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Westford Recollections

by June W. Kennedy

#36

Ice HARVESTING Part II

By JUNE W. KENNEDY
A Slippery Ride

It was no great problem to handle the cakes in the water because they floated with one-tenth of their weight above the surface, as every school child knows. Small operators used horsepower attached to a block and tackle to raise the cakes up the ramps; Hittinger had the advantage of steam power. The idea was to lift the cakes substantially above the level being filled, then release them onto chutes where the cakes would slide by their own weight along on wooden rails. Men along the way would steer the cakes around corners to proper resting places. As the ice house filled, the cakes would be carried higher and chutes then raised. Each course had to be level so that gliding cakes would not snag on projections. Thickness of the cakes was standardized. As they rode up the incline, a crossbar knife would scrape off the surplus top, probably "snow ice," which was not too desirable.

Determined by Weather

Ideal thickness was about 12 inches of clear ice, which did not melt as fast, but if a mild winter occurred, the icemen would have to reap whatever they could get, particularly toward the season's end. The price of ice would go up the following summer.

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 and fall into the water. Fortunate for him if he had the warm engine room in which to dry out; 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 also stored 50,000 tons for the southern market.

Daniel Gage Ice Company

In its latter years the ice industry at Forge Pond was operated by the Daniel Gage Company of Lowell. Gage supplied the city of Lowell. In fact, they made their own ice wagons and had their own wheelwright and harness shop, plus numerous stables. Bob Spinner recollects, "At the end of each harvesting season Gage sharpened all the equipment and put it away till the next year. So many extra men were needed for harvesting that an extra car was put on the train. It left Forge Village each night at 6:30 p.m. for Lowell. The regular drivers lived in the bunk house over the boiler room; they bunked there and had a cooking room. During its last year of operation 90,000 tons of ice were harvested from Forge Pond."

He Cometh No More

By the turn of the century, mechanical refrigeration began to take its toll on the natural ice business. When General Motors introduced its household model, those who could afford this new luxury bought a "Frigidaire," a name which "froze" 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.

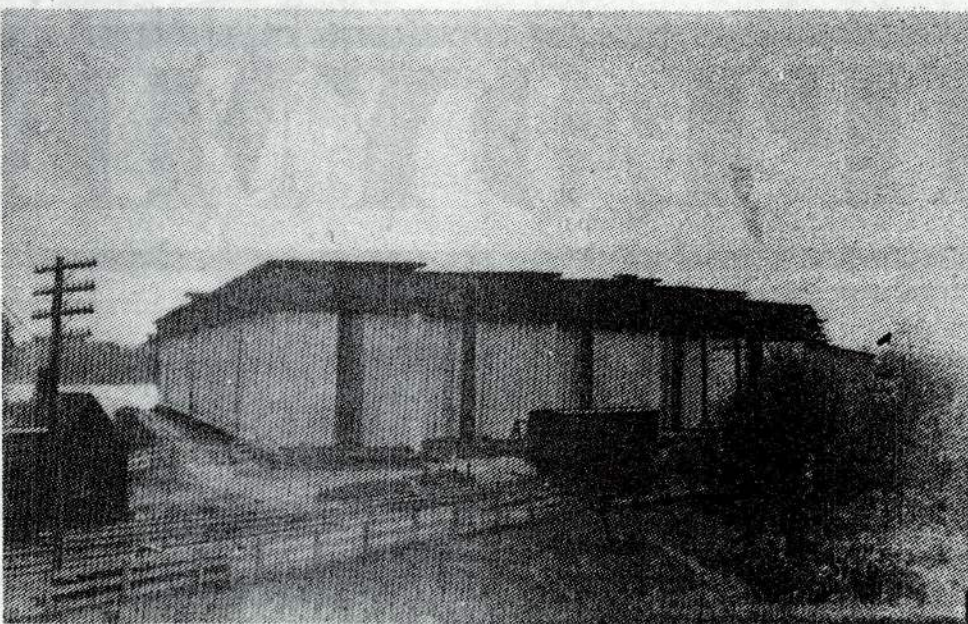
No longer did the iceman leave a trail of water on the pantry floor, nor did the ice pan beneath the ice box overflow. In extreme hot weather, milk no longer soured nor did butter get soft. And no longer could the person who caroused at night at the corner bar alibi his headache on "bad ice" the next 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 cart how much ice to leave, was torn up. And kids, following the dripping ice wagon for slivers of ice, had to turn to lollipops. Eventually, natural ice was a business gone down the drain.

