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A State of Mind ♦ A Way of Life

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A Country Gent's Note

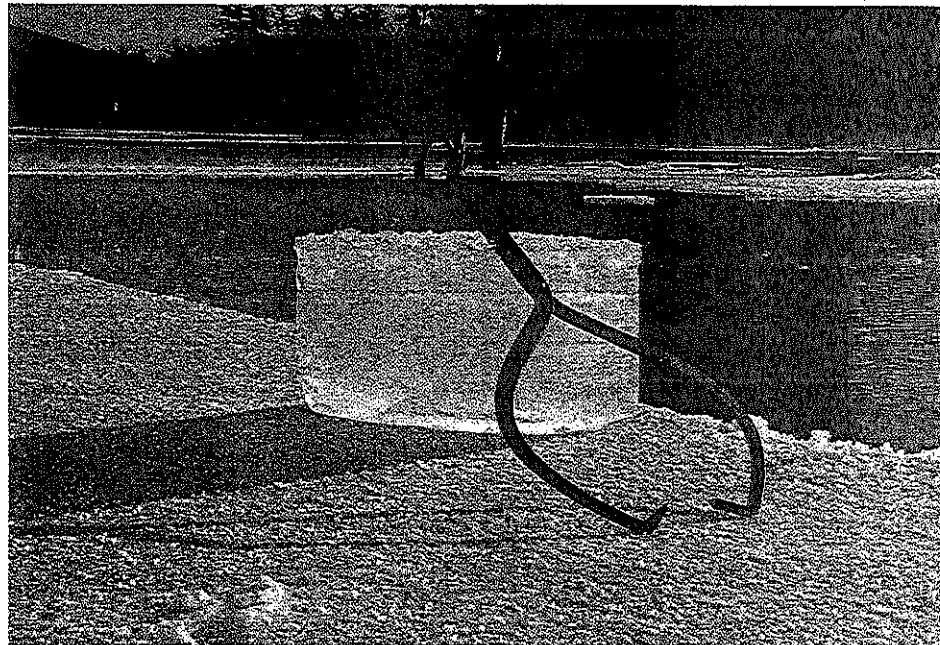
Lake Ice

Barclay Rives

The ice boy comes every morning. Each cabin in Rockywold-Deephaven Camps (RDC) on New Hampshire's Squam Lake has a vintage non-electric icebox for cooling food and drinks. The top compartment holds a block of ice that was harvested the previous winter. Signs are posted that the lake-ice is not for direct consumption, but many campers disregard the warning. My father-in-law loved gouging cocktail ice from the block with an ice pick and then plunging the pick back into a board on the wall. That epitomized for him the style of the camp and the reason he returned every summer.

In a 1967 modernizing experiment, RDC purchased four compact refrigerators. However, guests refused to use them and protested until their iceboxes were returned and the refrigerators were exiled to staff housing.

Ice harvesting at Squam Lake is one of the last remaining operations of what used to be a major New England industry. In the 1800s, ice from New England lakes and rivers was shipped to ports in the southern United States and beyond, including Cuba, India and China. The design for iceboxes was patented in 1856. Artificial ice-manufacturing methods arose in the mid- and late 1800s including vaporization, ammonia and gas power. Competition developed between manufactured and harvested ice. People were concerned about harvested ice spreading typhoid and other diseases. In the 1920s, electric refrigerator motors appeared that numbered the days of the ice man.



Squam Lake ice and tongs. (Photo by Deborah de Peys)

My favorite Three Stooges episode, filmed in the 1930s, portrays the boys as ice men who become chefs. They are incompetent in both endeavors. One ice delivery requires the ascent of so many flights of stairs that the big blocks of ice in their tongs melt into miniature cubes. After they become chefs, Larry asks Curly to get him some shaved ice called for in a recipe. Curly lathers up a block and makes barber-shop small talk as he scrapes it with a straight razor until Moe interrupts. Ice men and iceboxes were still an everyday sight for the Stooges' 1930s audience.

Supplying ice for the 65 summer cabins at RDC requires an annual harvest of over 3,000 blocks (also called cakes) of ice or more than 200 tons worth. The optimal

thickness is 12 to 13 inches. Starting December, ice thickness is frequently measured with a drill. When the ice is ready, a dozen or more people jump in action. One veteran compares the urgency of ice ready for cutting to that of hay on ground, ready for baling in summer.

One of the first steps in the process is shoveling snow off the top of the ice. A custom-made cutting machine powers a 16-inch circular blade to score 16 by 20-inch cuts on the ice. The saw blade is set just short of reaching the water below the ice, which would freeze on the saw and block and slow its operation. Workers then use pikes and chainsaws to cut the blocks free. In order to keep the ice untainted by oil, bar-and-chain oil is used on the chainsaws.

Contact with the water is sufficient to lubricate and cool the chain. Walking on the edge of the ice next to open water is safe unless the ice is fractured. Crew members wear ice creepers to keep from slipping.

The blocks of ice are then pushed down a channel to a loading chute where they are winched up onto a flatbed truck that can hold 35 of the blocks, each about 140 pounds. The ice then travels to two icehouses into which it is unloaded and packed in sawdust for insulation. When the camp closes to guests in September, some ice is always left over.

The most experienced RDC ice harvester is 84-year-old Norm Lyford, who learned the trade from his father Colby and has harvested Squam Lake ice for 66 years. Witnessing the harvest in January 2011, perennial RDC guest Deborah de Peyster of Concord, New Hampshire, commented, "I noticed the joy with which everyone was working. They seemed to feel it was a privilege to participate in a 100-year-old

tradition."

