had happened the week before when the roads were so soft they probably wouldn't have been able to get the trucks in there. The bright sun that morning was a welcome relief from the gray days of January that had come before but it could not dispel the cold nor the feelings of loss experienced by those who watched the flames take the old house.



There is a lot of history in that place. The low wing on the left side was built in 1783 and the big house in 1789. As a working farm it comprised over 100 acres of fields, orchards and woodlands. Only a mile from access to the Narrow Gauge Railway, the farm packed apples, pears and other produce in barrels for shipment to Portland and overseas markets. There were barns, animal sheds, chicken houses and packing sheds surrounding the house. Fessenden Hill Road was the main road in those early days from Denmark to the mills in So. Bridgton. Hilton Road was a spur off that road. Later connection to Bridgton was provided by Rte. 117. Things have changed a great deal over the last two hundred years but the house remained as testament to its earlier, more productive days.

Edna Holmes and her dog were assisted from the house and unharmed by the fire. She is staying with her daughter, Carol Farley. The family is already at the sad task of cleaning up and sorting through what is left. We wish them well and bid farewell to the old house.



January Meeting

Our first meeting of the new year brought 23 people out on a cold night to hear Bob Linnell talk about Denmark men and the Civil War. Dressed in an "authentically reproduced" corporal's uniform he gave us a general overview of the life of a new recruit. It did not meet the glorious ideas of the young men who answered the call to arms. They often had very little training in soldiering before being sent into battle. Many died of sickness in camp or from wounds. Some deserted. Some distinguished themselves. He brought with him a video tape of a training session held in Saco last summer by the 3rd Maine Regiment re-enactors. On the display were some pieces of Civil War gear and books on the period. We learned a good bit about what it was like to be a soldier and the part Denmark men played in the war.

February Meeting

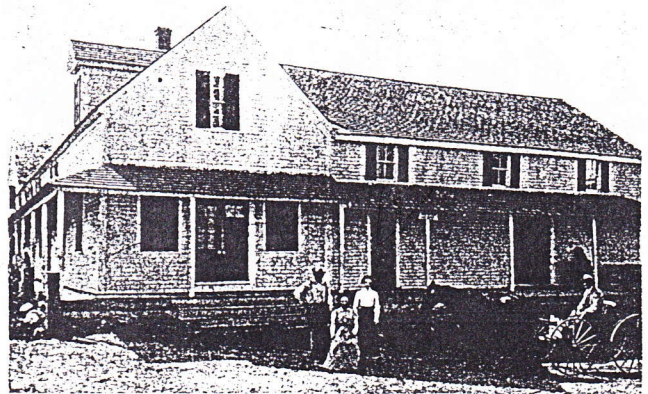
We will be meeting at the Denmark Arts Center on Feb. 14th to discuss fund-raising ideas and possible ways to utilize the space to best advantage. Working together with the Arts Center director and friends we have come up with some unique program possibilities. We'll be discussing these, brainstorming others and setting some dates.

March Meeting

Get set for an entertaining evening March 14th as Percy Lord tells tales of logging experiences in the Maine woods and, specifically, in the Denmark area. Percy worked many years with his father in the woods and at the mill and cooking for the logging crews.

Beck's Store & East Denmark PO Gets New Lease On Life

Many of you will have noticed that renovation has begun on the old house on the corner of Rte. 117 and Sebago Road. The old place, last owned by Oscar Freeman, was bought by Dane Beck Holdings Trust and Mr. Jason Stearns, Jr. started work on the foundations and sills last Fall. With no heat, work has been suspended for a few months. He has changed the face of the building, moving doors and windows according to the plan to make it into a single family dwelling. Next issue will have more information on the history of this former store and post office and we'll all be watching its transformation.



At East Denmark - corner of the Sebago Road
Photo probably taken between 1910 and 1915. The building, owned by James Beck, also contained a store. Three of the people in the photo have been tentatively identified as "Jim" Ingalls, standing; "Flossie" Ingalls, his daughter, seated; and Henry Smith, in the buggy.

Our New Post Office Box is #803

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