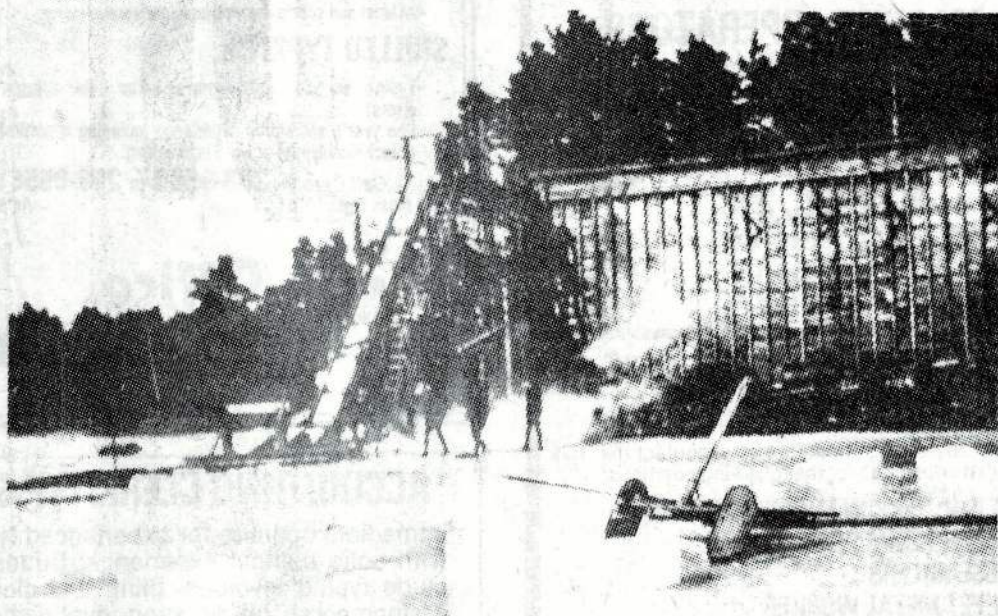
Houses Disappeared

Some ice houses were left to rot and tumble down, others were demolished. The complex at Forge Pond suffered a severe blow. Right at the height of the summer ice business, August 2, 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 loss was set at \$111,000 with \$75,000 for the building. The insurance coverage was on \$30,500. Even though the ice business was failing badly, Gage rebuilt on the same spot, but the set of buildings lasted only another decade. Another conflagration took place on July 14, 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 here in the town of Westford.

Credit to Gordon B. Seavey for this article.
This is article No. 36 in the continuing
WESTFORD RECOLLECTIONS 250th Anniversary Series.



During its last year of operation (1931), the Daniel Gage Ice Co. harvested 90,000 tons of ice from Forge Pond. (From the WESTFORD RECOLLECTIONS Series)



Operators at Burge's Pond used horsepower attached to a block and tackle to raise the ice cakes up the ramps and into the icehouse. (From the WESTFORD RECOLLECTIONS Series)

