

# Natural ice—a business "down the drain"

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get, particularly toward the season's end.

Some years the water might freeze as thick as two feet or more before time permitted the harvest. This was not good, either, because flat cakes would not roll in handling where thick ones would.

Harvesting in the dead of winter was cold and wet work. Sometimes a man would slip into the water. Fortunate for him if he had the engine room to dry out in; otherwise, it was a long, cold trip home for a change of clothes. Horses often would slip, too.

For the year 1881, records show that Hittinger employed 175 men and 50 horses to fill his Forge Pond house. Later he sent 35,000 tons to Boston which John P. Squire used in processing and storing meat products. He stored 50,000 tons for the southern market.

Harvesting ice in New England was big business. It started from Boston when Frederic Tudor in 1805 sent a small cargo to Martinique, the place where we now send tourists.

A decade later, cargoes went to Cuba, then to Charleston and Savannah and by 1820 to New Orleans. Soon merchants were shipping "solid chunks of New England weather" to Canton and Calcutta, to London and Brazil. New York state entered the competitive picture, too, when the yearly demand of New York in the 1870s was 300,000 tons. Thoreau wrote about the "

pure Walden water mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges."

**BY THE TURN** of the century, mechanical refrigeration began to take its toll on the natural ice business. It already had started in Florida as early as 1851. It appeared first into the big plants, and then trickled down to the household. When General Motors introduced its household model, those who could afford this new home luxury bought a "Frigidaire," a name which stuck early to every make whether it be a General Electric monitor top or a gas-fed Electrolux.

Folks found mechanical refrigeration clean, fast, dependable and usable every month of the year. Its ice was made from the purest of water.

No longer did the iceman leave a trail of water on the pantry floor, nor did the ice pan beneath the ice box overflow. In extreme hot weather, milk no longer soured nor did butter get soft. And no longer could the person who caroused at night at the corner bar alibi his headache on "bad ice" the next morning!

All over, during and right after World War I, ice houses began to disappear from the landscape. The bright card left in the kitchen window to tell the man in the street how much ice to leave was torn up. And kids, following the dripping ice wagon for slivers of ice, had to turn to lollipops.

Natural ice was a business

gone down the drain!

**SOME ICE** houses were left to rot and tumble down, others were salvaged for the well-weathered boards and timbers. But Hittinger's complex at Forge Pond, by now owned by Daniel Gage Ice Company of Lowell, suffered a severe blow.

Right at the height of the summer ice business, in August, 1920, somehow the huge building caught fire. The flames and smoke could be seen for miles and the best the local firefighters could do was to wet down the surrounding neighborhood and homes to prevent the conflagration from spreading.

The next day and for days after, the ruins smoldered. A wag in the newsroom could have written this headline:

"50,000 Tons of Ice Reduced to Ashes!"

The loss was set at \$111,000 with \$75,000 for the building. The insurance coverage was only \$30,500.

**EVEN THOUGH** the ice business was failing badly, Gage rebuilt on the same spot, but the set of buildings lasted only for another decade. Another conflagration took place in July, 1931, with records showing that the building was torched by "unknown parties," which was the final demise of what once had been a big enterprise. The difference on this occasion was that there was no harvest that year, the building was empty, and the ashes were undiluted with ice water.