JEFFERSON
EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

The Ice Harvest: A Neighborhood Memory

By David Frew
October 2024

Before refrigerators, there were ice boxes. It's hard to imagine these days, but almost every household in my neighborhood had a simple wooden "appliance" that held a block of ice. Iceboxes, like modern refrigerators, were needed to keep perishables from spoiling. There also was a regular iceman, a delivery person who lugged blocks of ice into the homes that asked for them. The iceman carefully placed the desired block of ice into the top (cold air sinks) of the household icebox where it sat melting, until the next delivery. Ice customers were provided with a window sign, which indicated the size of ice block needed. The sign was posted in a window on the day that a new block of ice was to be delivered.

Typical ice needed, signal sign. Blocks came in 25- to 100-pound sizes and customers oriented their signs so that the desired size was at the top.

My memory of the iceman and iceboxes has been enhanced by the fact that my father was an ice delivery man. He had a regular ice route for a few years at the end of the era and often took me along as helper. We drove in his super-exciting 1948 pickup truck to Union Ice on the lower eastside, where we picked up blocks of ice as well as bags of ice cubes, and made deliveries to individual homes as well as commercial accounts, including restaurants, bars, and taverns.

Blocks of ice came in pre-scored, 100-pound slabs, which could be reduced to smaller blocks, ranging from 25 to 75 pounds. Most home iceboxes were designed to accept either 25 or 50 pounds of ice (one or two 25-pound blocks or a single 50-pound block). As we were delivering to individual homes, my father would use an ice pick to separate pre-scored, 100-pound slabs into smaller blocks. Even at the age of 10, when I was helping, I was easily able to use ice tongs to carry 25-pound blocks into individual homes. The very best part of helping, as far as I was concerned, was that I was allowed to ride in the back of the truck (probably not a good idea but big fun).

My father acquired his route at the end of the ice and icebox era. It was the early 1950s and modern electric refrigerators were beginning to appear in most homes. He had the route for two years after which he moved on to other work. The final blow may have been when we gave up the family icebox and purchased a modern fridge. It was clunky and noisy, but we were finally free of the burden of handling ice and emptying the messy drainage pan under the old box. Like most of the neighbors we simply discarded the trusty old wooden box, thinking that it was of no use.

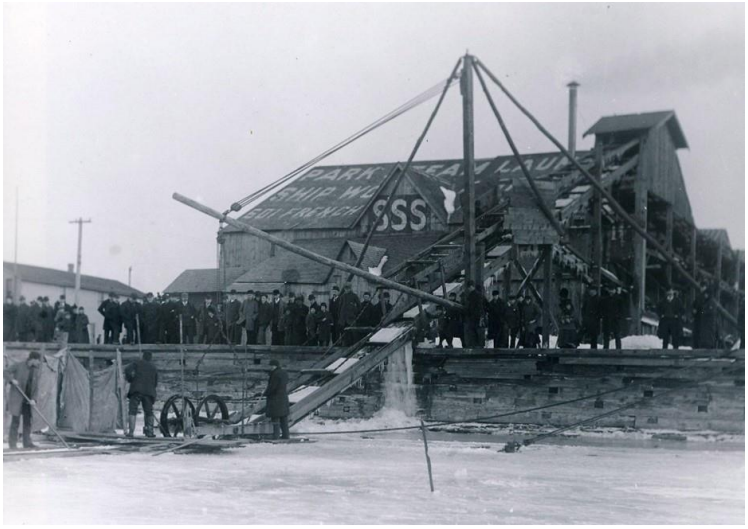
Ice tongs

There were visible scars from the historic ice harvesting process along our bayfront hangouts, old bones, including cemented posts and odd wooden bits from the ice infrastructure. The old wooden ice houses and lifts along the bluffs were long gone by the time we were kids, but wooden stakes and rotten posts marked places where creaky lift mechanisms and huge temporary storage houses once stood. Ice was harvested at several locations along the bluffs that overlook Presque Isle Bay, and for a time at Misery Bay on Presque Isle.

Given the technology of the 1800s, ice was a highly profitable and critical business, which provided hundreds of local jobs in the winter. By the early 1900s, however, icemaking had replaced open water harvesting systems and all the old bayfront infrastructure disappeared, replaced by plumbing systems and ice molds.

