

# Ice Harvesting In Falmouth: A Postscript

*Barbara Kanellopoulos*

Stories and reminiscences about ice harvesting in Falmouth in the days before electric refrigerators are scarce. That scarcity itself is suggestive. On Cape Cod, harvesting the ice crop was not as intensive as it was in other parts of the country where markets for ice were larger and closer and where winters were colder. Perhaps historical material is sparse because the custom was relatively short lived. The development of efficient harvesting tools in the mid-1800s was followed rapidly by advances in mechanical and electrical refrigeration. By the early years of the twentieth century, harvesting natural ice on any scale had become impractical. The tape recordings of Clarence Anderson, Oscar Hilton and Elmer Hallett are precious to us not only because of the uniqueness of their storytelling but also because their first-hand accounts have rescued from obscurity our own limited practice of this important American folkway.

There were at least three groups who undertook the physical and economic cost of cutting blocks of ice from Falmouth ponds and storing them in local sheds. Estate owners - the Fays, Whitneys, Emmonses, Marshalls, Cranes - comprise one group. Ice was still a luxury for the working classes but essential to the standard of living of wealthy families.

To ensure the availability of ice in summer, they had icehouses - square, wooden, windowless structures.

Local people found employment on these estates as caretakers and groundskeepers. When the ponds froze, the word went out that it was time to fill all the icehouses.

Surely Joseph Story Fay of Boston, who came to Falmouth in 1850, knew about the pioneering work of his contemporaries Frederick Tudor of Boston and Nathaniel Jarvis Wyeth of Cambridge in improving the technology of ice harvesting. Wyeth designed an ice-cutter in 1825, the prototype of the horse-drawn ice plow mentioned by Clarence Anderson. Wyeth's invention standardized the size of the ice blocks, making them easier to stack. Tudor's experiences in shipping ice to tropical ports led to improvements in ice storage. The icehouses in Falmouth described by Clarence Anderson are patterned on Tudor's original design.

If these affluent "summer people" didn't exactly originate the custom of ice harvesting in Falmouth, they strongly influenced the way it occurred. They would certainly have provided the tools: the horse and the ice plow, the snow scraper, the ice saw and others. The Fays got their ice from Nobska Pond, part of



Carrier Corporation refrigeration advertisement, 1949. Robert Fawcett (1903-1967) brought a superb sense of composition to his magazine and advertisement work. From "American Illustrators Honored With U.S. Postage Stamps." Courtesy Barbara A. Votolato of the United States Postal Service.

the Fay estate. Others harvested Nobska Pond as well. The curious mention of collecting money for cakes of Nobska ice in Oscar Hilton's account could mean that payment was made to Henry Fay. By law, owners of property along the shore line of ponds that are less than ten acres wide have riparian rights to harvest ice, rights that can be leased or sold. But, given what we know about the famously generous Fay family, it seems more likely that payment was made to the workers who cut the ice and hauled it out of the pond. Although the right to harvest ice was a contentious issue in many places, our oral histories lead us to believe that the activity here was cooperative rather than competitive.

There was a second group in town interested in large quantities of natural ice: the owners of meat and fish

markets. Notable examples are George Cahoon, a meat dealer, and Sam Cahoon, owner of the Harborside Fish Market in Woods Hole. Ice had replaced salt as a means of preserving fish at sea and on shore. The Cahoons harvested both from Nobska Pond and from Icehouse Pond (also called Miles Pond) on Sippewissett Road where Sam Cahoon had an icehouse. Like Oyster Pond, and Shivericks Pond, Icehouse Pond is considered a great pond, owned by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Public rights to great ponds include taking and removing ice for any purpose. When Sam Cahoon converted his ice harvesting operation to ice manufacturing in 1933, neighbors complained. It was a noisy operation and it was occurring in a residential zone. In *The Book of Falmouth* Bruce Chalmers describes the altercation and its far-reaching consequences in detail.



Ice harvesting with horses and tools, 1910. From the postcard collection of Philip Stanton. Courtesy WHHC.

A third group of harvesters were the ice dealers. The 1890 edition of *The History of Barnstable County*, edited by Simeon Deyo, lists several ice dealers in Falmouth, many of whom carried ice in addition to other products like coal, wood, fish, and grain. Lewis H. Lawrence and John F. Donaldson, owners of the Falmouth Ice Company are listed. In an advertisement in the 1890 edition of the *Bourne, Falmouth, and Sandwich Business Directory*, Silas F. Swift of West Falmouth features hay, grain, straw, feed, wood, and coal for sale in addition to ice. He also offers a livery and boarding stable, passenger and baggage transfer, and transient board at reasonable rates. Many businesses of the time were diversified, with ice as a sideline. Lewis H. Lawrence had interests not only in the Falmouth Ice Company but also in a grain mill located near Depot Avenue.

The information that has come down to us reveals that harvesting the ice crop was anything but quaint, Currier and Ives renderings notwithstanding. Falmouth resident Eunice Johnson, Lewis H. Lawrence's daughter, is convinced that a horse drowned on Shivericks Pond during one harvesting operation. The details are hazy in her memory but she recalls hearing that the horse's thrashing about caused additional ice to break up, making rescue impossible. Mrs. Johnson remembers most vividly the difficulty of her father's job. It was very cold out on the pond and the work was slow. The horse-drawn ice plow had to be carefully directed, the huge blocks

of ice carefully hauled out and stored. Her father's main complaint, she said, was that the work played havoc with what he called his lumbago. One day he returned home in an angry mood because a few young people had made a small fire on Shivericks Pond to keep warm while skating. He became even angrier when he discovered that one of his sons was among the culprits. Carol Bissonnette of Falmouth, Frederick Lawrence's daughter and Lewis H. Lawrence's granddaughter, remembers how hard her father worked. She frequently went along with him on his ice delivery route and recalls the many times she saw him disappear down the stairs of the Quisset Harbor House with a 200 pound block of ice on his back.

Ice is so commonplace today that we hardly think about it, but the ice harvesters and ice dealers of the past labored hard to provide it to the people of Falmouth. By recalling their valiant efforts, we do them honor.

Barbara Kanellopoulos was born in Waltham. She attended Northeastern University and Bridgewater State College, earning a B.S. in Education; and went on to earn her Masters in Education at Harvard University. She taught English at Cape Cod Community College for ten years, then taught English and developmental Reading at Falmouth High School 1973-1986. With her husband, Christos, she managed Christopher's Restaurant 1976-1997. They have two children, Anastasia Kanellopoulos Karplus and Paul Kanellopoulos, and one grandson, Christos.