

One hundred years ago, the iceman did 'cometh'

JAN. 9, 1986

By George A. Parkhurst

To theater-goers the words, "The Iceman Cometh," recall the 1946 play by Eugene O'Neill that has recently been revived on Broadway. To local housewives a century ago, it had an entirely different connotation.

Before the advent of mechanical refrigeration, the preservation of perishable food in warm weather depended on ice that had been cut from local lakes and stored in huge ice houses.

The way it was

The *Lowell Weekly Journal* reported in January, 1896: "The cold snap last week enabled the Dutton Brothers to harvest about one third the desired quantity of ice. The storage capacity of their ice house is 350 tons." The ice house was located behind what is now Care Cleaners in Central Square and the ice came from the Mill Pond.

For many years, Beaver Brook, which flows under Central Square, was dammed to produce a sizeable Mill Pond behind the homes on the lower end of Acton Road. Water was released to drive the grist mill on Cushing Place and, in cold weather, it pro-

vided ice for the local households. It was also a popular gathering place for skaters.

Under the dateline of Feb. 15, 1889, the *Journal* stated: "Dutton Brothers will complete their ice harvest this week, storing about 1,000 tons, or double the quantity packed last year. The ice is 12 inches thick and the quantity ought to be ample to enable the community to withstand the most melting appeals of ruddy-faced Sirius next August."

Dutton's ice house was only one of many in town. Every pond and lake had at least one.

The actual harvesting consisted of cutting the ice into huge blocks, either by the use of horse-drawn "plows" or large hand saws not unlike those used by lumberjacks before chainsaws. The blocks were floated to the ice house, where they were carefully packed in sawdust to await the summer months.

With the coming of warm weather, a few of the blocks were cut into more manageable sizes and loaded into an enclosed wagon, frequently painted yellow, and the iceman would begin his daily rounds of the residences of the town. Each dealer provided his customers with a card to be displayed in a front window when ice was wanted.

Some of these cards had numbers printed along each side (10, 25, 50, etc.) to indicate whether a 10 lb. or a 25 lb. or a 50 lb. cake of ice was desired. The card was so placed in the window that the appropriate weight appeared at the top.

When the ice wagon stopped at a house, it immediately attracted the children of the neighborhood much as ice cream vendors do today.

The iceman would chip small pieces from the ice block and hand them out to his anticipating audience, who would return to their play while they sucked on their frozen samples.

The vendor would then pick up the appropriate size cake in his large tongs, or carry the ice on a rubber blanket on his shoulder.

A few homes had refrigerator-type doors in the outside wall so that there was no need to enter the kitchen but in most cases he would have to place the ice in the "ice box" after, first rearranging the food to make room, if the housewife hadn't already done this.

"The iceman cometh" had a real meaning! Times have changed.