

Yarns of Yesterday by Gladys Hill

Putting Up Ice

That first summer (1943) on the lake we got our ice in town. Gunder Larson, owned the bar, and had a huge ice house that supplied the residents and the summer people with ice. We hadn't realized what a chore ice can be. When we first moved the ice wagon drove down our street on designated days of the week. We put our sign ICE in the Window and the ice man came in the back door and filled the ice box. No problem.

Later we purchased an electric refrigerator and those day of the ice man were gone forever, we thought -- but, now, Bill was the ice man. He had to get the ice in Winegar, than haul it home and fill the ice boxes, And, gas was rationed because this was in the early forties-War Time. So were tires and sugar and shoes. What wasn't rationed was hard to come by. Everything from food to building materials was expensive and scarce, along with cigarettes. (Both Bill and I smoked then -- much later we came to our senses. I quit first, Bill followed suit.)

That first summer we converted the ice house that was on the property into a cottage for rental along with having room for family and friends when they visited us. This was a combination building with a good roof, one large room for boats and storage, another large room for ice and a smaller room for sawdust; so we had a large living room/kitchen combination, one large bedroom and a smaller bedroom where the sawdust was kept.

It really made a great cabin because we screened the large opening on the lake where the boats were brought in and made double Dutch doors which could be opened in good weather and served as a porch, with a great view of Ox Bow. The bottom doors were solid and could be closed separately and the top doors were windows -- which could also be closed or left open, depending on the weather -- and still see outside.

Bill and Leighton built a small fort-like structure from old cedar and pines that littered the shore and wooded area. The girls and I used their little red wagon and hauled the sawdust from its original bin to the temporary ice house. That was hot, sweaty work those mid-summer days and what I wouldn't have given for a cold, cold drink of water But

That first summer we hauled our water from Horsehead Spring. Because of gas rationing, we limited our trips so we didn't fill our milk cans with fresh water every day. Although we had ice: it was lake ice -- not for human consumption. Of course, we could wade in the lake, go swimming to cool off, but we couldn't even have a good cup of hot coffee when we felt like a break. We only had a big old wood range in the kitchen. In winter it was great, but those summers we limited our use. I remember that on the farms, Grandma used con cobs for a quick, hot fire at meal time; here Bill split cedar, cut in small pieces. Rainy days and cool late evenings I baked.

That first winter we had the ice hauled in and of course, we w didn't have enough for our use and for the people renting. So again that summer we hauled ice from the bar.

That fall Bill put up an ice house, large enough so we would be able to sell ice, we thought. That didn't happen. We built another cabin which took more ice. .

So the ice house was enlarged and was very close to the lake; if, as we planned, we put up our own ice, it would require less labor to fill it. During the summer we hauled sawdust from the mill in the trailer. That trailer went everywhere we went. When we moved from Madison and rented our house, the trailer was loaded with everything we'd need, and all the things we could possibly need. We bought wood from the Crab Lake mill for 50¢ a load, I think it .was. That trailer got a workout since we used wood for heat and cooking. Like the tail on a dog, the trailer wagged behind. Where the car went, the trailer went, because "we might need it."

Fall came all too soon and Bill made a deal to have ice cut on our lake. When the lake froze over we cleared the area where the ice field would be. It was also great for skating; the kids didn't mind sweeping and shoveling the area because the ice was smooth and pretty much wind swept after the first of the snow was removed. Without a snow blanket the ice froze deeper.

There was no sitting in front of the TV those days. Everyone got their share of exercise, wood to haul, water to pump, paths to shovel. (Of course; you can say -- there was no TV then). True, but there was radio and after that first year we had a battery set. Still later, we had a 32 volt light plant from the Monroe area where they were getting electricity to the farms.

I never heard, "Mom, I'm bored," Our kids were wiser than that; there were always lots of jobs waiting-indoors and out. You saw very few obese children then or obese adults. Families sat at the table together, ate their meals together, worked and played together, ate their meals together, worked and played together and kept active-often more active than they wanted to be, but we never got any flack when it came to checking the ice field. That came under the category of Fun and besides, if it took a while to clear, maybe.

I'm not sure just when the ice was harvested, depending pretty much on the weather that particular winter, but I think mainly mid-January through February. Keeping the field clear of snow made for thicker ice, but all the blocks in the same field were uniform.

Frank Jirikowic had his own ice saw concocted from an old Harley Davidson. Frank was an ingenious individual and his ice machine performed to perfection.

