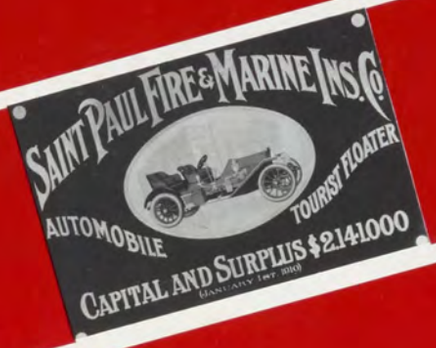
RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

Ramsey County Historical Society

The Fire and Marine: Facts, Fancies, Legends
The First 100 Years of Minnesota's Oldest Business Corporation



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ON THE COVER: San Francisco was severely damaged by the fire that followed the earthquake of April 18, 1906. It was the greatest single fire insurance loss on record and some companies never recovered. As the plaque (small photograph) proclaims, Fire and Marine entered the auto insurance business around 1900, perhaps the second United States insurer to do so.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: All photographs used with the article on St. Paul Fire and Marine Insurance Company are from the archives of The St. Paul Companies. The photograph on page 21 of soldiers harvesting ice at Fort Snelling is from the audio-visual library of the Minnesota Historical Society.

A Record-setting Winter — And the Ice Harvest on Lake Owasso

by Neill J. O'Neill

These past winters have put me in mind of another winter, the winter of 1934-35, I believe, when I was about 15 years of age. It was at the time of the Great Depression and I had stayed home from school to work on the annual ice harvest which took place on Lake Owasso where my parents had their home. A chance to earn some money for the household and for myself took precedence over some missed schooling at that time, although my parents were reluctant, both sides having come from tribes of school teachers.

The winter of 1934-5 was a record setting winter, weather-wise. We didn't seem to spend much time measuring the snowfall or the wind, as we do today, but there always seemed an ample supply of both. The temperature by the lake had not warmed up much beyond 36 degrees below zero for almost three weeks and it frequently was more than 40 degrees below zero.

However, the weather was not a reason for missing work in those days, so we reported promptly before 7 a.m. so as to be at our posts when the whistle blew at 7 sharp. The tower would start the endless chain that pulled the ice blocks up from the lake and through the scrapers and then through the tower and down to the swinging gallery suspended from the roof and running the length of the ice house. The men on the lake and the tower had been working since 5:30 or 6 a.m. to get things ready.

The size of the ice house was roughly the same as that of a city block—long and wide and at least six stories high. I don't believe there were any larger ice houses and I am quite sure the harvest on our lake was probably the largest in the state. It seems as though well over a hundred men were put to work, in addition to the regular ice house crew, for the duration of the harvest. Perhaps I should, as well as my memory serves, describe the entire scene.

The region around Lake Owasso, north of St. Paul, was in those days a separate rural area mostly populated by small farms and a few year-round residents. Transportation being what it was, we might as well have been fifty miles north of the city, instead of five miles.

The ice house was about a quarter mile up the shore from my home. Its property fenced in about forty acres and contained the bunkhouses, stables, blacksmith shops, the cookhouse and the sheds left over from the days when an ice harvest was conducted in the same manner as a lumber camp. The men lived there all winter. The work was done by hand or with the help of horses. The property also included several cottages for the executive's summer use and a large house for the superintendent.

The superintendent and the foreman had to be (or pretend to be) the toughest men on the job. They ran things with an iron hand. I recall seeing in an area tavern on a cold winter night a dispute between several workers and the Super, a large man who drew himself up to his full height next to the bar and declared, "I wull na back water from no mon." His challenger promptly charged but luckily was restrained in time from being harmed. We boys prudently decided we were warm enough and left the presence of MEN to go out into the 20 below-zero winter night and continue our long walk home.

