

The Sunset Lake Harvest

The Grand Trunk Railroad enabled Vicksburg to cash in on one of its natural endowments, an abundance of water. Early trains depended upon ice to refrigerate perishable goods, and Sunset Lake's proximity to the train tracks made it an ideal source for this commodity. Harvesting the ice became a sizeable local enterprise, undertaken annually before the advent of electric refrigeration.

The Vicksburg Commercial carried a typical account on February 9, 1900. The Canadian and Grand Trunk ice harvest went merrily on till Wednesday afternoon, the rainstorm causing a cessation of work. In the eight days work an average of 50 carloads were shipped daily. The crop is about half secured. If the weather gets colder work will be resumed, and about 400 carloads more harvested. Beginning in the 1840s, refrigerated cars were used to transport milk and butter. By 1860, refrigerated transport was limited to mostly seafood and dairy products. J. B. Sutherland of Detroit, Michigan patented the refrigerated railroad car in 1867. He designed an insulated car with ice bunkers in each end. Air came in on the top, passed through the bunkers, and circulated through the car by gravity, controlled by the use of hanging flaps that created differences in air temperature.

The railroad refrigerator car could be called America's 'ice box on wheels.' Invented some 150 years ago, the car was designed to haul perishable goods such as meat, dairy products, and beer--virtually any foodstuff that required a cool temperature. The car body was well insulated and the interior cooled by ice stored in bunkers at either end of the car. Salt was sometimes placed in the bunkers to accelerate the melting of the ice and lower the temperature of the load. Reefers had a limited time of effective cooling and required re-icing if they traveled greater distances. Railroads had to construct massive icing platforms and ice storage facilities to service the cars at major terminals and other strategic locations.



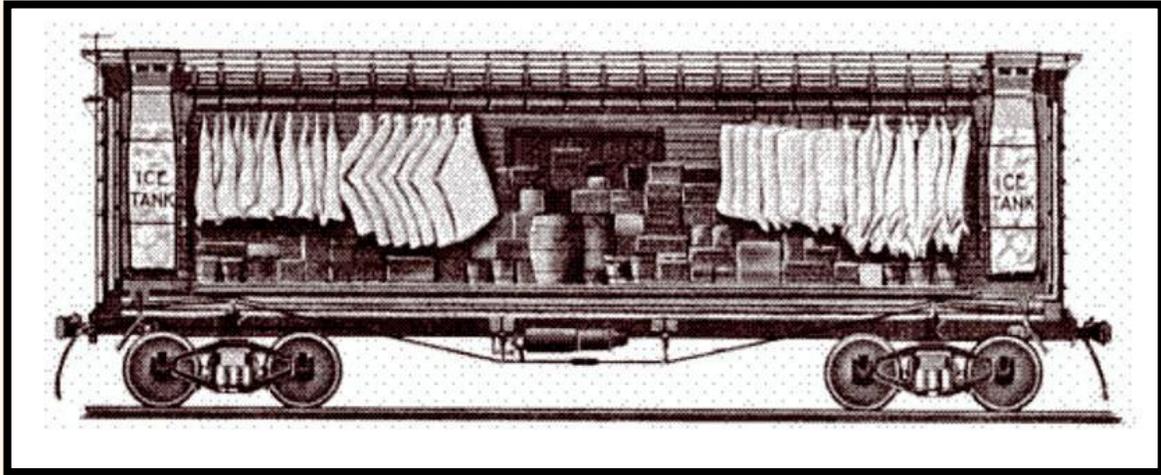
Ice Harvesters work together to pull ice from the lake and load the frigid blocks into train cars. The blocks were cut and distributed as needed throughout the railroad network.



300 N Richardson St (269)649-1733
Vicksburg MI 49097 info@vicksburghistory.org

The Winter Harvest

In the days before mechanical refrigeration, cutting ice each winter was an important part of the preparations for the coming summer. With no other way to keep perishables cool and fresh during hot weather, private homes, as well as businesses handling fresh foods, used insulated iceboxes holding one to several blocks of ice to keep food safe from spoilage.



Refrigerated train cars such as this one would bring goods around the country that normally were unable to be exported due to lack of cooling. Products such as meat and actual ice blocks were exported around the country using these special train cars.

While the Grand Trunk Railway took ice from Sunset Lake each winter, which was stored and then used during warm weather to cool railroad cars full of meat, milk and other perishable products, the needs of the home and business owners in Vicksburg were met by the Godshalk Ice Company.

James Godshalk built an icehouse on the south bank of the Mill Pond in the early 1900's, and brought his brother, John, into the business in 1902. John eventually bought out his brother and built a larger facility near McKain Street in 1905.

The Godshalk ice harvest on Sunset Lake started in January and lasted for a week to ten days, employing about 40 men. The first thing to be done was to scrape the snow the snow off the area, or "field", with a horse-drawn scraper. The field was then marked off in strips about 22" wide with a steel scribe, providing a guide for the saw.



300 N Richardson St (269)649-1733
Vicksburg MI 49097 info@vicksburghistory.org

Vicksburg Historical Society



The ice was removed in such a way that a channel of water gradually opened. Men with poles broke off the strips, then broke off the blocks and shoved them along the channel to the icehouse. Twenty or so blocks were hauled at once up the ramp into the ice house by a cable and pulley that pulled a jack which was slipped over the last block in each group. Horse or a gas engine provided power for this job.

Grand Trunk Ice Harvest Sunset Lake 1912: Ramp for moving ice from the lake to the icehouse.

Once at the top of the ramp, men packed the ice blocks into the storage barn until

they reached the eves. The ice was then covered by a foot-thick layer of marsh hay, a coarse bladed grass that provided excellent insulation. Properly packed away, the ice would "keep" through most of the summer.

Once warm weather arrived, the ice was delivered to homes on a regular basis, just like milk. The iceman carried a block from his wagon or truck into the kitchen and placed it in the box. Because different ice boxes held different size blocks, the ice man would have to chip away at a block to get the right size to fit properly. These chips would be handed out as special hot weather treats to the children who always followed him all over town.



The ice harvests in Vicksburg were fairly small compared some others in Michigan and elsewhere. The Kalamazoo Ice & Fuel Company carried out a much larger operation at Fife Lake in the Grand Traverse area.

The Ice Harvest was important to the relief effort after WWI.



300 N Richardson St (269)649-1733
Vicksburg MI 49097 info@vicksburghistory.org