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Ice Harvesting on Harvey's Lake

Introduction

Before World War II homes and business firms largely relied on natural ice (cut from lakes or rivers) or artificial manufactured ice for cooling food products and for rail/truck transportation of dairy, meat and fruit products. After World War II homes, businesses, and transportation companies converted to electrical refrigeration.

In Wyoming Valley from the 1890s to the late 1940s, ice harvesting was a major industry in our region. There were small localized ice-harvesting operations at many area lakes. The largest ice-operations were created by the Bear Creek Ice King, Albert Lewis, at Mountain Springs (near Ricketts Glen) and at Bear Creek, outside of Wilkes-Barre.

Oddly, Harvey's Lake was never developed for major commercial ice-harvesting. As the region's (indeed the State's) largest natural lake, no major commercial harvester located here - even as New York and Philadelphia based firms had major ice operations in the Poconos.

The Lake Patents

The likely reason that Lake development for ice harvesting was deterred is that the Lake bottom is actually privately owned (a peculiar legal entanglement which will not be recounted in detail). In Pennsylvania land ownership can generally be traced to State title or "patents" to early landowners and land speculators which began in the 1790s. At the Lake patents were taken to lands around the Lake quite early - and largely by the Hollenback family who had business interests based in Wilkes-Barre.

By the early 1870s, however, cottages were growing around the Lake. Charles T. Barnum had an early farm at Barnum Place near the Picnic Grounds. Hendrick B. Wright was a lawyer and local congressman whose large home built in 1881, shortly before his death, still stands near Sunset.

In the fall of 1870 Hendrick B. Wright and Charles T. Barnum applied to the state for warrants to the land underneath the Lake, which had not been included in any previous state warrants. Land warrants to areas under rivers and lakes in the state were not uncommon (usually to support coal mining rights). The Lake bottom was divided into two large parcels, and on October 13, 1870, the state granted Wright a warrant for 285 acres and Barnum a warrant for 329 acres. The Lake was surveyed on November 3, and patents were issued to Wright and Barnum on February 20, 1871.

The Lake patents drew the anger of local residents who protested to the legislature. The legislature responded with a law declaring Harvey's Lake and Harvey's Creek to be

navigable waters. The law was actually proposed to the legislature by the Hoffman Lumber Company, but it had popular local support, with Wright and Barnum opposing the act. (Hoffman had lumbering operations at the Outlet on Harvey's Creek.)

The effect of the law was not to challenge Wright and Barnum's ownership of the land under the Lake, but to assure access to the Lake waters by adjoining property owners. In fairness to Wright and Barnum, they probably never intended to exclude public use of the Lake. Wright and Barnum planned to engage in ice-cutting on the Lake in the winter, and the Lake patents arguably provided a legal basis to support the business. Wright and Barnum exchanged one-half interests in each other's Lake patents, and they built four large ice houses in the Alderson corner for their ice business. But the Hoffman Lumber Company was booming logs in several sections of the Lake creating an unsightly and sometimes dangerous nuisance. At one time, a log boom threatened to damage the Inlet bridge. By obtaining Lake patents, Wright and Barnum may have been able to limit Hoffman's operations on the Lake and to protect the pristine integrity of the Lake for lakeside owners. Wright and Barnum did exercise a proprietary interest in the Lake by stocking it with three hundred black bass, a new game fish, in late August 1871.

The Lewis Ice Business

Albert Lewis, who built the railroad to the Lake, was the county's largest ice harvester with its center at Bear Creek. He was also the greatest lumberman in the Lake/Noxen region by the 1880s.

Lewis, of course, contemplated the extension of his ice business to the Lake along with his lumbering interests. But circumstances would eventually turn Lewis away from the Lake as an ice-cutting center. The principal obstacle to Lewis was the Wright and Barnum patents to the Lake. In January 1888 the heirs of H.B. Wright and C.T. Barnum granted George R. Wright and Benjamin F. Barnum, sons of the original patent owners, a license to cut ice on the Lake. The license, however, was then leased to Albert Lewis who planned to cut at least six thousand tons of ice annually at the Lake, with a royalty to the heirs of Wright and Barnum. But the arrangement with Lewis only lasted a few years. Barnum and Wright had a dispute with Lewis over business methods, and the ice business at the Lake did not prosper. The royalty for 1893 only amounted to \$60.75. On November 12, 1893, the lease with Lewis was cancelled.

On behalf of the Lake patent owners, George R. Wright entered into a new ice-cutting lease with Theodore Renshaw, who was well-known in the Wyoming Valley as the captain of Susquehanna River steamboats. Renshaw also owned property at Alderson. Renshaw cut ice on the Lake for a short time. On January 3, 1895, however, Wright, Barnum and Renshaw visited the Lake to witness a strange phenomenon. The water and ice in the ice field from Alderson to the Picnic Grounds was full of algae. The unsightly ice could not be harvested, and the ice season was a disaster. Wright and Barnum did not take a serious interest in ice-cutting at the Lake after the 1895 season. In fact, in October 1895 Wright and Barnum offered the Lake patents to Judge Henry W. Palmer for the price of \$50,000.00. Palmer, however, did not accept the offer. A few

years later, on February 14, 1900, the uninsured ice houses of Wright and Barnum at Alderson were completely destroyed by fire.