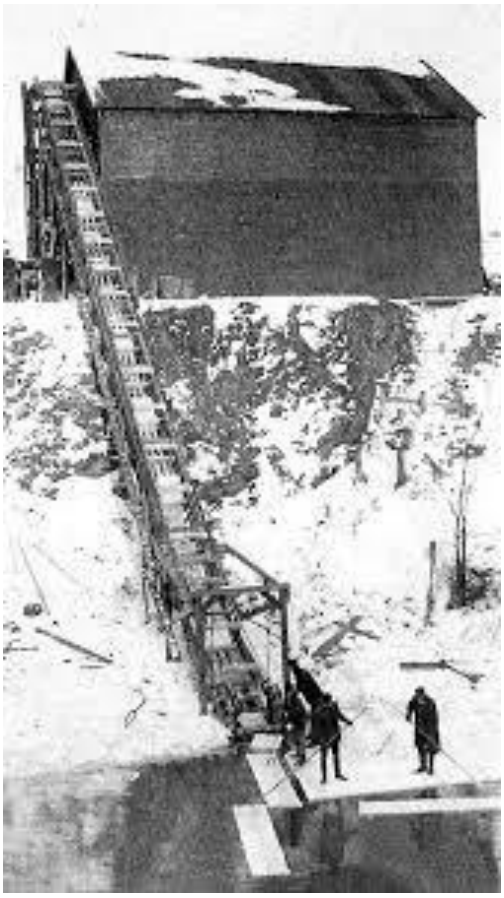
The old system began with the many ice harvesting companies (there were several, including a few run by the biggest fish processers) by staking out a section of frozen Presque Isle Bay that they planned to use for cutting ice. There were several steps in the process. First the snow was removed, since a thick overlayer would insulate the ice and prevent it from thickening as winter progressed. The second step was determining the average depth of the ice just before cutting it. This measurement was used to set the depth of the saws that were used to make preliminary cuts in the ice. Saw depths were set at approximately two inches less than the depth of the ice, since cutting all the way through would have allowed bottom water to rise up and into the cuts that were being made in the ice. Water flowing into fresh cuts would have quickly frozen, defeating the labor-intensive preliminary sawing step.

Horses were originally used to pull huge, weighted saw blades for making long parallel cuts in the bay ice. Later, gasoline-powered saws replaced the horses. Men pushed the gas-powered saws along the ice on sled runners, making the cuts that horses had once made. After a series of parallel cuts was completed, men went back out onto the ice with long hand saws, which were used to make final deep cuts all the way through the ice. The most difficult step was removing and moving the first few large blocks since that step involved the creation of a channel, leading to a conveyer that would lift the ice up to the top of the bluffs and into a storage shed. Once a channel had been established, blocks of ice were floated toward land and the conveyor. They were pushed along the channel by men with poles (called pikes).



A typical bayside icehouse included a lifting conveyor that carried blocks of ice up and into a storage building.

A vintage Erie postcard shows large blocks of ice as they were floated along a waterway that was cut into the frozen surface.



The conveyer was used to lift slabs of ice from the level of the water to the top of the bluffs.

Horses pull the ice saws used to score ice with parallel cuts before final cuts were made with hand saws.

When we moved back to Erie in 1970 and purchased a home, we had very little furniture, an artifact of having lived in doctoral student housing while on campus for three years. As we settled into our "mansion-sized" house (by graduate student standards) we began combing through junk stores for pieces of furniture. On one of our first search missions, I spotted a familiar looking article in a dusty corner. Covered with layers of ugly green paint I immediately recognized it as a vintage icebox. The dealer seemed happy to be rid of it and added it to our other purchases for only $10. I carried it to the driveway when we got home, applied generous coatings of paint remover, scraped and sanded, and transomed it back to its former "beauty." That 1894 Gibson ice box remains one of our absolute favorite pieces of furniture.

My 1894 Gibson Icebox was made in Wisconsin. Note the top-loading door for the ice and swinging floor-level panel for hiding the ice-melt tray.

Encouraged by my amazing junk store find, I continued to search for iceboxes and found one more that I could afford – a relatively modern, 1932 edition. I refinished that one and placed it in the dining room, where it serves as a utility cabinet. My affection for old iceboxes is obviously linked to the good old days and my time working as an iceman's assistant. Irrational, but fun.

I continued to look, although I'm not sure how many old iceboxes a person should have these days. I probably would have purchased a few more but within a few years iceboxes somehow became antiques and unaffordable.

My relatively modern but less efficient, 1932 icebox. Note that the ice compartment is at the bottom. Bad idea.

