

ASHRAE History Article - Ice Boxes

With recent weather reports from Erie County, NY, it seems appropriate that this next history article be about ice and ice boxes. For some of us born just after World War II, the ice box is not just an article of history. Many of us actually remember one in use in our own kitchen, at home. The earliest sources of ice for home ice boxes in Rochester, NY, during the nineteenth century, included the Erie Canal and many local lakes and ponds. One such source was Silver Lake, in the towns of Perry and Castile, in Wyoming County. Situated conveniently on a spur of the Baltimore & Ohio RR, Silver Lake boasted a mammoth ice harvesting operation, three-story storage house and ready-made transport facilities.

Similarly, there were numerous ice houses located strategically, along the Erie Canal, many here in Rochester. Built in the mid-nineteenth century, they had 3' thick stone walls, massive wood-beam floors and deep sub-basements to support the tremendous weight of the ice and help preserve the stored commodity, as far into summer as possible (typically well into the month of August). An example of one such facility in downtown Rochester is the former Kleen-Brite plant on Oak St., near Kodak Office.

People who couldn't pick up their own ice relied on the ice delivery man. Most routes were "owned" by the driver, and he was expected to pay cash for his ice, at the ice house, before it would be loaded onto this wagon. Because delivery men sometimes had trouble getting paid in cash, they began to sell coupon books. The customer would purchase a 500#, or 1000# book of coupons, usually at a discount. Then the ice man would simply collect the coupon when he made the delivery. The coupons were printed with different colors for different amounts of ice; 25#, 50#, etc. The customer would place a corresponding colored card in the window for the driver to see, and he would bring the required amount into the kitchen and place it in the ice box.

After the turn of the twentieth century, a general lack of sanitation facilities and sewage treatment led to increased pollution of the canal and the lakes. In addition, while the demand for ice increased, natural ice was not available in southern states, unless it could be shipped from the north. Consequently, the need for an ice-manufacturing plant in every town in North America began to put a major demand on the refrigeration equipment.

Next: Ice-refrigerated Railroad Cars