

MANSFIELD MEMORIES: Ice harvesting was a thriving business

By Kevin McNatt and Andrew Todesco

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MANSFIELD - There are many ways a farmer might attract customers when local produce is out of season. An ice cream stand in the summer or a corn maze in the fall keeps them coming back. But in a bygone era farmers and fuel dealers had another revenue stream courtesy of Mother Nature: ice harvesting.

Ice harvesting was a common practice in colder climates from the 1800s to well into the 20th century. Imagine the days before electric refrigeration. A household had to rely on the iceman to keep meat and dairy products fresh. A chunk of ice delivered regularly kept home ice boxes cool year-round.

Ponds froze over reliably a century ago. When they did teams of ice harvesters would venture out onto frozen lakes and ponds. With large saws they would systematically cut the ice into cakes. At first the cutting was done by hand, later by horse-drawn equipment.

The ice cakes would be moved by long poles through a channel to the icehouse. In later years the ice cakes were brought into the ice house by a chain hoist. The ice was usually packed in sawdust, which would prevent melting even in the summer. The harvesting process is far more detailed than described here. We would recommend additional reading and viewing on the Internet.

The local iceman now had a supply of ice to peddle around town. He would cut the blocks into smaller chunks and load them onto his wagon. If a customer placed a sign in his window indicating the need for ice that day, the iceman delivered a fresh piece to the kitchen icebox. The chunk usually lasted a few days.

Mansfield had many ice dealers over the years. Newspaper accounts consistently relay stories of ice freezing to a depth of 10 to 12 inches. The Consolidated Ice Company of East Mansfield had a crew that was able to harvest 700 tons in one day in February 1913.

A local early ice dealer was Warren B. Wilson. A 1906 advertisement from Wilson and his partner F.A. Bushnell informed customers there would be a new price structure



“on account of the shortage in the ice crop.” A 20-pound chunk of ice would now cost 10 cents.

While providing the latest in refrigeration and convenience, not everyone looked forward to the ice harvest. Consider this tidbit from *The Mansfield News*, February 1889: “between two and three hundred ladies and gentlemen were skating on Fulton’s Pond Saturday afternoon and evening. The young men played polo and displayed a good deal of skill in the game. The young people are

dreading the ice-cutting which will interfere with their skating decidedly.”



Pop Kirley’s icehouse in Whiteville

A later ice dealer that long-time residents might still remember was Pop Kirley. Pop ran a fuel and ice business on Shawmut Avenue. He also harvested ice at Whiteville Pond in East Mansfield until the early 1940s. He had an advanced operation, featuring a chain hoist to deliver the 200 pound ice cakes into the ice house. They were packed carefully in a layer of pine sawdust for insulation. A few of Pop Kirley’s ice houses in Whiteville were three stories high.

By the 1940s the ice business was coming to an end. The long familiar sign in a customer’s window would soon disappear. The kitchen icebox was gradually replaced by a new electric refrigerator. And the annual ice harvest became a memory.