

WINTER ACTIVITIES OF AN EARLIER TIME IN THE AREA

Ice Harvesting (continued)

A dance program dated 1890 lists the Labadie Ice Co. on Island Lake, which had acquired the Beaubian Ice Co. some time prior to that date. Edwin Labadie's father, from Ecorse, with horses and a crew of men had large ice houses. The one at Island Lake was located near the present bath house and beach in the Island Lake Recreation Area. A railroad siding was built to run the box cars into place for filling. The workers and the Labadie family lived in two houses nearby. The Labadie Ice Co. also harvested ice from the Detroit River. The Island Lake facility was sold in 1918.

The Crystal McFadden Ice Co., also at Island Lake, hired 30-40 laborers each year. Wages of \$1.50 per ten hour day were paid in 1900. This was increased to \$4.00 per day by 1920. The men worked hard during the few months ice cutting was in full swing. The ice house was on the north side of the Detroit, Lansing and Northern railroad crossing of Academy Drive, where the Michigan National Guard Camp was located. The Guard already was making use of the ice by 1884.

When ice was a minimum 8-10" thick, which some years was in December, that was the signal for work to begin. A winter with early snow was cause for concern since it would delay the freezing of the water. Some companies kept the snow cleaned off the ice to ensure deep freezing and others left it on, once it was thick, to lessen the chance of melting during a January thaw. Some considered ice free of snow to be more pure. When horses were used on the ice they were 'sharp shod' to help prevent slipping while cleaning the snow from the ice with a plow.

Cutting the ice in long straight rows to within an inch of the water allowed the men to work and not fall through. A second row was cut which, when the ice (cut in blocks) was removed, formed a channel through which blocks cut farther out on the lake were pushed to the shore. Water filled the channel to the top of the ice and as each block was cut it bobbed up and could be moved by means of spuds and tongs along the channel.

Commercial markets spurred improvement of the process: going from a man powered saw, to one worked by a horse (who had a rope tied around its neck to pull it out of the water if necessary), to a saw powered by a gas engine. The saw also had a 'bobbin' attached for retrieval from the water if necessary. This saw moved so quickly extra care was required by the worker to avoid injury.

The large ice companies built chutes and conveyers, run by a steam engine, up which the ice was raised onto the mounting layers in the ice house. There it was packed with saw dust and marsh hay. Working from dawn to dark tons of ice were harvested each day. During the night one worker periodically pushed a block along the channel to keep it from freezing shut by the next morning. Those who harvested only for themselves tugged and hauled the large blocks onto a stone boat and with much grunting and puffing put each block in place in the family ice house. (Prepared by Marieanna Bair, To be continued. Comments, corrections, additions desired. 229-6402)

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