



# That's cool

*Glimpses of the Past with Karen Webster*



## Keeping it cool

Above is an image captured generations ago of a crew cutting ice in Toronto. The practice was common for many years before the advent of the refrigeration we know and love today, though some local families still adhere to the ages-old practice. *(Courtesy photo)*

Today, when the weather gets rather warm and we wish for a cooling drink, a stroll to the refrigerator will do the trick. Mechanical cooling of our homes, workplaces and stores makes our lives bearable in the heat of summer. But what about our ancestors? What means did they have to seek relief in the dog days of summer? It seems that Mother Nature had a solution. Each January and February, men would harvest ice from ponds, streams, harbours and even Lake Huron.

Copious advice was found in local newspapers each winter about the best ice-harvesting practices. Dairy farms needed ice to keep their milk and cream from becoming sour. Calculations of the amount of ice

needed were based on one and one-half tons of ice per cow. A cubic foot of ice weighs about 57 pounds.

The minimum amount of tools recommended were: two ice saws, one hand marker, one pulley and rope, two pairs of ice tongs, two ice hooks, one pointed bar and one straight edge. Also handy to have would be a horse-drawn plow, scraper and marker, as well as a calking bar. Once the ice had reached an optimum depth, the harvest could begin.

Much manual labour would be employed to mark the ice. A line would be stretched between two stakes and a straight-edged board laid along that line. The ice would then be marked by a hand tool or

hand plow. Markings would be made on the ice in grid fashion. It was necessary to mark and cut the blocks accurately so they would pack together with as little air space as possible between them. Once a hole was made in the ice, a crosscut saw was used to cut the ice. Skill and muscle would be necessary to haul the blocks out of the water and then load them onto sleighs.

Once the ice was harvested, there needed to be an ice-house to store it for the rest of the year. The federal government in 1906 passed the Cold Storage Act that provided grants of 30 per cent of the cost of erecting a cold storage building. This money was paid in installments over a period of five years.

In the ice house, the dimensions

would have to include one foot on the sides and above and below the ice to allow for sawdust that was used for insulation. A smooth plank could be employed to slide the ice from the sleigh to the ice-house. The ice would be packed in with a slight dip towards the centre so that it did not press against the outer walls. When all the ice was in the building, sawdust would be packed around the sides and over the top of the blocks. Each year, fresh sawdust was required.

When the ice was taken out of storage for use, the sawdust had to be washed off of the blocks. Similar to the delivery of bread, ice was transported to homes and businesses. The ice would go into an icebox which had a compartment for food and one for the ice that had a drain to carry water away from the food.

In the *Wingham Advance* newspaper of January 1908, some information was given that included the costs of harvested ice ranging from six cents to 25 cents per ton (\$1.60- \$6.25 in 2023 dollars).

Ice harvesting was not without some dangers. Sometimes, snow would cover where previous ice harvesting had occurred and unsuspecting people would fall through the thinner ice.

It is often said that the winters we have experienced lately are not like they used to be. An argument for that could be found in the March 3, 1895 edition of the *Wingham Times* that relates that ice cutters were securing ice from the dock in Goderich. Temperatures had been quite low at

the time, well below zero Fahrenheit, and that Lake Huron was frozen more than 10 miles out.

With the advent of mechanical means to freeze water, ice houses gradually became a thing of the past. Or did they? Unlike many of the topics found in this column, which have gone by the wayside, the harvesting of ice is still being employed by many families and businesses that are not hooked up to the electrical grid.

Recently, I visited with Rudy and Lizzie Gingerich of East Wawanosh. Along with three other families, they have shares in a pond that was created to be used for ice harvesting. Every winter, in January or February, there is a day of ice cutting and packing the ice houses with large blocks of ice.

The Gingerich family has a storage area in the basement of their home. It is extremely well insulated with Styrofoam, rather than sawdust, and is sealed by a sturdy, thick door that originally came from a former butcher shop. Even five months after harvesting, the blocks have hardly shrunk and are capable of keeping ice cream frozen solid. Some other people have their storage area in outbuildings. Goat farmers who do not have hydro use their ice houses to keep their milk cooled.

The next time you open the refrigerator door to get a chilled beverage or food item, take the time to think of the work that would be necessary to cool those items if mechanical means were not available.

### The greatest burden, sorrow and trouble

(John Owen)

“What a wretched man I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin?” Romans 7:24

I do not understand how a man can be a true believer, in whom sin is not the **greatest burden, sorrow and trouble.**

A Grace Gem  
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## Going deep

On Monday night, the Wingham Blue U9 baseball team made its way to Londesborough for a game with the Legends, much to the delight of the many adoring fans in the stands. *(John Stephenson photo)*

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