

Miller's Mills' Ice Harvest

BY KEVIN HOEHN

As many of us in the Northern parts of the country push through the winter's chilly wind, sleet, and snow with the same determination our ancestors did, looking back at history reminds us that our ancestors had "harvest" on their minds. An ice harvest.

For two centuries in the winter, the people of Miller's Mills have come to Unadilla Lake with long saws, pikes, and tongs to cut pond ice, and then store it for refrigeration needs in warmer months.



Unadilla Lake in Miller's Mills, where the ice comes from. *All photos courtesy of the author.*



MILLERS MILLS
GRANGE  **N° 581**

Miller's Mills Grange No. 581 sign.



The two draft horses that haul the sleigh with the ice up to the storage shed.



Sawing the blocks and loading the ice cakes onto the sleigh.

Miller's Mills is a hamlet located in the Town of Columbia in Herkimer County a few miles south of the Thruway (the population on their website indicates 29+ and the site points out that the number is not a mistake). Every February, weather permitting, the residents, members of the local Grange, church, fire department, and highway department join together to host the annual ice harvest.

Ice harvesting was a large industry in America for about 150 years, from the early 1800s to the mid-1950s, second as an export only to cotton at one point. It was called harvesting because it involved the gathering of the cold-weather "crop." In the spring, summer, and fall, ice was delivered to homes, businesses, and railroads for preserving food. The home icebox may have needed re-icing a couple of times a week, especially during hot summer months.

In the late 1930s, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed an executive order to create the Rural Electrification Administration, which brought electricity to rural areas. This led to mechanical refrigeration and by 1950, 90 percent of American city homes and 80 percent of the rural households had mechanical refrigerators. The ice business could not compete.



The tongs used to grab and haul the blocks of ice.



The cutting blade used to "score" the ice for the saws to cut along.



Sawing the blocks of ice.



Loading the ice cakes onto the sleigh.



Break in the action as the empty sleigh returns to be loaded.



Unloading the ice blocks into the shed, where they will be covered with sawdust and stored until summer.



Using tongs to drag the ice blocks onto a horse drawn sleigh for transportation to the ice house for storage.

The Miller's Mills community maintains the authenticity of a 19th century ice harvest. The hamlet was founded in 1790 by Andrew Miller. Andrew and his six sons ran a gristmill and sawmill on the pond. The ice from the pond was needed to preserve food and to cool farmers' milk.

To begin the process of harvesting, a grid is cut on the surface of the lake that defines each block (this is done with an antique gas-powered machine, the only exception to the traditional tools used). The individual blocks are cut by using 5-foot hand saws and breaker bars. The ice cake is judged by size, thickness, clarity, and weight, as it has been done for over 200 years.

The floating blocks (cakes) are guided to the shoreline with pikes where a ramp

leads up to a horse-drawn sleigh. Tongs are used to snare the ice, pull it up the ramp, and stack the cakes securely on the sleigh. Then, draft horses, who have been used for this work for 200 years, haul the load to the ice house, up on the hill, for the next step.

The secret of the ice harvest is in the packing of the ice as well as in the cutting. A good six inches or more of sawdust is laid around the ice cakes to preserve them as they are stacked. And for all those years, as the load was emptied, the children (and adults) have climbed aboard the empty sleigh for the trip back down to the pond.

The ice harvest, which was once used to keep food cold, is now an event that is used to keep precious memories alive. The mid-winter ice is used in the making of the

Grange's summer ice cream social. It seems to be also making something more than that. It is almost a remembrance of a time and life that has passed. This is one ritual that a town has decided not to change. ▼



Kevin Hoehn is a retired hospital pharmacist. He spends his time enjoying photography, visual storytelling, running, reading, family time, and looking into history. Photo courtesy of the author.