



THE INDISPENSABLE ICE MAN—A REAL COOL GUY

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In Collingwood's early days in the 19th Century when there were no electric refrigerators, and, indeed, no electricity, it was a challenge to keep food cool/cold. Locales, like Collingwood, that were near a body of water could harvest ice in the coldest winter months and store it packed in sawdust in "ice houses" for distribution in the warmer months while those farther afield in remote rural areas might have had to make do with root cellars underground or dug into the side of a hill, making use of the natural cooling effect of the earth if they didn't have access to a frozen pond or lake and the means to store the ice through the summer months. Another very practical cooling facility was to have an insulated room on the north side of the house where the sun never shines. The house I grew up in on Ste. Marie St. had a root cellar accessed via a trap door in the floor of my bedroom. There in the soil under the house (no basement) my parents kept vegetables such as potatoes and squash in a state of preservation during the winter months.

The ice box, forerunner of the electric refrigerator, became ubiquitous in the Victorian era and well into the middle of the 20th Century. Ice boxes were just one of the many products of the Wilson Brothers whom we met in our April story. They were made with attractive wooden cabinets with several

compartments including one to accommodate a large block of ice. The interior was lined with tin, zinc or lead, the walls were insulated with sawdust. With the ice box came the ice man delivering heavy blocks of ice to homes, restaurants, stores, butcher shops, hotels, ships, trains, indeed anywhere that refrigeration was needed, even to undertakers to preserve dead bodies. Think of the words in the song “Poor Jud Is Dead” from *Oklahoma!* “He looks like he’s asleep, it’s a shame that he won’t keep, but it’s summer and we’re running out of ice”. On a much larger scale, ice was used to refrigerate insulated railway freight cars for shipping meat and perishable fruit and vegetables long distances.

The ice harvest became an important industry from the mid-1800’s onward. Collingwood had a ready-made ice harvest location right in the inner harbour before it became polluted, but the purest water was found in White’s Bay (not its original name) in the northwest area of the harbour. We call it White’s Bay after Edward White whose family settled there circa 1890. The Whites were a fishing family and eventually the bay came to be familiarly known by their family name. The original official name for this location was “Little Harbour” and is shown on an April 1858 *Chart Of Collingwood Harbour* by William Gibbard, Provincial Land Surveyor and Civil Engineer. This chart is shown on pages 34-35 in the book *Reflections*. Little Harbour/White’s Bay was/is northwest of the Hen & Chickens Islands and in this area the ice was used for something different than refrigeration in 1868 when the following proclamation was made:

COLLINGWOOD TROTTING RACES! TO COME OFF ON THE ICE! ON WEDNESDAY & THURSDAY, THE 11TH and 12TH MARCH, 1868, AT 2 P.M. PRECISELY.

As odd as this may sound today, ice racing was a popular winter sport in cities and towns in the 19th Century and into the early 20th Century. Just as when they were used in ice harvesting, the horses had to wear custom horse

shoes for traction while racing on the ice. Among the Rules and Regulations was the following: “All horses to go as they please”. As mentioned earlier, this area would later be the site of ice harvesting because of its ideal separation from the pollution of the inner harbour effected by the Hen & Chickens Islands which were incorporated into the breakwall. At the time of Collingwood’s 1958 Centennial, Jack MacMurchy of the *Enterprise-Bulletin* wrote a section on *Sports and Athletics* for the souvenir booklet in which he stated,

Back in the old days, too, racing was not limited to the summer months as it is today. On occasion, a track or course was laid out on the ice of Little Harbour, a protected bay west of the main harbour, and winter races were run off.

Years later, Captain George Collins (1816-1897), after retiring from his career (1859-1890) as the Lighthouse Keeper on Nottawasaga Island, built cottages and a wharf at Little Harbour in the early 1890’s.

An early ice dealer in Collingwood was William Swain (1817-1896) born in Farnham, England. He dealt in groceries, fruit, oysters and ice. In the 1861 Census of Collingwood he gave his profession as “baker”. A decade later, his profession was listed as “fruit dealer”. The 1879 *County of Simcoe and Hamilton & North Western Railway Directory* had the following display ad:

WILLIAM SWAIN, Grocer, Fruiterer, and Ice Dealer. HURON ST., COLLINGWOOD. Private Houses, Hotels and Boats supplied with ICE at short notice, and on Reasonable Terms. BEST BRANDS OF OYSTERS KEPT.