Needless to say the ice house property was a source of fascination for us young ones during the summer months. There would be a good-sized hill of ice from "cripples" that lasted through most of the hot summer and provided cool refreshment and a pleasant retreat. "Cripples" were any irregular pieces of ice that were rejected by a mechanism near the top of the machine tower or, if they passed through the tower to the gallery, were pulled over the edge by one of the switchmen to fall below.

The lake operations, while probably more arduous and certainly more exposed to the wind, were not as high on the social register as the men who actually packed the ice in the houses. They, of course, were called packers. These men were the elite. We who were switchmen thought we were, too, although in fact we were probably lowest on the class scale, and certainly on the pay scale.

Visualize if you will a long, high, squarish building a bright yellow in the sparkling winter sun and set on high, level ground perhaps seventy five feet above

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Neill J. O'Neill was born in St. Paul and has lived much of his life in the Shoreview area of Ramsey County. He grew up on the east shore of Lake Owasso. He is now retired from North Star Lithoplate, the business he owned in downtown St. Paul, and is researching his family's history.

the lake. The building is divided into ten equal "houses," each extending the full width of the building. Each house has an entrance about five feet wide and extending from top to bottom.

Running alongside the building horizontally and suspended by wire cables is the movable gallery which can be raised up and down as the houses fill with ice. In front of each house entrance, on the gallery, is the switchman's stand, a small platform with a wooden railing hanging out into space from the side of the gallery. It could be a pleasant aerie from which to view the wintry world on a sunny, crisp, windless day and a cold and bitter place to be for nine hours on other days.

In the bed of the gallery ran two parallel chains powered by the tower machinery. Spaced athwart these chains at approximately four-foot spaces were wooden bars. Each space pulled one block of ice. The switchman, with the aid of pike pole and foot, selectively pushed the blocks down the chute in his house to the packers waiting below. The packers braced themselves on their steel-pointed crampons and at just the right moment dug the needle-sharp hook on their pike pole into the hurtling 300-pound block of ice. Then they swung the block, sliding it across the dark, gleaming ice floor to an assistant who expertly caught it with his pike and slammed it into place with all the accuracy of a tile setter. No ballet called for better timing as the packers alternately sailed the heavy ice blocks smoothly across the icy surface to be packed in place. A miss was dangerous for if a block split, shivered, or shattered it could mean a crushed or broken leg. It could also mean that most common hazard of the full-time ice employees, a painful rupture.

It was also important that the switchman keep the ice coming at a steady regular pace. Once warmed up, the packers, like baseball pitchers, did not like delays that cooled them off. Conversely, too fast a flow of ice caused pile-ups at the bottom of the slide. Ice blocks that were shunted aside froze to the slab underneath and it was difficult to pry them loose.

Under each switchman's station there grew a small mountain of crippled ice chunks which remained there, slowly melting long after the grass was green and the trees were in full leaf—very picturesque on a warm sunny summer day.

In the middle of winter with only a handful of year-round people on a bleak snow-covered lake and a mile's walk to visit a friend, excitement was hard to come by. Crystal radios were becoming common, but with earphones only one person at a time could listen. So when the snowplowing started on a twenty-four hour round-the-clock basis, this was news, and to look out the window on a black wintry night and see the piercing headlights of the plows moving across the lake, this was exciting.

When the harvest started, an area the size of a large arena or stadium was cleared by snow plows drawn by trucks or horses. At night, just the trucks were used. Plowing was necessary in order to allow the water to freeze thicker—a process the insulating snow would prevent. Plowing also allowed the ice to freeze clear and without air bubbles. Perfect ice was about thirty-six inches deep, reduced to about thirty inches after shaving. One side benefit for me and my brothers was a chance to ice skate and glide over this large rink. We could also have impromptu hockey games. The preparation of the ice went on for some weeks, so we did not envy Hans Brinker.

