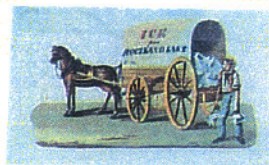


CITY LORE

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'DONNELL

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

The president of the city's Board of Health deemed the situation "an outrage." A Lower East Side doctor, Theodore F. Heller, called it "disgraceful" and predicted that thousands would perish.

It was the spring of 1899, and the city's ice barons were at it again.

In an age of ubiquitous air-conditioning and refrigeration, it's hard to comprehend just how much 19th-century New Yorkers depended on ice. By the 18th century, ice-houses were standard features on most estates in Europe and even Colonial America, but for the common man and woman, especially in cities, ice in warm weather was as rare and expensive a commodity as caviar.

That began to change 200 years ago this summer when, on Aug. 5, 1805, an ambitious Massachusetts man named Frederick Tudor set out to single-handedly create the world's first commercial ice industry. A charismatic scion of a wealthy family, a tall, balding man with a gaze of hawklike intensity, Tudor possessed an almost evangelical commitment to the enterprise. "People believe me not when I tell them I am going to carry ice to the West Indies," he confided in his diary the following winter. "Let those laugh who win." Seven months later, a ship filled with 130 tons of ice cut from a Massachusetts pond arrived in the Caribbean is-

land of Martinique.

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Plagued by what he called "a villainous train of events," Tudor struggled for nearly three decades, but his perseverance finally paid off. Along with his workers, the man who became known as the Ice King developed equipment and techniques that would allow ice to be harvested, transported and stored for commercial sale; by the 1830's, Tudor was shipping his product to the West Indies, India and even Australia.

He and his followers soon discovered, however, that the largest single market for ice was New York. "I do not imagine," the English novelist and travel writer Fanny Trollope observed in her 1832 treatise, "Domestic Manners of the Americans," referring to a recent stay in Manhattan, "there is a home without the luxury of a piece of ice to cool the water and harden the butter."

Demand for ice grew so rapidly that by 1855 New Yorkers of all classes were consuming 285,000 tons annually. That same year brought the incorporation of the Knick-

erbocker Ice Company, an enterprise that quickly became the city's largest supplier. Knickerbocker developed a massive ice harvesting operation at Rockland Lake in Nyack and along the banks of the upper Hudson River, and during the winter months it employed thousands of men to cut huge blocks of ice and haul them to scores of large ice warehouses. When the warm weather set in, barges carried the product to the Manhattan docks, where it was transferred to icehouses dotted around the city and then distributed to customers via ice wagons.

The availability of cheap and plentiful ice meant more than cool drinks in the summer; it changed New Yorkers' basic diet. Butchers, fishmongers and dairymen began to use ice to preserve their stocks, leading to significant improvement in food quality and public health. Ice also greatly increased the diversity of culinary offerings available to New Yorkers as importers found ways to preserve previously exotic delights like

freshwater fish. Ice cream, once the rarest of treats, became so popular that in 1850 a leading women's magazine declared it a basic necessity.

Ice had the additional effect of transforming New York into the nation's first beer capital by allowing for year-round brewing; in 1879, 121 breweries were operated in Manhattan and Brooklyn. But as much as the city's beer makers and drinkers applauded these innovations, not everyone was equally pleased, to the extent that in the summer of 1880, temperance advocates established a "Moderation Fountain" at City Hall Park, providing free ice water as an alternative to the offerings of the city's countless saloons.

Ice also delivered an impressive array of medical benefits. Doctors at Bellevue and other hospitals soon discovered that ice could save lives and began prescribing it as a means of lowering the body temperature of fever victims, especially the young. During the summer, city hospitals issued free

WHEN THE ICEMEN CAME

As late as the mid-1930's, ice deliverymen were a fixture in New York neighborhoods like Harlem, left and below left. Far left, an 1840's illustration of a Knickerbocker truck.



ice tickets to the poor, and crowds often grew so anxious outside free ice depots during heat waves that free-for-all known as ice riots erupted. According to an account in The New York Times of one incident in July 1906, "a woman pulled a man's mustache and another woman hit a man with a dishpan," and within minutes, "the ice was scattered on the sidewalk and hundreds were engaged in a rough-and-tumble fight."

By the 1880's, about 1,500 ice wagons plied the city streets every day, with Knickerbocker's bright yellow wagons one of the most recognizable vehicles. The burly, typically Italian iceman, a huge block of ice slung over his back and gripped with a pair of tongs, became as familiar a fixture on the urban landscape as the beat cop.

During a typical week in the 1880's, an iceman might deliver as much as 80 tons of ice, much of it carted up multiple flights of narrow and rickety stairs. The iceman's daily interactions with housewives gave rise to countless bawdy jokes, an occurrence immortalized in Eugene O'Neill's drama "The Iceman Cometh," set in 1912.

WHILE New Yorkers clearly loved their ice — Manhattan and Brooklyn consumed 1.3 million tons in 1879, more than a quarter of the national market — they loathed the companies that provided it, and in the 1880's and 1890's, a rising chorus of critics charged these firms with price gouging and monopolistic practices. In response, Knickerbocker and its competitors blamed the summer price increases on mild winters that produced insufficient stocks — "ice famines," in the parlance of the day.

In 1896, anger turned to alarm when Knickerbocker and most of the city's other firms were absorbed into a massive national ice trust called the Consolidated Ice Company. Prices jumped 33 percent that spring, and more than doubled by mid-summer. Hardest hit were the poor, who could afford to buy their ice, like their winter coal, only in small quantities.

Popular outrage reached new heights four years later when investigative journalists revealed that Mayor Robert Van Wyck and other city officials had conspired to create a virtual monopoly for Consolidated. As the price of ice doubled, new revelations showed that the mayor and his brother had been given \$1.7 million in Consolidated stock. The investigations produced no convictions, but the mayor, hounded by catcalls of "Ice! Ice! Ice!" whenever he appeared in public, was soundly defeated by a reform ticket in the election of 1901.

New York's ice age, however, was brought to a close not by reformers but by inventors. In the spring of 1916, the city's newspapers began carrying large ads for the Domelre electric refrigerator. Promoted as "The Electric Iceman," it promised to deliver "no ice — just cold." Domelre and its successors would not become a basic feature of most New York homes for several decades, but by 1950 the iceman had been become as much a relic of a long-ago age as the blacksmith and the lamplighter.

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