

# Keeping comestibles cold

## VINTAGE VIEWS

By Tim Mosher

Tavistock and District Historical Society

This photo answers last week's History Mystery that was #12 in this series. The question was, "How did businesses and homeowners keep food and drink cold during hot weather, long before electric refrigeration became popular?" This question was open to anyone under the age of 22. No one forwarded the correct answer. The best response is: Mid-winter blocks of ice were sawed by hand from the frozen lakes, rivers and the like and stored year-round in ice houses insulated with straw or wood chips.

The ice was sold to homeowners who had an insulated ice box in which to place the block on top and their food and drinks below. Sawing ice was a labour-intensive business thriving in northern climes that quickly disappeared when electric refrigeration gained popularity in the mid-1920s and was widespread by the 1950s.

No doubt the oysters that were advertised for sale at the Vance Meat Market in Tavistock in last week's Vintage Views article were shipped by train from the East Coast and kept cold with ice blocks harvested from the lakes of Atlantic Canada. The ice would have been replenished through Quebec or New England as it took a few days for the seafood to arrive locally.

This photo shows six local men using two-handed ice saws and large tongs to remove thick blocks of ice. A horse and cut-

ter would be nearby to slide the blocks onto a sled and then take them to an ice house insulated with natural materials to preserve the ice year-round. Sawing, lifting, loading and transporting the ice blocks was both backbreaking and dangerous. Some markets were lucrative enough to harvest the blocks until well past sundown when the labourers worked by lantern light.

Men who were employed during the summer on farms and had little income mid-winter were often hired to do this gruelling labour, though the season was short – typically January and February. Horses sometimes dragged an iron blade along pre-measured lines to score it or even cut it up to 25 centimetres (10 inches) deep and then the workmen would finish it.

This photo was taken in 1914 and was supplied to the Tavistock Gazette in 1981 by John Currah of Tavistock. It's not known where this picture is today or who the photographer was. If you have a copy of this image, the Tavistock and District Historical Society would like to make an improved scan of it for our collection.

Think of the very first pioneers who arrived here decades before this in the 1830s and what they did to keep their foods cool and safe, and the scarcity of doctors and medical facilities. A hardy bunch who we have a lot to learn from.

**This week's History Mystery:** Despite Tavistock not having a lake, natural large pond or river, what was the local body of water that froze and supplied the village and environs with ice? This question is open to all ages. Send your first and last name, community name or rural route number and your answer to [tim\\_mosher@hotmail.com](mailto:tim_mosher@hotmail.com). Whoever sends the first correct answer will have this information published in the next edition.



(PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN; LEMP STUDIO COLLECTION #5016)

Early refrigerators used blocks of ice to cool them year-round and were called ice boxes. No electricity was required but where did they get ice mid-summer? Usually from lakes mid-winter. Pictured here harvesting ice are, left to right, Henry Feick, Adam Falk, Henry Vogel, Henry Kaufman, George Herman and Charles Weitzel of Tavistock. Photographer Unknown; Picture courtesy of John Currah

## SHOW US YOUR WILMOT



(PHOTOS COURTESY OF SHOW US YOUR WILMOT FACEBOOK)

Jennie Burns spotted this graceful guest enjoying a leafy snack at the Mike Schout Wetlands Preserve — nature's buffet is open!

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