

This interview with Mr. George Miller took place on March 8, 1978 at his home in LaPorte. Interviewer was Jerrold Gustafson.

JG: Could you describe the process of going out and harvesting ice?

GM: I worked on the ice two winters, right after high school. I couldn't work before then because during winters I was going to school. The first thing I did was to take a team of horses and scrape the snow off the ice, then we had to mark it off in squares, get it ready for the actual harvesting of the ice. The Hilt Ice Company got started on the lakes first because they didn't need as thick 'a ice. It was all delivered in LaPorte. But the Knickerbocker, the ice company on Stone Lake, course there's been 3 or 4 names there, they'd wait until the ice got, oh maybe 15, 16 inches thick before they'd attempt to harvest it. Because of the fact that the Hilt Company got started first and tended to hire a lot of the help - people from town, a lot of farmers worked on the lake - so by the time the Stone Lake Ice Company got ready to put up ice, there wasn't much help left. So they imported their help from Chicago, most of them from, as I remember it, the Skid Row. They'd advertise in the Chicago papers that they needed help to put up ice and they'd bring those fellows down here; 15, 20, 25, whatever they could get. We lived down near the barns in a house the company owned. My dad, see, he worked there. He took care of the barns and like that, and the house was included in his pay. Added onto this house in later years, they built on an addition for a kitchen and recreation room and upstairs, it was two stories, with rooms, each with two, three bunks in them, all for these fellows from Chicago. Well, some of those fellows came down here with your just common shoes. No overcoat, just a topcoat. They'd go over to the barns and beg burlap sacks from my dad and wrap 'em around their feet to keep them from the cold. Well, maybe some of them would work a day, two days and that was enough for them and they'd hie back to Chicago. Ha. But those fellows that stuck it out, they got their fare paid back to Chicago if they stayed till the season was over. They brought their own cook. Sometimes they'd pick a fellow. They didn't serve anything fancy to eat, just good stuff that would really stick to your ribs to do work like that. Sometimes they'd have to bring in two, three different lots of fellows from Chicago to keep the thing going, to get the ice put up. They had two houses on Stone Lake, fact there was icehouses on Clear Lake in town. And some of the times I remember when they put up what they called second-crop ice. I seen ice there twenty, twenty-two inches thick. As they were removing snow pretty near all of what is now Soldier's Memorial Park, with a few exceptions, the ice company owned land almost all the way around the lake, because they had to have a place to scrape the snow off the lake and to deposit it. One particular place, you know where Thode Greenhouses are on Garden Street? A man lived there by the name of Brown, he was a Civil War veteran, he had a vegetable garden there; I later worked for him and so did my dad. Well from where he had the house down to where the shelter is, well that belonged to the ice company, they had quite a few acres in there. They generally used that ground to pile the snow up on the shore. I've seen snow piled up there as high as this ceiling. You see, the idea of that was, as soon as they could get a horse on the lake, they figured if the ice was about four inches that would hold up a team and a scraper. They'd get that snow off the lake. left. So they imported their help from Chicago, most of them from, as I remember it, the Skid Row. They'd advertise in the Chicago papers that they needed help to put up ice and they'd bring those fellows down here; 15, 20, 25, whatever they could get. We lived down near the barns in a house the company owned. My dad, see, he worked there. He took care of the barns and like that, and the house was included in his pay. Added onto this house in later years, they built on an addition for a kitchen and recreation

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JG: Was it like a plow?

GM: A scraper. They were as long as this couch, some were longer. One fellow would work the handles and scoop it up and then when they'd get a scoopful he'd pull back on there and tip it up. Then with the team they'd pull it off the lake and dump it on the shore.

JG: How much snow could they scoop up at once like that?

GM: Oh, I don't know, quite a bit; it would take quite a bit of snow.

JG: How many horses were in the team?

GM: Some of the scrapers were small, but usually two horses, a team. When the ice got thick enough they had a marker; they'd string a rope and then plow out just a little bit of the ice. It had a guide on it that would flip either way. They'd run that guide, when they'd come back on a row the one guide would be in that slot they'd plowed so that each cake was 22 inches square. Then they had what they called plows that would go down there. If the ice was thick, they'd have to go two, three times. They plowed it to within about three inches before they'd strike water. Then they'd chop the ice, then separate out a channel about 8 cakes wide. That was what they called a float. So then they'd float the cakes out, push them out with this pointed iron bar. They'd jab that in there and that would loosen them and then float them out the channel. When they got to the shore they'd separate the cakes. On Stone Lake they'd keep going until it would get almost dark, they'd have enough there to keep the men running until about 9:00. In one of the buildings there

they had an electrical generator for electricity and they had lights like you used to see on the street, old arc lights. They'd work there until all of the ice was run up. They couldn't leave any in there because it would freeze up overnight. They had a couple night crews that had a regular, like a scow that was just the width of the channel. They'd pull that back and forth, make a trip every so often to keep that from freezing over so they wouldn't have to break it loose in the morning. It'd be all ready to go. At the icehouse they had a chain that would yank the cakes up to the incline of the icehouse. They were wide enough to hold two cakes of ice that were 22 inches, so that would be 44 inches. That was run by a steam engine. That would catch the ice and take it up the incline. There the ice would drop off and go down and along in front of the icehouse. Then when the ice got up high enough they could take sections in and out of position on the incline to position the ice.

