

## A Crop No Longer Harvested in Martin County

Martin County is known for its rich farmland and abundant crops. However, there is one crop that is no longer harvested in Martin County, that being ice. Yes, at one time “ice harvesting” was a flourishing industry that contributed to the economy of Martin County.

The history of ice harvesting actually dates back to the early 1800s and a man named Frederic Tudor who became known as the “Ice King.”<sup>1</sup> Tudor had the pedigree to attend Harvard; however, he dropped out of school at the age of thirteen. Nevertheless, he had the vision of turning water into money and was persistent in attempting to reach his goal. He traveled around the country eventually convincing the medical profession, restaurants, barkeepers, and others that they actually needed ice. In defiance of his many skeptics, the visionary Tudor pioneered the 19<sup>th</sup> century’s global ice trade and eventually died a millionaire at age eighty. The ice industry expanded into one of the largest industries in the nation as Americans became more accustomed to fresh meats, milk, and fruit.

Now, one might wonder how ice that was harvested in the dead of winter was kept frozen for use during the summer months when refrigerators and freezers were not yet invented or at least not widely used. The answer was an ice house and sawdust, with sawdust serving as an insulator. It was put on the ground with ice being stacked in blocks on top of it. A space between the wall of the ice house and the ice was left to be filled with sawdust. The top of the ice was then covered with sawdust to prevent air from coming in contact with it. As long as the air didn’t come into contact with the ice, it wouldn’t melt. Consequently, sawdust of about one foot in depth acted as an insulator thereby preventing the stored ice from melting.

The history of ice harvesting in Martin County is chronicled to some extent in the archives of the Pioneer Museum. In 1917, John Niesz and John Wolf purchased the Fairmont Ice Business from H. M. Serle. The new firm took possession of the ice business that included teams of horses, wagons, equipment, and ice houses. They planned to start work on the ice harvesting in January of 1917.

In 1922 Fairmont’s ice harvest was said to be the best in many years. The harvest consisted of 9,000 tons of ice and the employment of thirty-two men as well as twenty teams of horses. Twenty carloads of ice from Lake Sisseton alone were shipped to southern Minnesota towns. The quality of the ice was considered exceptional as a result of the cold weather and continuous freezing that was uninterrupted by warm spells.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.startribune.com/local/blogs/114340259.html>

In 1932, the Jacobsen & Pederson ice crew began harvesting ice on Lake Sisseton in order to replace the oil damaged crop taken out of Budd Lake. The ice crew suspected that the oil in Budd Lake was a result of drainage from the oil depots that were located in town. The ice was cut with a large circular saw attached to the shaft of an engine of an ex-Ford automobile. This was a significant advancement from either hand sawing or horse drawn efforts.

John Livermore constructed an ice house on the Budd Lake shore at Oak Beach in 1937. Livermore had experience selling ice at the Lake Sisseton boathouses for several years. A cash and carry ice station was also planned for the corner of North North Avenue and Fifth Street in Fairmont by Knud Pedersen of the Fairmont Ice Company. He employed about twenty-five extra men during the ice harvest which involved about twelve to fourteen working days. Pedersen estimated that it would take approximately 6,000 tons of ice to supply the ice boxes in Fairmont. John Livermore supplied the Northwestern trains with ice taking about 3,000 tons from Budd Lake.

What may have eventually doomed the “ice age” was in fact our growing dependence on ice. This dependence contributed to the creation of the very technology that ultimately led to the decline of the ice empire, namely, electric freezers and refrigerators. During the mid 1900s, these appliances became commonplace and “ice harvesting,” as it was known, became a thing of the past. An example of that was demonstrated locally in July of 1953 when an automatic, round the clock, ice dispensing vending machine was slated to be installed in Fairmont.

Ice, something we all take for granted, is no longer harvested in the manner in which it was many years ago. The ice industry is still huge, but not nearly as dominant as in the past. Today’s ice business is primarily prepackaged, direct-to-consumer ice that can be purchased in grocery and convenience stores.

For more information on this topic, or to become a member, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.