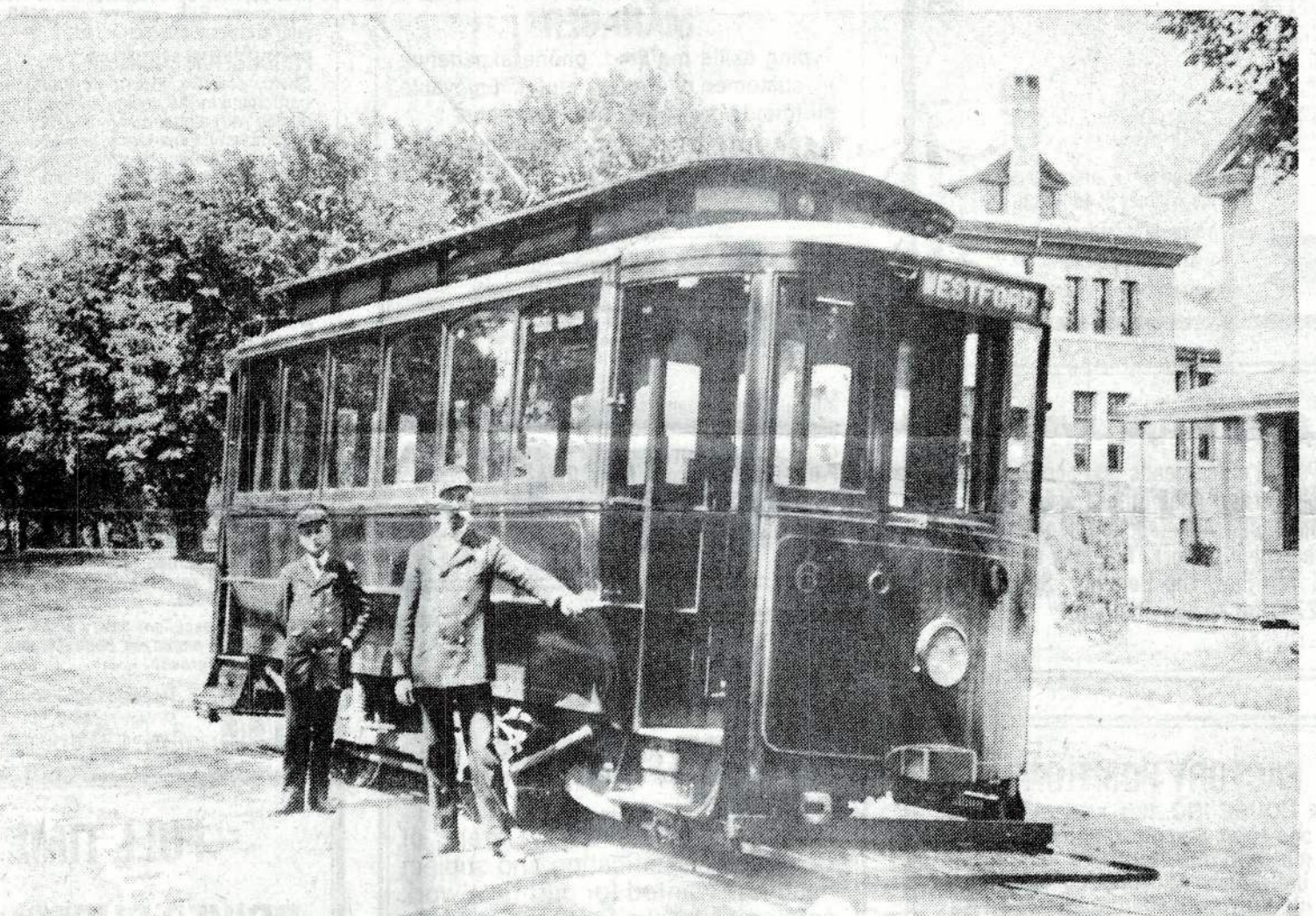
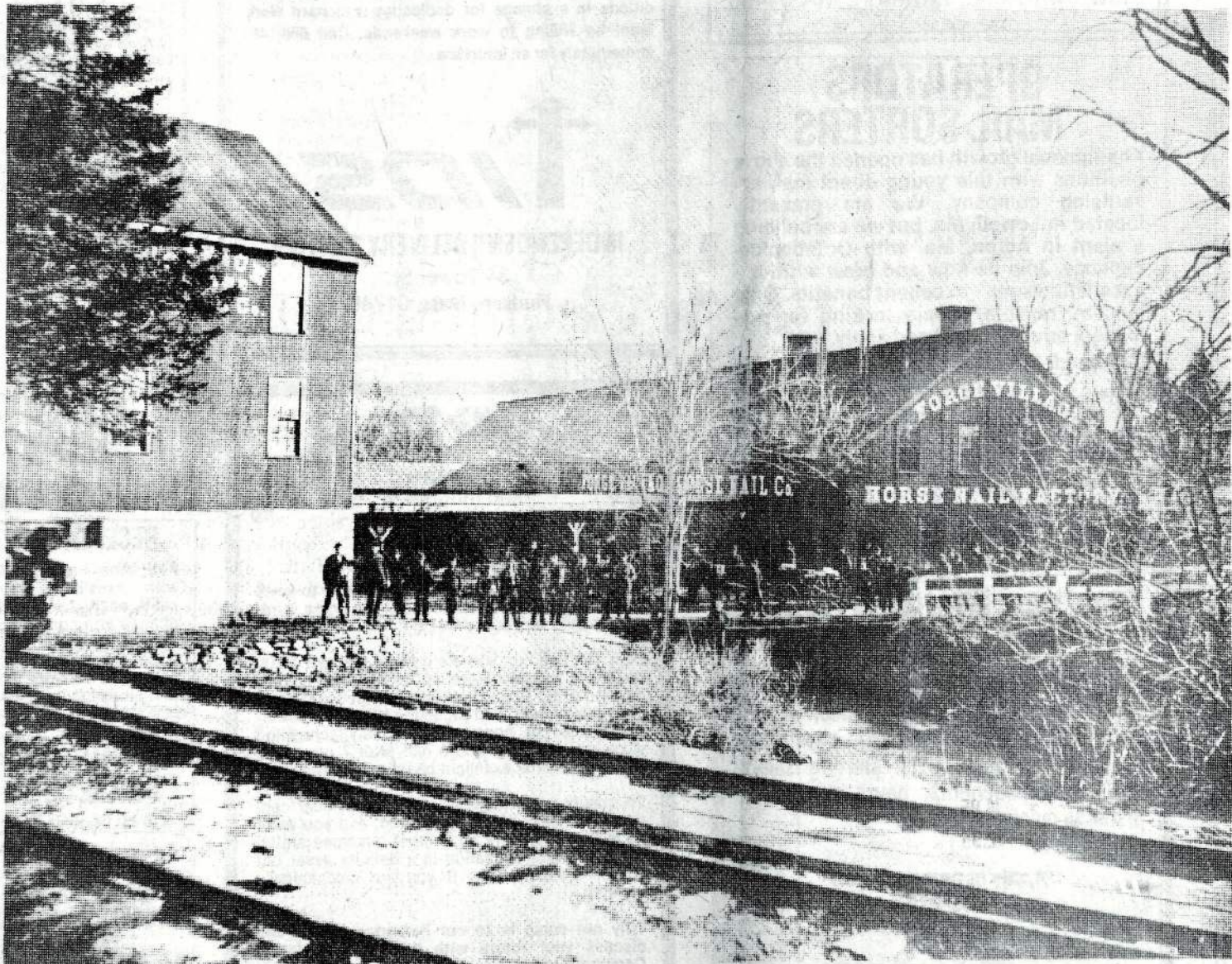


Photo of the Forge Village Horse Nail Co. from the forthcoming WESTFORD RECOLLECTIONS 1729-1979 hard cover book authored by June W. Kennedy. This photo documentary, to be released in early Sept., is a limited

edition of 1,000 copies. Over 500 books have been reserved to date. Townspeople may call or visit the "Book-tique" at 6 Carlisle Place in Westford to place orders. (From the WESTFORD RECOLLECTIONS Series)



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FORGE VILLAGE, MASS.

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