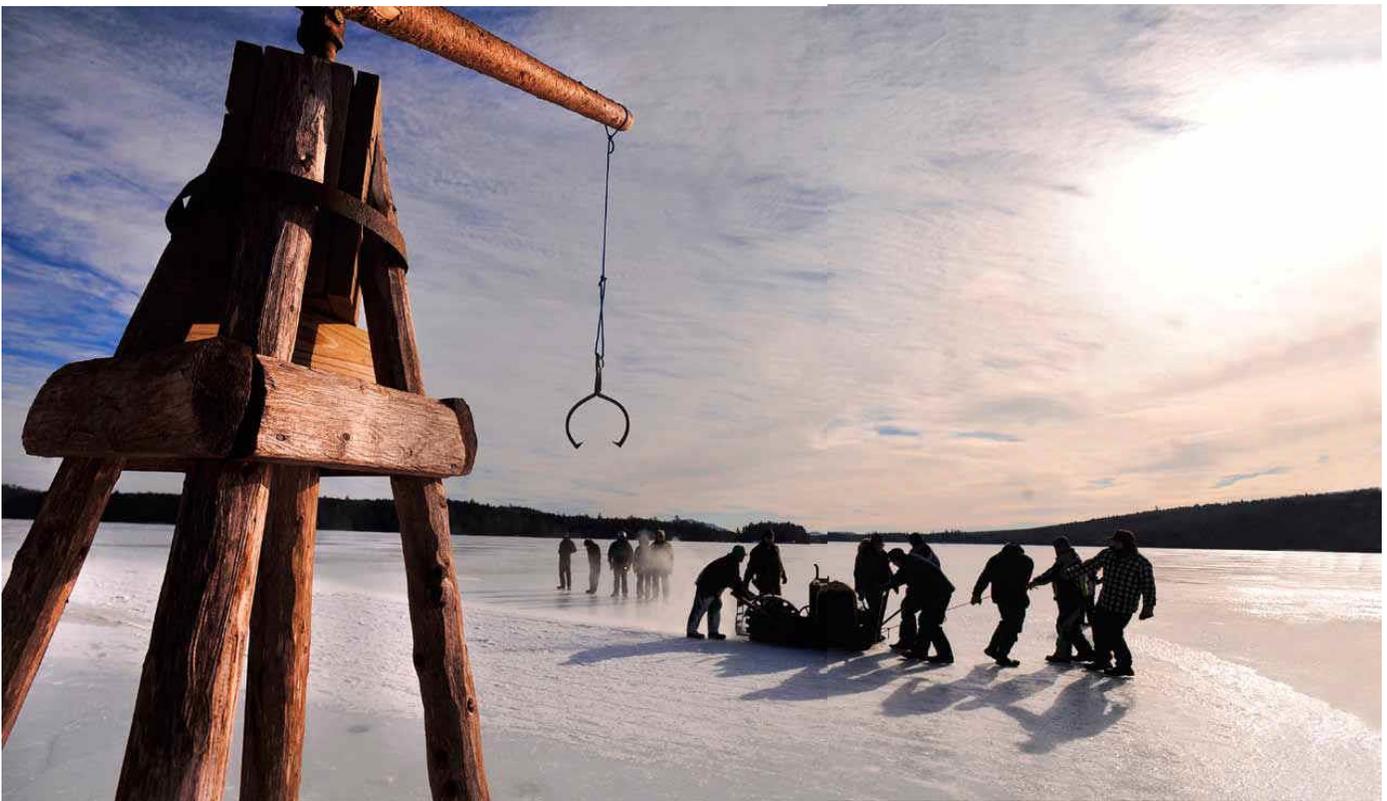


ICE HARVEST

Article by Paul Fournier - Country Magazine - January 2014

We rounded a point on the wilderness lake, and a scene right out of Currier and Ives stopped us dead in our tracks. Burly, brightly garbed men were hard at work cutting ice from the frozen lake with handsaws while smoke curled from the chimneys of a cluster of snow-covered log cabins on the shore behind them.