In another publication, his location on Huron St. is listed as being opposite the *Messenger* newspaper office which was in the block between Hurontario and Ste. Marie Streets in the late 1870’s (this was before the *Messenger* amalgamated with the *Enterprise* and moved to Hurontario St). This would place him in one of the many wooden buildings on the north side of Huron

St. where the Shipyard Machine Shop was built in the first decade of the 20th Century. A famous photo of Swain's horse-drawn ice wagon at the corner of Hurontario and Simcoe Streets outside the store of Archer & Fluent was clearly taken prior to the Great Fire of September 1881 simply because Archer & Fluent were located in one of the many wooden buildings destroyed in that fire. In the photo, a bearded man displays a large block of ice held by tongs while the ice is sitting in the dirt of the street. Just a few feet away are horse droppings. People must have had cast iron immune systems in those days.

Mr. Swain, as well as dispensing ice and keeping oysters, also found time to serve the town in other capacities. *The Town of Collingwood Street Naming Policy* states that he was an "early businessman, confectioner and ice dealer as well as Council member; was Chief Constable following Adam Dudgeon and also a school trustee in 1884-87". During his school trustee period, the *Simcoe County Directory & Gazetteer* for 1884-86 listed him as "Ice Dealer, Huron St." The *Dominion Business Directory* for 1890 lists him as still active at age 73. The 1891 Canadian Census does not list a profession for him. By the time of the *Ontario Gazetteer & Directory for 1892-93*, Swain is no longer listed, the only listing for ice belonging to Arthur G. Clark & Son who were fishermen in Collingwood for many years, in the father's case, since before Confederation. Arthur Clark died on Christmas Eve 1902 and this time frame appears to approximately coincide with the beginning of Seiggel's ice business.

There is a large mural on the south wall of the building at the north-west corner of Hurontario and Second Streets, just steps from where the above-mentioned photo was taken in the 1800's. Facing out onto Second St., the mural immortalizes Swain's horse-drawn ice wagon making its rounds. A sign that is part of the mural states the time frame as "Collingwood 1905". This is a remarkable time warp considering that William Swain died on

March 27th, 1896 one month into his 80th year. He and his wife Harriet are buried in the All Saints Anglican Cemetery.

In those early years before sewers existed in town, ice was harvested directly from the inner harbour. The *Huron Institute Papers & Records Vol. 3* identifies a photo of the ice harvest in the harbour as being from March 1890 and likely illustrates William Swain's crew. The Blue Mountain can be seen in the distance and closer by there are ships wintering in the harbour. For the ice harvest to begin each year, the ice had to be thick enough to support the weight of teams of horses, sleighs, men and their equipment. The horses had special horseshoes with cleats and the men wore a similar device on the heels of their boots. A hand-held auger was used to bore a hole in the ice followed by the insertion of a metal ruler to determine the thickness of the ice. The horses were used to pull scrapers to clear the snow from the ice, then they pulled "markers" to cut grooves an inch or more deep into the ice to mark off a grid for the size of the blocks of ice to be cut. Following this, the horses pulled "ice plows" to cut deep into the ice, about two-thirds of the way through. The final cutting right through to the water was done manually with large saws and later with powered rotary saw blades and much less effort.

When the town sewer system was inaugurated it emptied, untreated, right out into the harbour at the foot of Birch St. where it still empties out, the difference being that the sewage treatment plant has been located there since 1958. When ice was harvested from White's Bay that more distant location was well away from the harbour as well as being beyond the Hen & Chickens Islands and the outer break wall and up to the year 1951 when Seiggels stopped harvesting there and turned to manufactured ice, the water samples always tested absolutely pure. Compare this to the earlier mention of Swain's ice man setting a block of ice in the dirt on Simcoe St.

Speaking of “manufactured ice”, about forty years ago I witnessed an amusing exchange between two bartenders at the hotel in Victoria where I worked. It was a hot summer’s day and the ice cube machine had stopped working, refusing to make a single ice cube. One of the barmen, Greg, said to Ernie, “What did we do for ice before we had this machine?” Ernie replied, “We got ice from an ice factory”. Greg said, skeptically and incredulously, “An ice factory! What do you mean an ice factory! How do you manufacture ice?” Ernie replied dryly, “You freeze water!”

It is not known for certain who continued the ice business following William Swain’s retirement and death. However, there is a clue in the Collingwood History Book *Reflections*. In an article written by Ed Seiggel, he states that his father Alexander Seiggel (1873-1952) bought out the ice business of his employer, Campbell & Co. who were established “around the turn of the century”. The ice business remained in the Seiggell family at their Beech St. location operated by Alex’s sons Alex Jr. (1911-1976) and Edward (1916-2003), who “sold out and retired in 1978”. One of his successors was Borland’s Ice.