While Barnum and Wright struggled to profit from their Lake patents in the early 1890s, Albert Lewis decided to develop an ice-cutting industry elsewhere in the North Mountain range. Lewis built two dams on Bowman's Creek at Mountain Springs, and there he soon developed a large ice operation. The ice from Mountain Springs, and an allied operation at Beach Lake, was conveniently shipped on the Lehigh Valley Railroad through Alderson to the Wyoming Valley. When Lewis returned to Bear Creek after the Alderson sawmill closed, the Mountain Springs and Beach Lake ice operations were assumed by Arthur L. Stull, a son of Adam Stull (brother-in-law of Albert Lewis).

The Casterline Ice Business

Winter at the Lake provided employment to the Lake men. During the 1920s ice-cutting on the Lake was in its prime years as the patent issue was ignored. The Barnum and Wright family interests were elsewhere and the patents seemingly abandoned. The Casterline family had three generations in the Lake's ice-cutting industry. Nathaniel Casterline was the original family pioneer at the Lake, settling at the Outlet from his original Connecticut home. He hauled lumber from the Lake to the Wyoming Valley coal companies, which used Lake timber for mining operations, but he also entered the ice-cutting business in the early years of the century. There were a number of other early ice-cutters after the ice company operations of Barnum and Wright closed at the Lake. Individual farmers and merchants frequently cut their own ice to stock their farms and stores at the Lake. Two ice-cutters who had a prominent trade in earlier years were the cousins Grover and George Anderson. A later example was Tony Javers who opened a store at Alderson in 1931.

During the 1920s the Lake Improvement Company at Sunset also entered the ice-cutting business, along with Stull's Supply Store at Alderson. The Stull Store, however, received its ice from Mountain Springs.

In time, however, it was Nathaniel Casterline's son, George Casterline, who had the largest ice operation on the Lake. During the summers of the Golden Years, George Casterline also operated a carriage service carrying passengers and luggage from the Alderson station to the Hotel Oneonta and Lakeside Inn. The horse and wagon service was later replaced by a jitney (taxi) service.

In later years, George Casterline was aided by his sons, Bill, Jim and Chick Casterline. The Casterlines generally cut ice in the Sunset area - about 150 feet from the shore. Ice was also cut in the Inlet basin. In the early years, ice was cut with horse and muscle. Usually, ice was cut when it was about eight inches thick. A horse-drawn plow cleared the snow from the ice field. An ice plow would cut parallel rows about one hundred feet long. Cross-cuts were made with a hand saw, and the eighteen by twenty-eight inch blocks were spudded apart and piked over to a loading chute. Ice was stored by the Casterlines in icehouses or loaded into the icehouses of the Hotel Oneonta or Lakeside Inn.

The Casterlines had two large icehouses at Sunset. Each held about twelve hundred tons of ice, as the Casterlines cut nearly twenty-five hundred tons of ice in the winter. Only about five or six weeks of ice-cutting were necessary to fill the icehouses if conditions on the Lake were appropriate. Frequently, ice was cut in mid-January, but in a late winter ice could be cut as late as March. In addition to ice, the Casterlines sold and delivered coal and also managed a general hauling service. In the 1930s mechanical devices would be constructed by the Casterlines to modernize the system. But the rotary saws and mechanical chutes could exact a serious injuries, and occasionally trucks and tractors fell through the ice, threatening the lives of their operators.

In 1947 the Casterline family completed its last regular season cutting ice on the Lake. Mechanical refrigeration developed swiftly after World War II and replaced the familiar icebox. Refrigeration ended the ice-cutting industry at Mountain Springs. Ending, too, was the principal freight service that supported the Bowman's Creek Branch of the Lehigh Valley Railroad. Only the Noxen tannery remained to provide any significant freight along the rail line.

William "Bill" Casterline cut ice around docks to prevent winter damage and engaged in community hauling services. Bill and his wife "Beth" represented the best of an earlier era - a special generation with roots to the earliest families, a lifetime of dedicated work to Lake residents, a friend to anyone in need, and a life repaid with love from a special family and community "at the lake."

Post Script

The nearly forgotten Wright and Barnum patents to the Lake were again dredged from the historical records in 1968 when the Board of Water and Power Resources of the Pennsylvania Department of Forests and Waters planned to tax the owners of shoreline and docks at the Lake. The state agency had assumed that the Lake was owned by the Commonwealth. Counsel for the property owners at the Lake defeated the tax plan by raising the old patents, which have descended to the uncertain heirs of Wright and Barnum.

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