The Dawn of New York's Ice Age

In a sultry season, when life without central air seems inconceivable, it's hard to imagine an era when ice was worth fighting for.

BY EDWARD T. O'CONNELL

It was, in the words of one reporter, "a precious commodity," and to the great advantage of the city's citizens, its price was once again on the rise.

The president of the city's Board of aldermen, who resided in a "Lower East Side" dory, Theodore F. Heller, called it "disastrous," and predicted that thousands would perish.

It was the spring of 1896, and the city's ice merchants were at it again.

In an age of ubiquitous air-conditioning and refrigeration, it's hard to comprehend just how 19th-century New Yorkers depended on ice. By the 19th century, ice was a valuable commodity that could be transported and stored for commercial use.

The ice trade was already a well-established business in New York and other cities, with large blocks of ice being cut and transported to customers via wagons.

The availability of ice meant more than cool drinks in the summer; it changed New York's diet. In the winter, ice was used for storing food in cold storage.

Demand for ice grew so rapidly that by 1896 New Yorkers of all classes were consuming 325,000 tons annually. That same year brought the introduction of the Rundacker Ice Company, an enterprise that quickly became the city's largest supplier.

Rundacker developed a massive ice harvesting operation on Rundacker Lake in New York City. It employed thousands of men to cut huge blocks of ice and load them onto railroad cars for transport to customers.

The ice trade was also a major source of employment for thousands of workers, many of whom were immigrants from Europe.

As the ice trade grew, so did the demand for new and improved ice-cutting equipment. In 1898, the Rundacker brothers introduced a new ice-cutting machine that revolutionized the industry.

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Edward T. O'Connell is the author of "19th Century: The Story of the Steamboat and Steamship Industry."