

TOBYHANNA MILLPOND #1 ICE HARVEST

**LAKESIDE DRIVE
TOBYHANNA PA 18466
Ice Harvest Hotline - 570-894-8205
bdleonard@verizon.net**

How this ice harvest got started:

Bill Leonard Sr. had been collecting tools that had been used in the local ice industry for years, and as a part of the Coolbaugh Township Bicentennial Celebration in 1994, he decided to construct a small icehouse and hold an ice harvest on Millpond #1 in Tobyhanna. He had worked in the ice industry as a boy and had been collecting ice-harvesting tools for years. He wanted to pass along the heritage of how this once important local industry had thrived many years ago. With the help of family, friends, and townspeople, Bill started construction of the icehouse and ramp in late 1993, but he passed away suddenly before the project was completed. Everyone chipped in to complete the project and the ice harvest was held on February 19, 1994. Each year since then we've harvested ice as the local folks (many of whom had fathers and grandfathers in the ice industry) gather together to relive the tradition.

The natural ice industry had been an important local industry around the turn of the last century. Tobyhanna Millpond #1 was originally dammed for the logging industry in 1856. The Pocono Mountain Ice Company leased the lake from the Tobyhanna and Lehigh Lumber Company and the first single icehouse was built in 1895. Approximately 1907, a larger ten-room icehouse was built that was 500 feet long, 100 feet wide, and 50 feet high. This icehouse remained in operation until it burned down around 1939.

Before the days of electric refrigerators, iceboxes were common in households and they were cooled with a block of ice, delivered regularly by the iceman. Huge icehouses were built on several lakes in the Poconos and each winter the ice was harvested and stored in the icehouses. The icehouse walls were filled with sawdust for insulation and the ice would keep all summer long. The primary market for Pocono ice was the New York City and Philadelphia area, shipped by rail car, then cut into smaller blocks for iceboxes. Normally ice cutting operations began on the day after Christmas and they cut ice off the entire pond, and then when it reached 12" thick, they would have another harvest and oftentimes on local mountain lakes, there would be a third harvest.

It was reported that the Pocono Mountain Ice Company was harvesting ice for 6 cents per ton. Ice workers out on the lake were paid 30 cents an hour while those working in the icehouse, where 300 pound cakes of ice were being pushed around, were paid 35 cents an hour. The Pocono Mountain Ice Company employed over 500 men during the height of the harvest.

The invention of refrigeration marked the beginning of the end for the natural ice industry. As electric refrigerators became more common in households in the 1930s, the ice industry was rapidly declining. Ice-cooled railroad cars were the last great demand for natural ice. The nearby icehouses in Gouldsboro and Warnertown remained in operation until the early 1950s for cooling boxcars.

To begin harvesting ice, a device called an ice plow that cuts a single groove in the ice is pulled by horses or mules to make a straight line across the lake. Another groove is cut perpendicular to the first, and then the plow is moved over and a guide rides in the first groove to make another cut. This continues until the lake is marked in a checkerboard fashion, with cakes measuring 22" by 33". The horses repeatedly pulled the plows back and forth in the grooves until the cut was about 2/3 of the ice thickness. Large sections of cakes, called floats, were then cut loose and floated to the water box at the icehouse. The floats were broken into individual cakes with a spud bar and fed into a steam-powered conveyor that raises them into the icehouse. Approximately 1918, gas powered icesaws were invented, which greatly increased productivity. It was said that one power saw could cut as fast as 5 horse drawn ice plows.

We harvest the ice much like it was done 100 years ago. In our earlier harvests, we used ice plows and handsaws for the cutting. We have since restored a 1919 Gifford Wood ice saw, powered by a Buda engine with a 36" diameter blade for the initial cuts, about 2/3 of the ice thickness, then we cut the cakes loose with hand saws. We move the cakes to the base of the ramp and use a tractor to pull the cakes up the ramp and into the icehouse. Our icehouse holds about 50 tons of ice and is located at the site of the huge icehouse built 100 years ago. It is constructed much like the historic icehouses (although on a much smaller scale) of hemlock lumber with sawdust in the walls for insulation. Once full, we put straw on top of the ice so it will keep through the summer.

Local groups and organizations use the ice for picnics through the summer and the ice usually keeps in the icehouse until September.

We also have a Boston & Maine Boxcar, originally built by Western Steel and Foundry in 1908. The car has steel under frame with wood sides, ends, and roof and it rides on its original Fox-patent, pressed steel trucks. Although this car was never used for hauling ice, we've painted it to replicate an ice car. This car had actually been used in revenue merchandise service by the B&M and later as a tool car for railroad maintenance. All-steel cars became more prevalent seventy years ago and very few of these wooden cars still exist. The rails upon which the boxcar rests were amongst the last rails rolled in Scranton PA in 1901.

Tobyhanna is an Indian word for "alder stream" or "dark water" stemming from the dark color of the water that flows from the marshes in the headwaters of the creek. The town of Tobyhanna was named after the stream that runs through it.

Bill Leonard, Jr.
137 Leonard Lane
Tobyhanna PA 18466
570-894-4761
Cell 570-977-0251