When the ice was judged thick enough, the sawing began. A circular saw was used first for deep scoring; long straight saws were used to saw out the rafts. The rafts were pulled by horses to the open channel that led to the endless chain traveling up through the tower. Men with long ice chisels split the rafts into stringers one block wide and eight blocks long. Other men with long handled pike poles pulled the stringers up the open channel. Finally, still more men split the ice into single blocks which were pushed into the chain and pulled up to the houses. The lake workers were much more exposed to cruel weather.

One incident which happened on the lake concerned a rough but sturdy and experienced worker named John. His job was to pull stringers. One day his space conflicted with that of a horse that was pulling rafts. The horse knocked him into the icy water. Not one to take an affront lightly, as soon as he was helped back onto the ice he went over and pushed the horse into the lake. After order was restored it was with a great deal of difficulty that he was persuaded of the need to go home and put on dry clothes.

John was something of a mystery. He lived in and owned a two-and-a-half story house near the north shore of the lake. He lived alone. John had no feeling in his large, thick hands and liked to demonstrate this in various ways, such as putting his fist through chair bottoms. One slow afternoon at the corner tavern, John walked over to the cast iron wood-burning cook stove and, with one mighty blow of his fist, hit the top of the stove so hard that he caved in a stove lid.

When I was almost 15 and old enough to work on the ice harvest, I was hired on for the first time. I believe I worked three consecutive harvests before I found other fulltime employment. In my second year of this work I was home for lunch one noon when my mother noticed blood on the kitchen floor. We

Soldiers cutting ice at Fort Snelling around 1890.

discovered that in the process of pulling a crippled ice block off the ice house gallery, I apparently had run the needle-sharp end of my pike pole into my semi-frozen big toe. This called for some fast first aid, which my mother was expert in supplying, because I had to be back at work by 1 o'clock. If you were not there you lost your job. Men always were waiting around to replace you. With several pairs of socks and felt slippers inside of heavy work rubbers I was able to keep working and keep my feet from freezing.

Most of the men who regularly worked the yearly harvest wore felt shoes inside of heavy work rubbers to which leather strips with sharp cleats were attached. Those of us who hoped to do this work only one or two years did not or could not make this kind of an investment. I was lucky to be hired on for harvests during my teen years, earning some much needed money and gaining a unique experience. My wound, however, was deep and slow in healing. For the next twenty-five years it provided a pipeline for cold weather right into my foot.

The pike poles we used—we may have called them ice hooks or picks, I am not sure—were well made. They had a five-foot handle of good sturdy wood and a steel end with one point that was straight like a small spear. The other point drooped at a right angle, something like fleur-de-lis cut in half. The points were about a half-inch thick at the base and were kept needle sharp with a file. There were also much longer poles with handles ten or twelve feet in length which were used on the lake to pull the ice rafts.

The ice harvest provided some regular much needed off-season work for local farmers, truck farmers, and other seasonal workers from Little Canada, New Brighton, White Bear Lake and in between. It also

served as an introduction to people you otherwise would never have met. Most of the bulk of the crew members went from lake to lake, as there were several ice houses located in the county. In addition, they usually finished the season on the St. Croix River between Stillwater and Bayport, packing ice directly into railroad boxcars. With fish and game still quite prevalent then, some trapping and poaching rounded out their incomes quite well for many years until manufactured ice came into being.

The ice company's insurance firm came out at the beginning of the harvest and addressed all of us with promises of a big party at the end of the season if there were no accidents. This turned out to be one keg of beer at one of the corner taverns. Because we weren't paid until the end of the harvest, we would get one check for perhaps four weeks of work which the beer joint would obligingly cash with money borrowed from a brewery. This, after paying any bills and giving the proper share at home, would usually be spent in the time-honored fashion set by lumberjacks, sailors and cowboys—all in one night. Contrary to popular opinion, none of us felt especially bad about it the next day.

