Up to 100 men and boys employed daily

Imagine cutting ice with plows from a frozen lake and floating the100-pound blocks through a channel to a conveyor belt and finally onto a train.

During the ice harvest heyday, as many as 500 cars were filled on some days that required the labor of 100 men to cut, float and ship ice at Lake Helen from Lake Helen.

Horses and men drowned and frigid winds howled from the north and west as men worked near the icy water for hours.

Watchmen, hired to drag agitators up and down the open channel every hour to keep it from freezing, worked through the night.

An exhibit at the Gothenburg Historical Museum chronicles the days of the ice business as well as reason for the creation of the lake.

“It was for irrigation and to generate electricity,” said Dick Larson, a museum board member, about the creation of Lake Helen and a canal in 1891. “And ice cutting became important too.

“It furnished employment to many men during a season when there was not much work to be found.”

One contract for ice to cool fresh produce on rail cars, called for 30,000 tons of ice annually from the lake.

Another contract, by the Platte Valley Farm and Cattle Company, was to ship as many as 2,000 cars of ice in a single season for five years.

The ice was taken to other cities and used in refrigerated rail cars in which slabs of ice were slid onto racks above what needed to be kept cold, Larson said.

At least three small houses were built at the edge of the lake where ice was stored for the railroad and for town residents who often needed smaller chunks to keep food cold.

The Gothenburg Area History book notes that a new ice house was erected in 1893 by the Gothenburg Water, Power and Irrigation Company.

“People came in wagons to collect ice from the ice houses that also stored a big supply for summer use,” Larson said.

In fact, Jane Sheets (another museum board member) remembers a man named Mr. Carr who had downtown ice storage in the 1940s.

The industry began in 1893, when the first ice house was built near the lake, and continued into the 1920s until refrigeration was invented.

At some point, during the early years, the Union Pacific Railroad installed a spur line to ship out

ice from the lake.

“Most of it went to the Pacific Rail Express but some of it was also shipped to North Platte and Grand Island,” Larson said.

Photographs show many of the men working without gloves and wearing caps that don’t cover their ears.

Larson remembers reading an account about how a Model A Ford engine was used to operate an electric saw for ice cutting.

“The night watchman would drain the warm oil into a bucket at night, so it wouldn’t freeze, and keep it warm overnight,” he said.

Ice was cut a foot deep before workers used pry bars to break off the chunks and float them to a conveyor belt.

Inside shacks on the ice were kerosene or wood stoves for the watchmen to stay warm.

Long sticks, with short blades on the end, were used to float the ice through an open channel and to pull frozen water chunks onto a conveyor belt. From there, the ice was loaded into rail cars.

Larson said the ice was also scored, by horses pulling a walking plow, but he doesn’t know why.

“Once a team of white horses fell through the ice and drowned,” he said.

Larson said the bustling ice-harvest business shows how industrious the community was in employing up to 100 men who were paid 20 cents an hour.

Boys, wanting to make extra money, received 15 cents an hour.

“You don’t realize what people have done to make Gothenburg such a progressive community,” he said.

Sheets said she thinks people take more pride in their community when they know more about it.

Today, Lake Helen (named after the founding engineer’s daughter) is undergoing significant change.

The lake is being drained as part of a $1.5 million project to clean the 105-year-old body of water. Lake Helen will be shrunk, dredged and transformed to make it more user friendly.

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