JG: What was the pay of the men who worked on the ice?

GM: If I remember they got a dollar and a half a day, for ten hours work.

JG: How many days would it take them to fill the icehouse with cut ice?

GM: Oh, they'd sometimes get started in the latter part of December and finish up the last of February or around the first of March.

JG: How was the ice stored in the house, was it just stacked up in blocks?

GM: Yah. Each one of these rooms - I couldn't tell you the dimension of them because things look so much different now than they did when I was a kid. Where the barns and this electric plant was, out by where the Stone Lake Memorial is now, the icehouse was just to the west of that. That had eight rooms, they'd run that ice in there. They had a man there at each one, and as the ice came along he'd grab that there with this pole with a hook in it and swing it so it would go down. They put a layer in the whole length and they had fellows in there to space it with bars. They tried to keep it just a few inches apart. But even before they got to loadin' and shipping it that would probably be froze. They had chisels there and another bar they called an "understriking bar" that would go underneath the cakes and loosen them up and pull them over to the slide, mostly by gravity, to go to the cars. They bought a lot of marsh hay years ago, before they drained the Kankakee Marsh, the Kankakee River. There were acres and acres of marsh hay out there. In fact one of our neighbors, he used to do down there in the summer, late in the summer, he'd bale hay there for quite a number of weeks. The ice companies had hay racks longer than the average farmer had and they'd go down there so many days, get what they wanted and bring that in and stack it near the icehouse. When they were all through ice-making they had forks like farmers used and put it up into the icehouse. They covered the ice with marsh hay. About all of it was shipped into Chicago. The ice company on Stone Lake was first called the Washington Company; well let's see, actually before they had it, it was the Thompson Ice Company, then Washington, then they sold out and it was the Knickerbocker Ice Company and the last ones to have it was the Consumer's Ice Company. They handled building materials and everything in Chicago.

JG: How was the ice shipped to Chicago?

GM: By rail. When they got to shipping ice the railroad company would corral these cars, closed cars, and bring them out. They had a sidetrack off the main line down into where the ice houses were. One sidetrack went to the icehouse down there by the Link Memorial and the other one went down to where that boat launching place is. The superintendent would tell them how many cars they needed, see, he'd get his orders every day by telephone or telegraph, mostly by telegraph. Around noon he'd get his orders from Chicago, how many cars of ice they wanted and where they went, what station they went to. Well, they'd load those cars. As far as I can remember as many as twenty, twenty-two cars of ice in a days time. Sometimes they'd have to work as late as 9:00 at night to get that quota filled and ready to ship. Then they would call the railroad and the switch engine would come out that night and pick up those loaded cars and bring in a string of empties, set those on the sidetrack for the next days' work. Years ago they had a wreck. They had a bunch of cars and the switch engine couldn't pull them all. They had quite a number of cars, fifteen - twenty cars. This was before the New York Central was a two-line track and they ran them different than they do now. Now the cars go on the right like they do on the road, but then they were on the left, just opposite of what the trains are now. Well, the switch engine came out to get the ice and there's too much for him to pull. There was a kind of a grade going from there to the main line. So he pulled half his lead up there and switched them out on the main line. Well, the fast train was due through LaPorte about 7:00 and he thought, the boss on the switch engine, that is, thought that train had gone through, which it hadn't. That train didn't stop, it was a fast train and didn't stop at LaPorte, They came through and hit that line of seven, eight cars. Two of the cars went clear out to where the furniture factory is, Kingsley, clear out there. The rest of them was just a mess. The engineer and fireman, see the coal car just telescoped into the front end of the baggage car, and either the engineer or fireman, I forget which, was in the hospital several months. He wasn't killed, but he was injured; a broken leg, I think. That kind of stuff.

JG: After the ice was shipped, how was it delivered to the people?

GM: Well, that ice was all delivered by teams, they had regular ice wagons, covered wagons. The foreman here got his orders and they told him to send so many cars to each distributing point in Chicago. From there they unloaded the cars and delivered it to the people. The people had cards, they'd put out 25, 50, or 100 lbs. cards and stick that in their window. When the iceman would come along he knew how much ice to carry into the house. They had all these teams in Chicago that delivered the ice and when it got cold late in the fall and winter, people wouldn't take ice, they'd have a little shelf on their back porch to put their milk and butter and stuff and they would quit taking ice. Well, they had all these horses and instead of keeping them in Chicago they'd ship them out to these places like LaPorte and up in Wisconsin - Crystal Lake and different places. I've seen, at times when we lived there by the icehouse, they'd have seventy-five or eighty horses that they'd take care of here. They could take care of them here a lot cheaper than they could in Chicago cause they had a lot of land here and they grew hay. They bought grain for the horses, but they had the hay stored in the barn to feed the horses all winter long. Late in spring, when people began taking ice again, well then they'd send an order out to ship in so many horses. They'd get about sixteen, eighteen horses in a car. They'd put them in the car, one head this way and the next turned around the other way and so on. They'd save the last place for some poor horse they could squeeze in. There was no slack in there for the railroad to bump them or knock them down, they couldn't fall down. They were standing up all the time.