Love and Marriage on the Old Frontier

EDITOR'S NOTE: Although Fort Snelling for some years was on the edge of civilization, love, marriage and family life flourished, for the most part, on the frontier. These brief accounts were drawn from an address, "Fort Snelling Echoes," which Edward Duffield Neill, pioneer educator and historian, presented to the officers and troops of the Third United States Infantry at Fort Snelling on March 15, 1889.

On the second of May, 1849, the President of the United States of America, with his wife and a married daughter, received a visit of respect from one who had been a member of Congress from Pennsylvania but had recently been appointed by him the Governor of a new territory which had been created by an act of Congress.

The President was Zachary Taylor, and the visitor was Alexander Ramsey, the First Governor of Minnesota Territory, who was about to leave for his post of duty, then an insignificant hamlet, designated by law as the capital, called St. Paul, on the verge of the military reservation of Fort Snelling, where the President had once been the commanding officer....

As Lieutenant-Colonel Taylor of the First United States Infantry in 1829, he was on duty at this fort, and it is noteworthy that he had once been Major of the Third Infantry now represented here....

On the 12th of July, 1829, Col. Taylor left for Fort Crawford at Prairie du Chien. His interesting daughters had enlivened the society of the post, and the assistant surgeon, R.C. Wood, after the boat which carried them away was out of sight felt as if the walls of his heart would cave in. It was not surprising that early in September he obtained leave of absence to visit Fort Crawford in an open boat, and that he should return before the close of the month with a lovely bride by his side, the daughter of Col. Zachary Taylor....

When Col. Taylor went to Fort Crawford another daughter was persuaded by a young lieutenant, Jefferson Davis, to run away and marry him, and he became the President of the so-called Confederacy....

Joseph Plympton made a pleasant commanding officer. When the war with Great Britain began in 1812, he was engaged in commercial pursuits, but that year was commissioned a second lieutenant of the Fourth Infantry, and in June, 1821, was a captain of the Fifth Infantry. He was a handsome, courteous blue-eyed young officer, and in 1824 married Eliza Beekman Livingston of New York, known among her associates for energy and vivacity....

Of all the commanders of the fort, Captain Seth Eastman was the most literary. He was a native of Maine, and before coming to Fort Snelling had been for several years assistant professor of drawing at West Point. In 1835 he married Mary, the daughter of Surgeon Thomas Henderson of the army, who sympathized with him in his studies and pursuits. At Fort Snelling Captain Eastman devoted his leisure in painting pictures of the scenery and Indians of Minnesota, while his wife noted their manners and customs. In 1849, she published "Dacotah: or Life and Legends of the Sioux Around Fort Snelling," and at a later period two other works on Indian life....

The first commander of Fort Snelling after the Mexican war was Brevet Major Samuel Woods, then Lieut.-Col. Gustavus A. Loomis of the Sixth Infantry succeeded....

At the time he was the commandant he was a widower, and it is said fell in love with a gentle and fascinating young woman, when to his great disappointment a second lieutenant, not recognizing the superiority of the commander in such matters, urged his suit and was accepted. The lieutenant and his wife still live, and she is recognized in the community where she resides as one of the best of women.

On the 15th of April, 1850, Major Samuel Woods of the Sixth Infantry was united in marriage to Miss Barney of Baltimore. The ceremony took place at the fort, and she had the prospects of a long and happy life. In a few years her husband was stationed at Fort Riley, Kansas, and she accompanied him to this new post, where was also stationed Major E.A. Ogden, who in 1835 was married to the daughter of then Captain G.A. Loomis. The cholera broke out in the garrison, and Major Ogden and Mrs. Woods died.

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San Francisco after the fire and earthquake of 1906. See page 12.

Alexander Wilkin, first president of St. Paul Fire and Marine Insurance Company. See page 5.

Ice Harvesting about 1890. See page 19.

Fire and Marine's second headquarters, 1909. See page 11.

The Gibbs Farm Museum, owned by the Ramsey County Historical Society, at Cleveland and Larpenteur in Falcon Heights.

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