During the heyday of Seiggel’s business there were other ice dealers as well. The 1910-11 Vernon’s Directory lists, in addition to Alex Seiggel, the Dominion Fish Co. at the Grand Trunk Wharf:

DOMINION FISH CO. LIMITED. Wholesale Dealers in FRESH & SALT FISH and OYSTERS. ICE AND COLD STORAGE. Robert Gilpin, Local Manager.

Harvesting ice from White’s Bay was hard work. In the article in *Reflections*, Ed Seiggel explained the process:

It usually involved hiring about twelve teams of horses which gave work to local farmers. Several men would be employed to work on the lake and in the ice-house. As word got around the ice haul was going to start, the blacksmith shops would be quite busy for a while shoeing horses as they had

to be sharp shod in order to stand up on the ice. The ice field was marked and cut in square blocks with a horse drawn ice plough and loaded on the sleighs, the blocks being drawn up a skid by means of horsepower...Around 1941 horse drawn equipment was done away with and replaced with a circular power saw to cut the ice. A loader powered by a gasoline engine loaded it on the trucks. This equipment was used for about ten years when we erected a refrigerated cold storage and switched to manufactured ice...On rare occasions when the winter was very mild and jack frost did not co-operate, the ice supply had to be imported from outside points. One year several freight cars were shipped in from Orillia and sometimes we cut and hauled our ice from a lake at Singhampton.

In 1937 the *Toronto Evening Telegram* under the heading “Ice Harvest Underway At Collingwood” and with photos by D. O. Deacon, stated that the men were taking about 150 tons a day from the harbour. The harvested ice was stored in one or more ice houses, windowless buildings with double walls as much as 12 inches thick and filled with sawdust for insulation. One was located at the foot of Maple St. just before the CNR tracks. A massive amount of ice stored in one location keeps itself cold, even in hot summer weather. If sufficient ice was harvested, the supply would last through into the following winter. The large blocks were stacked with insulating sawdust between the layers to keep them from freezing together, and distributed to customers around town as required. Plenty of sawdust was needed in the ice houses and there was a good local supply of it in those days from the many woodworking firms in town.

Just as bread and milk were delivered around Collingwood by horse-drawn vehicles, ice was similarly distributed. As with the horses of the Potts Bros. Dairy, some of the ice horses knew their route well enough that they would walk on and stop at the next customer’s house while the ice man was delivering to the house at the previous stop. In later years, Seiggels

switched to delivery by truck and I well remember their truck coming along Ste. Marie St. One long-gone aspect of childhood from those long ago hot summer months was to follow the ice man as he made his rounds along your street and try to get from him a chip of ice to suck on—a simple, free pleasure with no calories. The ice man would grab a block of ice with large tongs and carry it into the house. Ice dealers provided their customers with a card which would be displayed in a window facing the street to indicate that ice was needed, perhaps a couple of times a week. As the ice slowly melted the water would run to the drip pan at the bottom of the ice box and this had to be emptied daily so the water wouldn't run onto the floor.

In her collection of stories titled *Tales Of Collingwood*, originally published by the now-defunct *Enterprise-Bulletin* newspaper in 1967, Ruth Carmichael Bryan (1923-1975) gives us a personal account of the childhood pleasure of getting a chip of ice to suck on during a hot summer day. In her story *My Sister And I* Ruth, about age 9, and her imaginary playmate sister were returning from a trek to Ike Winter's place to pick up two pails of buttermilk when,

Just as we start to cross over to Playter's side of the street, Herbie Lawrence's ice cart turns the corner of Ninth Street onto Hurontario...Herbie Lawrence waves to us as he gets down from the driver's seat...As he goes around the back of the ice rig, the horse starts up of his own accord. "Whoa there", Herbie says and the horses [sic] stop. We stand across the road watching Herbie as he lifts a big block of ice with the tongs. "Help yourself to some ice" he shouts in our direction and ruins the game. Sandy Seiggel, the other ice man always yells at us to stop when we snatch ice from the back of his rig. It makes it stealing, and stealing is much more fun. Herbie takes the ice into a house and we go across the road, swing on the back lip of the ice cart and rattle our hands in among the cool chips searching for the biggest ones.

