

PILOT LOG 2006

The Ice Houses

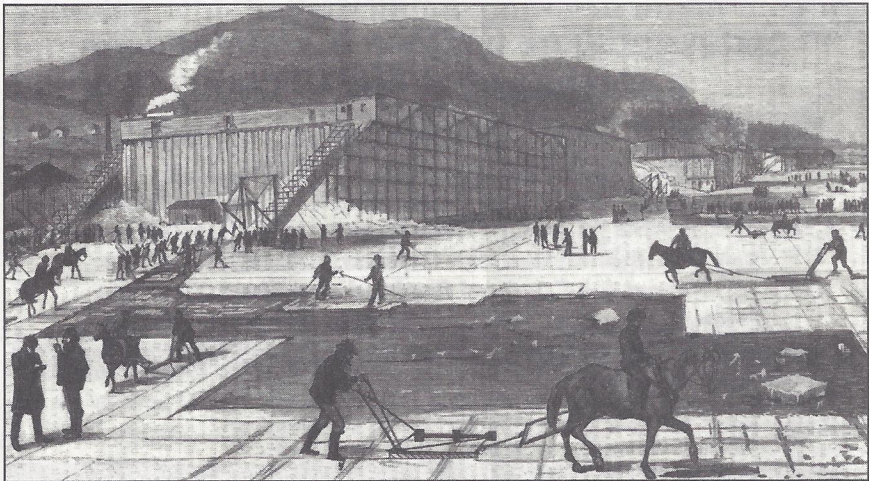
One of the major industries along the upper Hudson River, prior to World War I, was the natural ice business. The ice, once it had reached a desired thickness of at least 12 inches, was cut, or harvested, and stored in huge double-walled wooden structures known as ice houses.

The invention and marketing of the home electric refrigerator quickly brought the industry to an end after World War I. Prior to this, almost every household would have had an ice box and used natural ice. Most of the ice for New York City came from the upper Hudson and was delivered to the market by special barges in long River tows.

Before World War I, the River would normally begin to freeze over by mid December, at which time all navigation on the River would cease. This was due to two factors. At that time, virtually all commercial vessels were made of wood and new ice would raise havoc with a wooden hull. Also, coal was the most common fuel used for heating and coal all came into the area by railroad, eliminating the need to keep the river open in the winter.

During the warmer months of the year, a common sight in city residential areas was an ice wagon pulled by a horse delivering ice in quantities desired by the home owner.

In November, most of the horses owned by the ice companies would be taken to the steamboat piers and put on board the freight and passenger boats for transportation to the up-river ice houses. The steamers would stop at the ice



Ice Cutting: Ice Cutting at Rondout from Harper's Weekly 1874. Large icehouses recede into the distance as busy workers illustrate the many tasks of ice harvesting including marking the ice fields with horse-drawn plows, poling the ice blocks in towards shore, and the conveyer belt moving the ice up into the icehouse.

house docks, and there a number of horses put ashore for later work on the ice, clearing snow, marking out the ice fields, pulling large pieces of ice through a cut channel to the ice house for storage, etc. The following spring, the process would be reversed and the horses returned to their summer employment of delivering the ice to the city dwellers.

Working on the ice was hard, back breaking, and cold wet work, the work day starting, during the harvest, at dawn and ending at dusk, six days a week. Most of the work, sawing the ice, pushing and pulling the ice cakes by long pike poles, and storing the ice inside the ice houses was pure manual labor. The pay was often but a \$1.50 a day. It was not unusual at the peak of the ice harvest for the workers to strike for more money. The settlement would depend on how much ice was already in the ice house and the weather forecast -- since during a mild winter it was crucial to harvest the ice at the right point in time.

The electric refrigerator and artificial ice making brought the natural ice industry to an abrupt end. The large ice houses gradually passed from the scene. Some were torn down, others burned to the ground in impressive fires and a very few survived until World War II for the growing of mushrooms.

— by Roger Mabie



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