

How did ice put Lake Mills on the map and what summer sport did it support?

Imagine yourself back in the time when Wisconsin was first becoming a state. The year is 1848, there is no electricity, no refrigerator, no cold beer, none of the modern conveniences we take for granted today. Everything you ate you grew yourself and worked diligently to preserve. It was helpful to live near a source of fresh water for cooking, cleaning and preserving foods. The Lake Mills area was an ideal site to homestead, located as it is between two rivers and a beautiful pristine lake. As the village grew, so did the economy and its dependence on the lake and its resources.

Interestingly, living on lake front property was regarded in Victorian times as cold, damp, and unhealthy. Most of the village of Lake Mills grew around the downtown area and radiated from north and south along the main street. The lakefront was not heavily populated with houses but with business and industrial enterprises like the growing ice business. The technique of harvesting and storing ice was becoming big business out East near the big cities. Spearheading much of the development in the expanding industry were companies like the Washington and Knickerbocker ice companies of upstate New York.

The need to harvest and store ice became a household necessity very quickly. In the 1890's you could purchase an icebox with two compartments, a wooden box similar to today's refrigerator, with a block of ice resting in one compartment and food to be kept chilled in the other. The waters of Rock Lake were clear, cold, and accessible from several sites perfect to support the growing need.

In January of 1890 the Washington Ice Company built a huge ice warehouse on the shores of Rock Lake, where Sandy Beach is now located. The four story, 600-foot long (two football fields) building could hold 50,000 tons of ice and had a 44-foot high slide ramp. The Chicago-Northwestern rail line located its rail line across the marshland to serve the ice house. A spur from the rail line ran directly from the ice house and linked Rock Lake ice with the growing cities of Chicago and Milwaukee. In 1900 the Knickerbocker Ice Company purchased the building. At this time its ice capacity had doubled to 100,000 tons of ice. The building was so large that the flat topped roof was used as a baseball diamond!

Ice harvesting technology at that time was very basic. Ice was harvested by cutting a checkerboard pattern into the lake using horse-drawn saws. The blocks of ice were then hoisted from the freezing water and stored in insulated ice houses until warmer weather created a demand. This ice was kept frozen by its sheer bulk. The more tightly it could be packed together the longer it would stay cold.

In its heyday the Knickerbocker Ice Company employed over 100 men to cut and store the winter bounty of Rock Lake. So many workers were imported for the harvest that it was both disturbing and profitable for the community. The men were boarded on site and were paid \$1.25 per day. In 1909 the ice harvest was completed on March 4th, and 1,000 railroad cars were loaded with 25 tons of ice in each.

The ice industry eventually became a victim of its own success. America's appetite for ice spurred technology to create mechanical method of freezing. Home delivery of ice continued through the 20's and 30's, but electric refrigerators gradually replaced ice boxes in most households.

Mother Nature also helped bring the era of the large ice house to an end. The Knickerbocker ice house was hit by tornadoes in 1909 and again in 1914. Although there was still harvesting for a number years after the near destruction of the building, it would never come close to what it once was. The last harvest was in 1919, and by 1922 Sandy Beach Resort opened, ushering the change from winter to summer industry on Rock Lake.

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