Whereas the Collingwood ice harvest was for the local market, the ice harvest on Lake Simcoe, begun in the 1870's in the Barrie area, was conducted on a massive scale on Kempenfelt Bay and points farther south along the west shore at Bell Ewart and Lefroy. The lake was known for the purity of its spring-fed water, and the resulting high quality ice was harvested not only for local consumption but also for export by rail to distant cities in both Canada and the United States. Multiple insulated rail cars were loaded and dispatched daily. With the Allandale section of Barrie being a divisional point on the CNR, the railway conducted its own ice harvest to supply railway centres over a very wide swath of central and southern Ontario. Ice harvesting by a number of firms was also a major industry on Lake Couchiching in Orillia. In 1890 one of the ice houses, owned by a company from Buffalo, New York, in the area known today as Moose Beach adjacent to Tudhope Park, is said to have measured 600 feet long, 150 feet wide and 24 feet high with a capacity of 60,000 tons. Their ice was "noted for its purity, quality, and uniform excellence". Ice was exported from here in insulated rail cars as it was from Lake Simcoe farther south. The Buffalo Ice Co. supplied "Canada ice" from Lake Couchiching to their customers in Buffalo, New York and surrounding area and this may even have helped form the idea in the minds of some U. S. citizens that Canada is a land of ice and snow. Also note the reference above to several freight cars of ice being sent from Orillia to Seiggels in Collingwood when White's Bay did not freeze sufficiently one year.

Even in the 1950's not everyone had an electric refrigerator. This was partly due to the shortages of consumer goods during the Second World War when the economy was largely geared to producing goods for the war effort. As the economy recovered in the post-war years, more and more people bought new electric refrigerators while some still kept their ice boxes. The ice box kept things cold; keeping food *frozen* was another matter. Early electric refrigerators had a fairly small capacity freezer section

where ice cube trays would fit along with a few other small items but to keep large items like roasts, etc. frozen there were storage lockers for rent in at least a couple of locations downtown. One of these was at the Collingwood Dairy & Creamery at 25-27 Hurontario St. I remember going downtown with my mother when she had to retrieve something from her locker there or to put something in it. We entered at a door labelled “Creamery” at the north end of the building from which I could glimpse in the distance the fascinating machinery at the rear of the building being operated by overhead line shafts with multiple drive belts coming down from the ceiling. Another location was at the opposite end of the business section at the rear of Knuff Motors (later one of Art Foley’s furniture buildings).

When people had modern refrigerators and chest freezers and their old ice boxes had been discarded, ice was still needed for various purposes and the Seiggel brothers, following in their father’s footsteps, continued this business which survived into the late 1970’s operating from the ice factory at their home on Beech St. Ice machines have long been common in hotels and in bars and restaurants and bags of manufactured ice can be readily bought at grocery stores, convenience stores and gas stations for picnic coolers, fishermen, etc. There are refrigerators that automatically dispense ice cubes when a glass is pressed against a handle. There are even countertop portable ice makers—such convenience without any effort. Imagine if the old time ice men could have foreseen what technology can do today!

Things have come a long way from the sharp-shod horses struggling to stand on the ice surface of the inner harbour and White’s Bay 80 and more years ago while the men froze while cutting the ice into blocks and getting them onto sleighs for transport to the ice house. The ice men were a hardy lot and it was strenuous and dangerous work. It could be hazardous working

with the very sharp tools, and sometimes men and horses accidentally fell into the water. It was also heavy work to deliver the ice to waiting customers, carrying heavy blocks of ice costing 25 cents each up perhaps several flights of stairs to apartments on hot summer days. This was not a job for academic types. Look up on YouTube the 1941 3 Stooges short subject *An Ache In Every Stake* wherein they are working for the Zero Ice & Coal Co. (“Ice With Personality—Coal With Oomph”). Just like William Swain 60 years earlier, they are driving a horse-drawn ice wagon. This time they have to deliver ice up a very long cement staircase of 147 steps to a house on a hilltop on a blistering hot day when the thermometer is pushing 130 degrees Fahrenheit (just over 54 degrees Celsius). An extreme example, yes, for the purpose of comedy, as the large block of ice defrosts into the size of an ice cube by the time Curly reaches the top of the steps, but it illustrates the stamina that was needed to be in the ice business. Ice men worked long, tiring hours and sometimes seven days a week depending on the time of year. At the beginning of the 3 Stooges film, Larry, Moe and Curly are actually asleep in the back of the ice wagon as their horse plods along the street and stops when it recognizes the ice card posted at someone’s gate. The well-trained horse bobs his head up and down to activate a rope attached to a cow bell to wake the boys up, with little success.

As technology advanced, the introduction of manufactured ice rendered the winter ice harvest obsolete and made ice and refrigeration available year-round, a convenience that we now take for granted. The next time you load ice into your glass from the automatic ice cube dispenser on a fridge and enjoy an ice-cold drink on a hot day, give a thought to the stamina of the ice men of old and the heavy, hazardous work they had to perform to produce the same result. There are still some locations in the northern United States where people re-enact the ice harvest to keep the old traditions alive. The Facebook version of this story features two photos taken from a 1921 silent newsreel about the ice harvest on Stillwater Lake in Pennsylvania.

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