JG: Did the horses work while they were here?

GM: In the winter time? When they got ready to put up ice they'd use, oh maybe ten, fifteen horses. They'd take them into the blacksmith shop and fit 'em with special cork tipped shoes for work on the ice. Course you know those hooves grow and have to be peeled down certain times, so they'd take the, a bunch of horses, into the blackshop. Mostly they went to Wagner's; it was on Monroe Street.

JG: This ice came from the lakes; did people use that in drinks, or just for storage?

GM: They claimed, the ice people, they had experts on this natural ice and they claimed that the freezing of the ice froze out all the impurities so it was safe to put in your drink to cool it. Well, people did it, of course, whether it was all right or not. They just took their word for it and I guess nobody took ill from it. But that's the logic they used - that the freezing took out the impurities.

JG: How many years did ice harvesting go on?

GM: Well, as I get it, the Hilt Ice Company down there on Pine Lake, they quit about 1932. I think the ice company down at Stone Lake quit a few years before that. See by that time freezers began to come in and from freezers they got artificial ice and that was pure ice because that was made from filtered water or something like that; they purified the water before they froze it. There were quite a few people who used that and of course, then refrigerators began to come into use and it was no longer profitable to put up ice. They claim that at that time when they were paying the men about a dollar and a half a day or nine dollars a week, that it cost them about 9 cents a ton to put up ice. There were always about 3 layers that would be melted down, like a cone. They'd have to take out about 3 layers of that, that was all wasted until they got down to the square stuff.

JG: Would the ice in the icehouse melt during summer?

GM: Well, the sides of the icehouse were double-walled with sawdust in between there that would act as insulation. There was so much ice in there and it was so cold it didn't melt much; not outside of that top layer, there wasn't much melt to it.

JG: After the ice companies began to close down, what happened to the ice houses?

GM: They tore 'em down, yah. After we moved away from the icehouse, there by the Link Memorial, my uncle moved in there even after they quit making ice, they still kept him on. He was driving nails out of the lumber. They could use it in houses, it was all right for that; the first boards before they put the siding on. I hadn't married then and was working. I didn't care too much when they were tearing them down.

JG: Were the lakes about the same size then as they are now?

GM: The lakes over the years have fluctuated a lot, at least within my memory which goes back to 1900 or just before that. It seems like they work in a cycle. The lakes came back up but the next thing you'd know they'd go down. Right now they're way up. There's hardly any beach on Waverly Road anymore, which used to be a real wide beach.

JG: What accounts for the fluctuations in the lakes?

GM: I don't know. I don't know if they really know what causes it, but they've been up and down three, four times that I can remember. But there's always been very good fishing over the years. I noticed earlier today going uptown there was about a dozen fellows there on Clear Lake, fishing through the ice. And the fishing has been very good in the summer too. Mostly bass and pan fish; there's some pretty good sized fish in those lakes. Years ago, I told you about the Thode's place where Mr. Brown lived. A man by the name of Harding had a boat which I suppose was about twenty-five, thirty foot long. He built this boat and had it down there by where my son lives now (Bluffside); that was known as the Baptist Assembly Grounds. People from Chicago had cottages there. Well, this man Harding dredged a channel between Pine Lake and Stone Lake. I remember once at Mr. Brown's property they had a boat landing there, so my mother fixed up a picnic lunch and we went down to this landing. They'd run on a regular schedule. So we went down there on a Sunday morning half an hour or so before we knew the boat would be coming through that channel from Pine to Stone Lake. My dad started waving his handkerchief and the guy went "toot-toot" and he came around and picked us up. We went on into the town by the waterworks and come back out through the channel and ate our dinner somewheres out there, then in the afternoon when the boat'd come in, why we got on the boat and they landed us over there on the landing where we started from. I don't know what the fare was, couldn't be very much. They used to haul quite a few people in the summer. That was run by an upright, vertical steam engine. Probably carried about a dozen passengers. Safely. Course, nowadays you go down there on Sunday and that thing is just lousy with motor boats. We were talking about how the lakes go up and down - well, I've got a picture of that channel between Pine and Stone Lakes from about 15 years ago. Completely dry. Yah, and there's a sign there: TEN MILES AN HOUR. GOING THROUGH THE CHANNEL. Ha Ha Ha and I got that in the picture too. No water to go on. Ha. But now that channel is really full, it's widened out, way out.