



ICY HARVEST: Men at Frenchman's Bay cut ice for transport to Toronto. Photo from City of Toronto Archives.

'Pure' Lake Simcoe ice was a valued crop

By Jeanne Hopkins

One of the storage depots of the Lake Simcoe Ice Company was located on the shores of Frenchman's Bay. Ice was harvested from Lake Ontario, plus other bodies of water in the city and York County. These huge storage depots were always on railway lines to allow easy access to markets in Toronto.

The Lake Simcoe Ice Company had been incorporated in 1870 in Toronto as the Spring Water Ice Company. This business had started that year in the hollow above Davenport Rd. near Avenue Rd. by James Fairhead. He began supplying ice to butchers, hotels and restaurants in the city. The Spring Water ice was harvested from the lake, and smaller bodies of water in and around the city such as Frenchman's and Ashbridge's Bays, Grenadier Pond, Bond Lake, Lake Wilcox and Lake Simcoe. Ice harvested in the winter was stored in sawdust for summer delivery.

James Fairhead was born in Australia on Dec. 20, 1849 and farmed there with his father until 1870 when he came to Canada. He set up a contracting business in Yorkville and this was followed by a brickyard.

Around 1890, Fairhead set up the Knickerbocker Ice Company on the shores of Lake Simcoe at Jackson's Point. At that time there were five large ice companies from the U. S. which formed an ice union, cutting and sending ice from Lake Simcoe to various cities in the eastern U.S.

Ice from Lake Simcoe was considered the best — first class quality, from 12 to 20 inches thick. The lake's reputation for pure, clear water was such that, in 1894, Spring Water changed its name to the Lake Simcoe Ice Company.

The ice harvesting operations could not begin until the ice was at least a foot thick as it had to support the weight of the horses, men and equipment. Water from

Lake Simcoe was especially pure due to the fact that the impurities sank to the bottom of the lake where the water rarely froze.

If the ice surface was not particularly smooth, a "field planer" would break up the frozen slush after a thaw with chisel-like teeth. Then, this "ice" would be cleared away by eight or more horse-drawn ice scrapers, each 10 feet wide. These plows were also the first commercial method of cutting ice. Until then, ice cutting was done by men with long hand saws, with four horse pulling scrapers behind.

Used pieces of coal (briquettes) were used to mark out the ice. A guide line about 200 blocks (of ice) long was laid out. While one field was being taken out, the next was being marked in a similar way.

Channels cut

The ice blocks were then marked out by a channel marker, with its teeth set at either 22 or 32 inches, for lengths or widths of the blocks. At three feet thick, one block of ice could weigh up to 325 kilograms (about 150 pounds).

One row of blocks was then pried loose to create a channel through which a "raft of ice" could pass. A horse and cable was used to tow these rafts through the 10-foot wide channels to the shorelines and storage houses or railway cars. Each morning, especially after a very cold night, these channels had to be reopened.

At first, the men would stand by the channel with a splitting bar. This was a heavy, two-pronged bar used for prying the blocks of ice apart, and splitting the bottom four inches that had held the blocks together.

These channels led to elevators with long conveyor belts designed to pick up the ice blocks from the water and transport them into the ice houses. The ramps were constantly being relocated as each

ice house or railway car was filled.

Inside the ice house, some consisting of up to 18 "rooms" each 100 feet long by 30 feet wide, the ice was insulated with a foot of sawdust between the ice and the walls. The railway box cars had their doors stuffed with hay. Up to 30 or 40 carloads of ice could be moved each night to prevent thawing.

Because of the fierce rivalry among the many ice companies, James Fairhead decided to specialize in the domestic trade. With increasing demand for Lake Simcoe ice, James Fairhead set up another harvesting site at Belle Ewart. Storage depots were set up in the city near railway tracks — one at Frenchman's Bay and another on Ellis Ave. near the Queensway and Grenadier Pond.

With more than 30 horse-drawn ice wagons on the city's streets, James Fairhead soon became known as "The Ice King." At one time, the Lake Simcoe Ice Company had 225 horses and 25 wagons, delivering ice to the city and its suburbs. Each morning, before setting out, the men would groom their horses and wash down their wagons.

In 1914, the company began making plans to manufacture rather than harvest the ice. Now standard size blocks were needed for the iceboxes. The sawdust in which the ice was stored often stuck to the blocks and had to be scraped away, and there were many awkward delays in railway service.

Toronto's first ice-making plant was built in 1915 on Dupont St. Over the next 15 years, Lake Simcoe Ice Company built three more ice-making plants and the storage depots were gradually dismantled. In 1929, the company was enlarged to also market coal oil and fuel and to install heating equipment. Today, the Lake Simcoe Ice Company is a thriving, independent company specializing in ice-making and cold storage facilities.