

150 years ago on the Cathance and Kennebec rivers

Selling ICE was a great Bowdoinham business

by Frank Connors

Let the frigid weather of Maine's winters lock old Bowdoinham's Cathance and Kennebec rivers into a glass-pure, crystal ice, chances are, hundreds of local farmers and sons, with folks from neighboring towns, would be standing in line, waiting to work with what in those days was called "frozen gold!"

Tidewater river ice was cut, stored and sold from our two rivers for several decades, starting in the early 1870's, and lasting till at least 1890, when electricity and other "modern" conveniences came along and ruined what many considered a "perfect industry." Cutting and selling ice was perfect because the rivers froze solid every year, nothing was needed to produce the "product" but cold weather, and the work came in mid-winter, when work on the farms was slack. In his [History of Bowdoinham](#), Silas Adams says the first ice stored for shipping on the Cathance was in the year 1856. In the 1880's the demand for Maine ice was so great (and the supply seemed unlimited) that ice was cut and stacked OUTSIDE some houses to await shipment. By 1884, there were a dozen or more houses located in our town, and many of the larger ones had boarding houses for workers, and stables for rented horses.

The little Harward's railroad depot in East Bowdoinham was a hub of sorts, delivered hundreds of men and horses to work on the ice fields each winter. Many of these men boarded locally, ate in local establishments (or homes) and kept the hardware stores "humming." Adams added, "the business proved so very profitable that many invested their money in this business." A worker might earn \$8-10 in a good week, the pay was in cash and a wonderful addition to the local economy. Check out this item, gleaned from a [Richmond Bee](#) newspaper in 1898: "the Hancock Ice Company succeeded in getting out 400 tons of ice with a crew of 40 men last Saturday."

A cake of ice six to eight inches thick and measuring some 24 inches square was expected to weigh 100 pounds. These blocks were cut from "fields" on the river, often an acre or more in size. Lingering snow would be scraped away, and laid to waste near the shore, or pushed away to open water. Row after row of these blocks would be cut off and chipped free, then steered along, using the river current and pointed pick poles, to jockey them into "channels" where an endless cable, or chain towed the things up a chute to slide them into the waiting "great room" of the house. When the massive structure was filled, ground level to rafters, all was covered with blankets of sawdust from local sawmills, and the "harvest" would wait to be shipped along the American East Coast, and Europe, as soon as schooners could come up-river in the spring.

Ice Houses on the Cathance in 1884 included the Crystal Ice house Company, Tidal Wave Ice Company, Maine Central Ice Company, Merrymeeting Bay Ice Company, T.B. Read Company, N.W. Purington Company, Spring Cove Ice Company, and Glazier Ice Company. In the winter of 1886-87, some 31,500 tons of ice was shipped from our little Cathance, and there is no reason to assume that year was a record. For several years, the Cathance stood behind only the Kennebec, Hudson, and Penobscot rivers for total tons of ice produced and shipped. Out on the Kennebec, the Hodge icehouse was just below the Richmond Town line, the Sagadahoc (or John Hancock) house was on what was then the Hill Farm, and the Clark & Chapin, measuring some 300 feet wide and 400 feet long, ("the largest house on the river,") sat opposite the south end of Swan Island. The Morse Brothers house stood on the Maxwell shore, and the Pine Grove, Cold Wave, and William Brown Company ice houses were clustered together on the end of Abbagadasset Point. Many of the houses on the Cathance had capacities of 10,000 tons or less, but the Clark & Chapin house could easily store some 75-80,000 tons!

Most of the ice houses were large, warehouse-like structures, built for profit, not longevity. They'd squat along the shores of the rivers, two or three stories high, great shingled affairs that were stable when filled with ice, unstable during the long summers when they stood empty, unused. Some ultimately blew over during July gales, others caught fire and burned flat in minutes, some were abandoned to ruin when the ice business failed in the late 1890's. Each house had its own dock and slide system, making it easy to load ice on the waiting schooners, getting it across Merrymeeting Bay, down the Kennebec and off to market.

While it lasted, the Cathance and Kennebec ice business was an amazing and unique boon to Bowdoinham and the surrounding area.

Further reading, see:

Tidewater Ice of the Kennebec River. by Jennie Everson (1970)

Kennebec, Cradle of Americans, by Robert P.T. Coffin (1937)

Mainestays of Maine, by Robert P.T. Coffin (1944)

A Maine Man in the Making, by Franklin Gould (1945)

See photos below- please keep reference info below it.



*Consolidated Ice Company in Bowdoinham, ca. 1895. Item #194 from the collections of the
Maine Historical Society and www.VintageMaineImages.com*