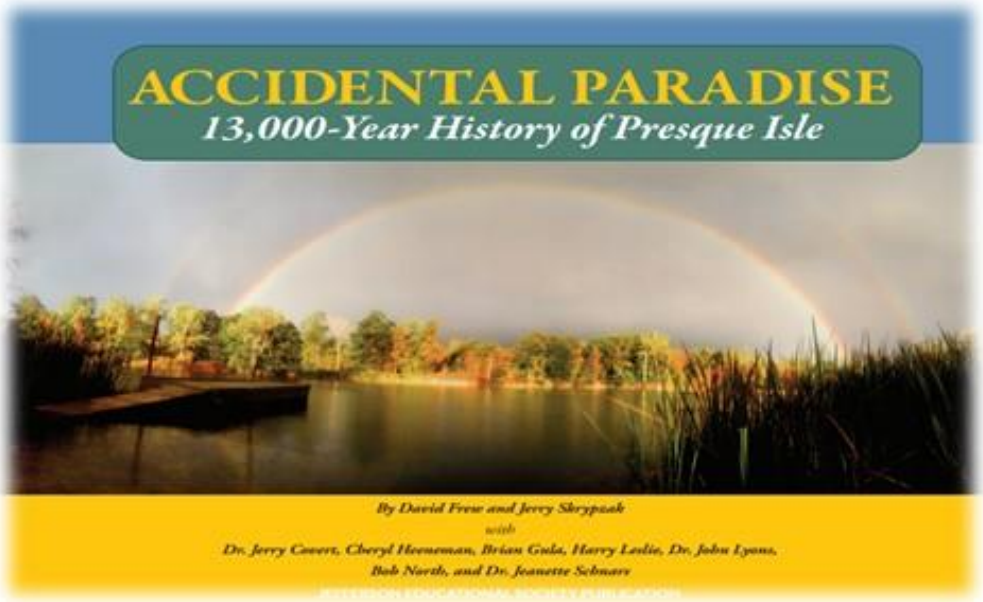
Between World War I and the end of World War II, iceboxes were slowly replaced by refrigerators. The first models were converted from old icebox designs and powered by a compressor that sat on the top of the unit. Early refrigerators were quirky and potentially dangerous since the refrigerant used could leak. For a few years, conversion kits were marketed that could be mounted in the ice compartments of existing iceboxes, but those were relatively unsuccessful.

This 1935 GE monitor-top fridge bears a remarkable similarity to earlier iceboxes.

The first modern electric refrigerators appeared during the 1930s but they were rare and generally were found only in the homes of upper-middle-class consumers. By the end of World War II, however, refrigerator technology had advanced geometrically and almost everyone had replaced their iceboxes.

An ultra-modern, 1956 Amana refrigerator

Erie's role in the world of refrigeration was physically marked by the growth of the local General Electric refrigerator division. By the mid-1950s, the GE's Erie Works had grown to more than 22,000 employees, a total that was threatening both the physical size of the eastside campus as well as the elasticity of the local labor market. Dramatic post-World War II economic growth was almost entirely due to refrigeration. In a search for a friendlier labor environment, GE transferred its refrigeration division to Louisville, Kentucky. After that, and with the exception of a small adjunct refrigeration division located outside of the GE campus on East 12th Street (Gloeckler's), Erie's GE plant became largely a locomotive and transformer producer.



The beautiful book on Presque Isle recently published by authors David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak – "**Accidental Paradise: 13,000-Year History of Presque Isle**" – is on sale at the Tom Ridge Environmental Center's gift shop and through a special website, AccidentalParadise.com.

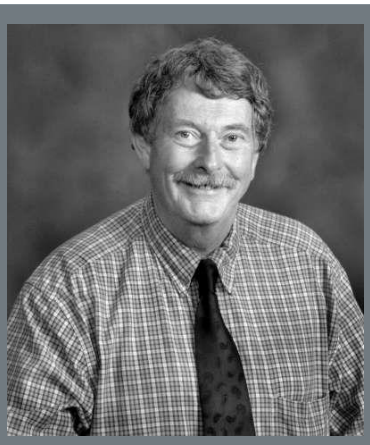
The book, priced at **$35 plus tax and shipping**, can be ordered now through the website sponsored by the TREC Foundation, AccidentalParadise.com.

Presque Isle Gallery and Gifts on the main floor of TREC, located at **301 Peninsula Drive, Suite #2, Erie, PA 16505** will also handle sales ***daily from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.***

For more information, send an email to **aperino@TRECF.org**.

To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click here.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.

In Case You Missed It

Democracy Can Win at the Ballot Box written by **John C. Austin** with an Introduction by **Lena Surzhko-Harned**

The Wider World | Southern Border and Beyond written by President of DC Analytics **Diane Chido**

Truth in Love | Waiting to Exhale written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Parris J. Baker**

Be Well | Tea Tree to the Rescue written by health and wellness expert **Debbie DeAngelo**

Book Notes #185 | 'The Pursuit of Happiness' written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Andrew Roth**

On the Waterfront | Warning Signs: Special Bay Rat Invitations written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. David Frew**