A 1930s vintage power saw and homemade ice hoist at Cobb's Pierce Pond Camps

Finally my wife, Anita, breathed, "It's like a scene from the past." In the 19th and early 20th centuries, enterprising New Englanders cut millions of tons of ice from their rivers and lakes, loaded it on sailing ships and sold it around the world. Maine shipped 1.5 million tons in 1882 alone. Icemen and iceboxes persisted in small towns until late in the 1930s. As a very young child, I remember seeing a big, gentle chestnut horse pulling an ice wagon down the streets of my hometown of Chisholm, Maine. When a truck replaced the wagon, we'd chase it down the street to grab ice chips off the tailgate. Today a few wilderness resorts in Maine still cut ice from pure waters and store it under hay or sawdust until it's needed to chill a summer drink or preserve the freshness of a trout caught for tomorrow's breakfast. We were lucky enough to visit one of these resorts, Nugent's Wilderness Camps on Chamberlain Lake in the Allagash Wilderness, while this backbreaking but cherished tradition lives on in Maine's remote wilderness camps.



Blocks of pristine ice sawed from Munsungun Lake (above) will cool next summer's catch at Bradford Camps in the North Maine Woods.

Legendary founders Patty and Allen Nugent were still running the place. They shared their remote retreat— 50 miles from the nearest power line— with hardy wilderness fishermen and campers for nearly half a century. Fortified with one of Patty's lumberjack breakfasts, the ice-harvesting crew started by marking off the cutting field into straight saw lines about a foot apart. In a labor-saving concession to modern technology, they used a chain saw to score along the lines and save a bit of hand sawing. After the snow layer was cut into blocks and carted off, the ice field resembled a square pond. "It's a job that requires both muscle and patience. You have to let the saw do its work, and there's simply no way to speed it up." But a 2-foot-thick layer of coveted blue ice waited a foot beneath the water's surface. Al chiseled a hole in one corner and the sawyers inserted freshly filed handsaws. Then began the slow, tedious process of sawing the block loose. With two sawyers at work, the sharp teeth of the saws nibbled their way around the big square, advancing an inch or so with each stroke. All hands, including yours truly, took turns at manning the heavy saws. It's a job that requires both muscle and patience. You have to let the saw do its work, and there's simply no way to speed it up. Finally, the saws met at the far corner and— nothing happened. We'd done all that work for nothing? Then one of the men took a long-handled chisel and began poking and probing along the edges. "Must be some chips wedging it in," he muttered. Then: "She's coming up!" Ponderously, like a great blue whale, the massive ice block rose. One end thrust up into the air, streaming water, and then settled back as the ice floe leveled itself. The sawing then began anew as the big block, which weighed several tons, was cut into rectangular cakes and hauled up onto the ice. The giant cubes glistened cold blue in the bright afternoon sun. While the others sawed, Al loaded the sledge with ice and made repeated trips up the snowy trail to the icehouse, where his right-hand man, Lee, packed the ice cakes in tight layers. Snow packed between layers and tamped into cracks ensures that the ice lasts as long as possible. They'd get around to covering it with an insulating layer of sawdust in a few days.

It took two days— and several more of Patty's fortifying repasts— to fill the icehouse. Then, with next year's supply of firewood stacked in huge piles in the woodsheds, and their root cellar still stocked with a good supply of homegrown food from last summer's vegetable garden, the Nugents could sit back and await the arrival of the spring. Not so long ago, most Americans shared Patty and Al's simple— some would say primitive— lifestyle.

It wasn't an easy life, but self-reliance gave us a sense of security we may all come to envy as the world becomes increasingly interconnected, complex and unpredictable.



After the power saw scores lines in the cutting field, it takes pure muscle to cut the ice into blocks and pack it into the icehouse at Cobb's Pierce Pond Camps near North New Portland, Maine.

More Maine ice-harvesting photos at country-magazine.com/ice-harvest