

Ice Harvest

Edward I. Maxwell
(Adapted by ReadWorks)



Refrigerators were invented to keep people's food fresh. But before then, people needed to find different ways to keep food fresh.

Some people would build basements in their houses, where food could stay cool. Others built sheds to store food. Dried and preserved foods could stay there all year round without going bad. But some foods couldn't just be kept cool or dry. They needed to stay cold. For those foods, people would gather, or harvest, ice.

During the winter, freshwater lakes and streams in some places would freeze. A sheet of ice would form on top of the water. This sheet would often be one foot thick.

The ice-cutters would ride their horse-drawn sleds to the frozen lakes and streams. These harvesters would cut long sheets of ice, using different tools like saws, picks and hooks. With their horses, they would pull the ice to the sides of the river or lake. Then they'd cut the ice sheet into blocks. This work took a long time, and required patience. Once all the blocks had been cut, the ice harvesters would pack the blocks onto their sleds. They'd ride back to town, where they would store the large blocks in an ice house. The ice house was usually a large, insulated building. It had material in the walls that would keep the inside of the building cold. Because it was insulated, the ice house could store ice all year without the ice melting.

People known as icemen would deliver the ice to places around town. They would bring the ice to homes, stores and restaurants. Individual homes might have an icebox to keep food cold. This was often a wooden box with a place to put the block of ice next to the food. Underneath the box would be a pan or pot. These would collect any water that dripped down as the ice melted.

Some people had another very interesting way to store food with ice. Buffalo hunters would kill some buffalo during the winter. Next, they'd dig a large hole in the ground and line it with blocks of ice. Then, they'd lower the meat into the hole and cover it up. Over the winter, the meat would freeze solid. Because it was frozen, the meat would stay preserved and unspoiled into the summer. In the middle of the summer, the hunters would go back to these holes. There, they could dig up their well-preserved meat from the winter.

In the early 1900s, there were many large businesses that had to do with ice. These businesses helped harvest, store, and sell ice. Around this time, cities were getting bigger. More and more people were around who needed to keep food fresh, so ice businesses could make a lot of money. But once the refrigerator was invented and people could buy them, there was little need for ice harvesting. Now in the United States, large chunks of ice are rarely harvested. When they are, it's to make ice sculptures and other large pieces of ice art.