

Sawtooth Interpretive & Historical Association
Oral History Project
Transcript
Ice houses, Martin Pollock (1984, edited)
Transcribed by Susan Kim

Ice was an important commodity in the early days, as it is today. In those days they didn't have refrigerators and so they had to improvise the best they could. For many, many years the people of cold communities would have an ice harvest. They would select, usually a pond some place, cut their ice for the summer months from the pond and store it in ice houses. Ice houses were usually just buildings, a shell of a building, and they would put the ice in the ice house and put a thick barrier of sawdust around all sides of the ice. And the sawdust acted as a good insulator and would keep the ice frozen for usually the entire summer months. And when the people needed ice for cooling and ice cream making and so forth why they would dig down into the saw dust and pull out a block of ice and cover up the rest of it. And they would use it for ice boxes, use the ice in ice boxes and for other purposes.

But up in this valley, Little Redfish Lake was just ideal for harvesting ice because it was easily accessible for sleigh travel for all the inhabitants of Sawtooth Valley and Stanley. But it wasn't just a simple matter of going up and cutting the ice. There was a... they had to do a certain amount of work in order to get the proper ice that they wanted to cut. Now Little Redfish Lake usually starts to freeze over in, oh end of November and the early part of December. And perhaps the ice will get maybe 3 or 4 inches thick and then invariably a snowstorm will come along and put 3 or 4 inches of snow on top of the ice. Because snow is an excellent insulator, why then the ice doesn't get very much thicker. So, in order to get 18 inches of ice, the snow had to be removed. And they would get local people who were interested in harvesting ice to go out and clear the snow off of a relatively large patch of Little Redfish Lake. And every time it snowed, they'd have to go out and repeat the snow removal until the ice froze to a depth of about 18 inches.

When it reached that depth of 18 inches of good clear ice, then they would, all the people of the community on a designated day would go out and start the ice harvest. They would cut a hole in the ice in order to get an ice saw down through the ice. And then they would mark off lines on the ice about 18 inches apart. Then they would get a crew to saw along these lines maybe for 100 or 150 feet. And they would saw maybe a dozen lines like that. Then they would saw at right angles another, or make another cut at right angles I should say, and so that they would come up with blocks of ice about 18 inches by 18 inches by 18 inches. Then they had a little wooden chute that they would let down into the water and with ice tongs they would grab onto these blocks of ice and pull them up on the shore and dump them into the sleighs. When they got a load on the sleigh, why the farmer or the Stanley-ite would take off for their ice house. And this program would go on usually for a week, maybe two weeks at a time. It was hard work, but they would get all of their ice, or their ice houses filled. And after they got them filled, of course, it was all over with. But anyway, it was quite a social thing. The women would cook the meals, and they would have large dinners. And the men would eat breakfast out there on the ice. And when it got too dark to cut ice, why they would go to somebody's house and have a social evening. In other words, it was the big event of the winter, the ice harvest was.

Those who did not have ice houses, they could still store ice by cutting round (?) logs and laying them up like a house window. Like a house without windows. And they'd run those walls up about 6, 7, 8 feet. They'd put down a layer of sawdust in the bottom, maybe 2 feet thick. And then they would fill the

center part with ice. And they'd have about 2 feet of sawdust insulation between the logs and the ice. And then they'd usually put three or four feet of sawdust on top of it and that system of keeping ice worked fairly well. And they had very little money invested in construction.

And when they got powered refrigerators, why eventually there were fewer and fewer people left to harvest ice. And eventually that custom completely faded out and now it's just a memory.

