

# Historical Highlights from the DeForest Area Historical Society

*This is the first in a series of photographic essays featuring selected historic artifacts from the Society's collection and related information.*

## WHAT'S AN ICE BOX?

Is an ice box a cube of ice? A container for freezing water? A box for transporting ice, perhaps? For those who recall the days before the advent of electricity, the term likely conjures up a very specific image: a large wooden box, zinc or tin-lined, with a compartment for large chunks of ice and an area with shelves for storing perishable food items. This was an important component of most kitchens during the earlier years. In mail-order catalogues at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they were called "refrigerators."

Most of these early refrigerators were of quite simple design, a wood cabinet often decorated with some etched designs on the front exterior surface. They included two separate compartments, an insulated, lined area at the top designed to hold large chunks of ice and a bottom section with shelves for storing perishable food products. Some of the ice compartments were top-loaded; others front-loaded through doors. A very necessary part of the system was an interior pipe, which drained water from the melting ice to a collection pan located at the bottom or on the floor.

The ice and the cooled, circulated air did keep the interior temperature of these boxes relatively cold, never near-freezing of course. Constant supplies of ice were required to maintain the system. These ice boxes were particularly important during the warm months of the year, when a back porch or outbuilding could not be used for cooling purposes.

During these years, many communities had an ice house located in a central location, where people could buy their chunks of ice as needed or to supply an ice delivery service. The iceman delivered chunks of ice to customers on a regular basis. This service was similar to that of the milk man, who delivered milk directly to the homes.

Ice was cut during the winter months from bodies of water, with specially-designed ice saws. It was then transferred to storage buildings and packed in sawdust where it was maintained in this state for several months. Large ice tongs were used to transfer the big chunks of ice to the delivery wagon (or truck) and ultimately to the kitchen ice boxes in the homes.

The ice was sold by the pound. For delivery purposes, the iceman relied on a number card which was placed in one of the front windows of the home to indicate how many pounds were requested on a particular delivery day (usually in weights of 25, 50, 75, or 100 pounds). Sometimes the blocks of ice were wrapped in newspaper to help delay the melting process.

In the early 1900s some families purchased hundreds of pounds of ice each year for use in the ice box. The average running cost at that time was 30 cents per pound. One of the important chores for certain family members was to check the ice box drain pan on a regular basis and to empty it when necessary. Puddles of melted ice on the kitchen floor became a source of embarrassment for those responsible.

With the advent of electric refrigerators, which provided more controlled, reliable cool temperatures, kitchen ice boxes soon became remnants of the past. This took place, of course, only when electrification reached specific areas. People living in rural areas often received this service years later than those in town. The new refrigerators were generally received with much excitement and delight.

The concept of using ice for keeping food items cool in a well-insulated box is still prevalent today. Coolers are used to transport and keep food cold for picnics and other events where electricity is not available. Even today, however, one occasionally hears chefs on the Food Network refer to their electric kitchen cooling appliances as “ice boxes.”

One of the more recent acquisitions by the Society is an antique ice box which completes the “before electricity” home interpretation in the kitchen at the Hansen-Newell-Bennett House Museum. It features a hinged top above a tin-lined ice chamber, a shelved storage area below for storing bottles and other containers, and a drain pipe. This artifact is featured in accompanying photos.

*The icebox was purchased for the collection with donations from the Warner Family Memorial Fund, which included receipts from the sale of a book written by Elizabeth Marshall Warner, The Letters of Colonel Clement Edson Warner While Serving in the 36<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin Volunteer Regiment During the American Civil War and donations from other family members. The ice box was originally discovered in an Antiques Shop by David Haswell, great grandson of Clement Warner of Windsor. Special thanks to David for sharing his memories about the ice box used in his childhood family home.*

--Published in the *DeForest Times-Tribune*, May 20, 2010.

*Photo # 1.*



*Ice Tongs  
Used for Transporting Ice Chunks.  
[DAHS Photograph]*

*Photo # 2.*



*Ice Request Poundage Card  
Reproduction of a card that was placed in the  
front window to indicate how many pounds of ice were  
requested on a given day. [DAHS Photograph]*

*Image # 3.*



*Ice Box (Circa 1910)  
Located in the kitchen of the  
Hansen-Newell-Bennett House.  
[DAHS Photograph]*

Image # 4.



*Ice Box Interior  
Upper tin-lined ice compartment  
and lower shelved storage compartment.  
[DAHS Photograph]*