Every morning from June through September, ice boys rake back the sawdust from atop the ice and muscle the blocks out to a platform where they are rinsed with a hose. The blocks then ride rubber-tired, wooden-sided wheelbarrows to the cabin iceboxes. Former ice boy and crew chief **Matt Emmons** (a great-great-grandson of the camp founder) remembers, "Delivering ice to cabins was always fun and challenging. You had to be coordinated getting 200-300 pounds of ice over the rocks and roots." Hoisting the block from the wheelbarrow to the icebox is chilly work for bare hands. Emmons says, "The guests' question 'Is that cold?' never ceased to amaze."

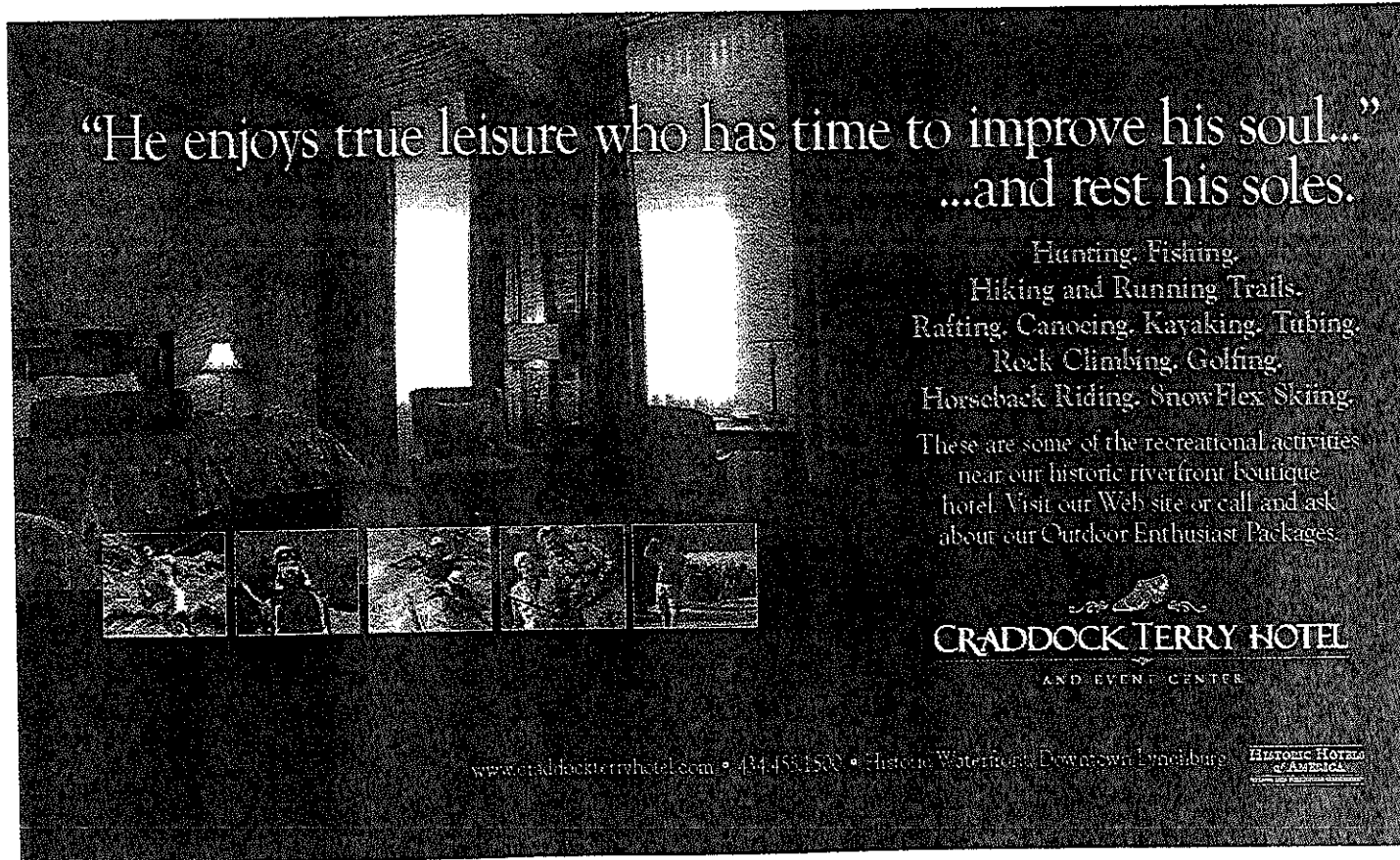
Ice harvesting was still a part of rural Virginia life in the early 20th century. Big farms had icehouses set below ground level. James Madison's Montpelier has a circular icehouse topped by columns and a dome that is a signature image of the place.

My grandfather's farm journal of

1920 reports ice harvesting on January 6 and 7. Three men worked at getting ice out of the pond and three teams hauled a total of 31 loads. He notes the last load was put by lantern light. The ice was five inches thick, not up to New England ice standards.

A now-deceased neighbor told her farm wagon loaded with ice was a heavy load for a team of horses to pull up the hill above her pond. Her icehouse had stone walls and she used straw for insulation below and atop the ice. The ice usually lasted through August. It was used for keeping food cool and for making cream. The lady's flock of ducks resided on her muddy pond rendered the ice unusable for drinking, also beneath New England standards.

Barclay Rives lives on a small portion of his grandfather's estate and foxhunts with the Keswick Hunt Club in Keswick, Virginia.



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