

Truckee's Ice Industry

By Judy DePuy

One hundred years ago, winters were much colder in Truckee with temperatures often 30 to 40 degrees below zero. In those days, the Truckee Basin was known for producing some of the finest and best quality ice in the west. Before electric refrigeration brought cheap and available ice in the early 20th century, ice was harvested along Truckee's lakes and rivers. Truckee's cold mountain air and readily available clear streams created an ideal environment for ice companies to create and harvest ice.

Although the ice industry actually started in Boston in 1806, it did not move west to Truckee until 1868. The large quantities of ice harvested in the Sierras depended on cheap transportation. The completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in May 1869 enabled the distribution of Truckee ice to distant markets.

Ice Production

Ice was originally produced in the Donner Summit area but Truckee was a better location for ice harvesting. Because Truckee is located further east and protected by the mountains, it had fewer storms, was intensely cold, blessed with lots of clear water and had easy access to the railroad. The first ice company in Truckee was the Boca Mill and Ice Company, located just east of Truckee in Boca.

Truckee Basin's ice was known for its purity and firmness. Moving ice production from Soda Springs to the Truckee area kept the temperature similar to Donner Summit but with much less snow. Snow could ruin the thickness and purity of the ice. Snow is a great insulator which would impact the thickness of the freezing ice (quality ice was 8-14 inches thick). Also as snow fell the weight would push the ice below water level. The water would rise to the surface of the snow and freeze there. Instead of being clear, transparent and bright the resulting ice was white, opaque and dull. "Good enough for refrigeration" but not desirable enough for consumption.

Ice Harvesting

Harvesting of ice was an art in of itself. Most of the men who worked on the Boca ice harvests were lumberjacks in the summer. Ice harvesting seasons could be as short as one week and was seldom longer than a month. It was a short-term business but it helped give the lumberjacks employment during the winter. Ice harvesters usually started their day at dawn and ended when the sun set. Harvesting ice was not easy work but it paid well. An ice harvester in the 1800s could make \$3.00 per day, which included room and board. Ice harvests provided many men work for pay in the Truckee region for over 50 years.

Markets for Ice

The amount of ice created in a given year was dependent on weather conditions including snow, rain and temperature. The natural ice that was made in Truckee was used in multiple industries.

Ice was a necessity in the nearby Nevada mines. As the mines went deeper, the temperatures inside the mines soared reaching 125 degrees in the rocks and 170 degrees in the water. After working for 15 minutes, miners would be allowed ice water to keep their body temperatures down. As much as 95 pounds of ice was allocated to each miner every day. In 1872, Virginia City's Consolidated Mine used more than 1,000 tons of ice!

In the late 19th century, Truckee's pure "Mountain Ice" was used in San Francisco and Sacramento's high-end hotels and bars. In 1898 the San Francisco Sunday Call acknowledged that the Truckee River furnished San Francisco "with most of its ice". The ice was also used by the wealthiest citizens for refrigeration.

Agriculture was the real mainstay for the Truckee ice business. After the mines played out, the surpluses of fruits and vegetables produced in California's great interior valleys needed an avenue to get to eastern markets. Ice was used to preserve California produce that was on its way to markets in Chicago and New York. Truckee ice was shipped to the Central Valley in yellow 'Pacific Fruit Express' rail cars where it preserved the fruits and vegetables until they could reach the Sierras. The rail cars were iced again for the long journey east. Ice helped insure the produce would arrive in good condition. Without the ice from Truckee, the development of California's agriculture business would have had to wait for mechanical refrigeration.

The proximity of ice and cold, clear mountain water made Truckee an ideal place to establish a brewery. Lager beer must be made at low temperatures and ice was needed to keep the cellars cool. The Boca Brewing Company located its brewery close to the Boca ice pond and ice houses. Boca Brewing Company produced the first lager in California. In 1884, Boca Brewing Company stored over 5,000 tons of ice for their own use. The annual shipment of lager from the Boca plant exceeded 650,000 gallons to meet demand.

Conclusion

For a short time in history, ice harvesting was big business in Truckee. The ice industry peaked between 1880 and 1900 when ice houses in the Sierras could store 300,000 tons of ice in a single year (Note: New York Hudson River Ice companies produced 3,000,000 tons that same year). Pacific Fruit Express stopped using natural ice when it built one of the largest refrigeration plants in Roseville in 1924. The final ice harvest at Boca occurred during the winter of 1926-1927.

Mechanization of ice production shut down the old ice houses after WW I. All that is left of Truckee's ice industry are the crumbling foundations and remnants of old ice dams. The days of railroad barons, pioneers and ice harvesters are a thing of the past but hopefully not forgotten.

Sidebar:

- A short interpretative walk is located at the site of where the town, logging mills, ice houses and brewery of Boca once resided. Take the Hirschdale Road Exit off Interstate 80 going east. Turn left (drive under the interstate), cross the railroad tracks and look for the dirt parking lot on the right, before Boca Reservoir.
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- To learn more on this topic, join us on July 13, 2019 for a historical talk on the ice industry in the Truckee area, 7:00-8:00 pm, Truckee Airport Conference Room, 10356 Truckee Airport Road, Truckee.
- For more information and a list of summer activities going on in Truckee to celebrate the sesquicentennial of the Transcontinental Railroad go to <https://goldspike.org> or the Facebook page: Donner Summit-Truckee Golden Spike Celebration.

About the author:

Judy DePuy is a retired civil engineer, marketer and a volunteer for the Truckee-Donner Historical and Railroad Societies.

Sources:

- "Loading an ice rain at Boca." Photo #12, 11/18/79, photo collected by Tom Macaulay, donated by A. Williams.
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- "Frozen in Time: Remembering a once-thriving ice harvesting industry, by Jamie Ball, Sierra Sun, February 13, 1997, p. 13.
- "Historical Look at the Ice Harvesting Industry at Truckee", by Doug Barrett, My Place in the Sun, Sierra Sun.
- "A Look at the Truckee River Ice Industry", by Doug Barrett, My Place in the Sun, Sierra Sun, April 22, 1982.
- "New book features Truckee's ice industry history", by David R. Tousaint, Ice from Truckee.
- "Remembering Truckee's ice harvesting period", Sierra Sun, 1985.
- "River Canyon source of ice", by Doug Barrett, My place in the Sun, Sierra Sun.
- "Ice Harvests Were a Major Industry", by Tom Macauley.
- "Monopoly: Union Ice Company by Tom Macaulay, Special to the Sierra Sun, September 17, 1998.
- "Does 'Winsted' recall anything to anyone?", By Doug Barrett, My Place in the Sun, Sierra Sun, June 26, 1980, p. 7.