The ice field was laid out in uniform blocks, very close to the ice house; a conveyor carried the cakes from the lake up and into the ice house. Here men in their bright plaid shirts and heavy jackets worked the ice field; others also garbed in bright wools, heavy boots and wool socks with their caps pulled over their ears unloaded the cakes of ice with their 'tongs and stacked them in neat rows. Others worked the saw dust, dumping sawdust between the rows and over the ice before another row was started on top of the original. Everyone knew their job and the work went smoothly.

It was a picturesque operation. The crystal clear blocks of ice floated in the open water; men with pike poles steered the cakes toward the ice house. The colorful garb of the men as they moved from the snow covered lakes to the edge of the blue/black water and again the colorful dress of the men beside gray logs of the ice house.

It's a scene I'll never forget-and at night as I looked out of the large window in the Point cabin, to see the moonlight streaming across the snow covered lake the open water of the ice field; glistening across the floating cakes not yet harvested on the deep blue water field reflected from that winter sky, I think I never knew true midnight blue until I visioned the absolute beauty those winter nights, with the tree-lined shore, the star-studded sky reflected in the open waters. The glory of winter in the woods.

Mostly, putting up ice was without incident. However, there was one year that Frank and Bob Spencers who was his able assistant, were finishing up for the day. They were alone on the lake as the workers had all left-their work was over, and Bill and Leighton were thawing out in front of the fireplace.

Frank and Bob were gathering equipment, "readying up" for another day, Somehow, Bob stepped on a loose cake and pitched into the water, under the ice, Frank ripped off his mittens, knelt on the solid ice and waved his hand back and forth in the icy water. Bob told it this way, "It was blacker than black. I couldn't see a thing - I was under the ice and I twisted and turned trying to get my bearings then I saw Frank's hand waving. It was the only thing visible in the blackness."

Frank pulled him up on solid ice and they dashed for the truck, Bob's clothing already creaking and cracking. They took off in a cloud of snow.

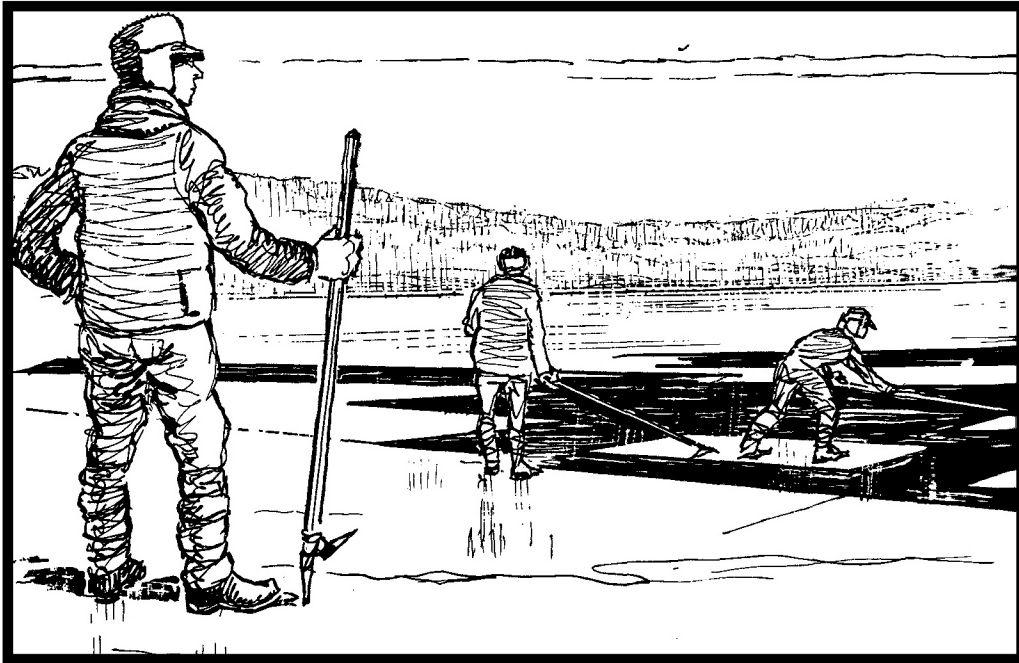
When we learned what had happened, my first comment was to this effect, “Why didn’t you come up to the house?”

And the answer surely made sense. Bob’s clothes were already freezing and soon were a sheet of ice. If they came to the house we wouldn’t have dry clothing to fit, so of course the sensible thing was to rush home where he could change and not go out in the cold again.

Bob and Frank were on the job the next day,

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“ABC Book of Early Americana,” by Eric Sloane, published 1990, Henry Holt & Co., NY, page 21.

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