

Ice In Chatham

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

by spencer grey

Before the early 20th century, most households did not have an electric refrigerator but instead relied on ice boxes to keep their food fresh, and as the name indicates a block of ice was needed to make it functional. To meet that need the ice on most ponds and lakes was harvested and stored in ice houses on their shores. Lord's Pond, although relatively small, had an ice house on it, and Black Pond, though not much larger, had two ice houses. The ice was cut into slabs that were large but nevertheless small enough to be pulled up a ramp into the ice house. In Chatham, Grover Speight drove the horse-drawn ice wagon to deliver ice from Zenas Kendrick's ice house.

Although most of the ice from these waters was used locally, ships from New England ports carried ice packed in straw or sawdust to the southern states and to Caribbean islands. This practice was introduced by an enterprising Boston merchant named Frederick Tudor in 1805, when he created the first natural ice business. He shipped the ice harvested on a pond in Lynn to the West Indies. He subsequently made a fortune by shipping ice around the world to the southern states and to Cuba, Calcutta, South America and England. There are records that indicate that Queen Victoria purchased ice from Massachusetts in the 1840s.

But no matter how well packed, the ice would not last long enough to ship long distances. For that reason, one of Chatham's enterprising sea captains, David Smith, learned on a voyage to California of the availability of a machine to manufacture ice and bought the patent to the machine. With that in hand, he established the Smith Transparent Ice Company, and he devoted his time to perfecting the machine. To explain his technique of producing ice, he wrote and distributed a pamphlet, a copy of which can be found in the archives of the Atwood House Museum, describing in detail how to make ice. As the business grew, he enlisted the help of his three brothers, who helped in setting up the many branches throughout the country.

When David Smith returned to Chatham in 1877, his company was so successful that he had ice machines operating in Cuba, Honolulu, Caracas and Oakland as well as in several southern states. With that success behind him, he established a manufacturing plant in Washington, D.C. Before long he had four manufacturing plants in Washington and 10 delivery wagons on the streets.

In December of 1886 when Captain Smith was in New Orleans supervising the construction of what was to be the largest ice-making machine in the world, capable of manufacturing 100 tons a day, David Smith died of heart failure.

But the presence of ice is not limited to lakes, ponds, or ice-making machines, for in Chatham we also have ice in the coves and harbors during extremely cold winters, such as the winter of 1975 when Stage Harbor was entirely frozen making it possible to walk from the Battlefield Road Town Landing to the wharves in the inner harbor. At what now is the Eldredge dock the fishing boat Silver Mink was tied up and frozen in 18 inches of ice. During that winter and others equally cold, the Oyster Pond was totally frozen, and one such winter a young girl on her way home from school attempted to take a short cut across it. Because salt water ice is not totally firm, she fell through the ice but fortunately was rescued by a couple of men on the shore who saw her predicament went to her rescue.

Although winters have been warmer lately, there still will be exceptions, bringing weeks of snow and ice to our region, and once again our ponds and harbors will be covered with ice.

