

Currier & Ives print: *Winter in the Country. Getting Ice.*

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Topic suggestions: where does our food come from, history of refrigeration, how the seasons affect growing and producing food.

Science connection – how do refrigerators work?

"Winter in the Country. Getting Ice." illustrates the harsh, yet beautiful, landscape of a New England winter. White painted highlights on the trees and in the foreground help create a frosty scene on a cold winter's day. The image was adapted from a painting by George Durrie, a Connecticut artist known for landscapes set in his native state. Here, a number of men cut chunks of ice from a frozen lake and load the blocks onto a waiting horse-drawn cart. The building at the left may be an ice shed, a place where the ice, packed in straw or sawdust, was stored for several months. During this period, prior to refrigeration, ice was a necessary commodity and farmers supplemented their income during the slow winter season by selling the packed ice chunks to businesses in nearby cities. The dog, who has been provided with a blanket to sit on, adds a sense of hominess and comfort to the scene, trademarks of the Currier & Ives firm.

The goal of this podcast is to give teachers ideas for using Currier & Ives prints in the classroom. The print we are using was downloaded off of this website and printed at my office computer. I then laminated it and I now have a classroom resource. We hope to show how a Currier & Ives print from 1864 can spark thinking about current issues and concerns. The big questions that this print can ask are "where does my food come from" "how is my food stored" and "how does my food get to me?" By looking at how food was once harvested and stored students can better understand how much energy and resources we now use today when we eat food that has traveled long distances and is grown out of our natural growing season. Eating locally is a hot topic right now with growing concerns about the fuel usage and pollution caused by food transportation. We hope this lesson can serve as a jumping off point for debating whether eating locally does or does not help in limiting our energy use.

Background on ice harvesting:

This lithograph is from an original painting by George Durrie. He was a Connecticut artist known for his landscape paintings.

Back in the early 20th century families would receive a card from the iceman towards the end of May. Most likely the woman of the house would fill it out and place it in the window to notify the iceman how many blocks of ice she wanted.

Today we open up the refrigerator at least a dozen times a day to get something cold to drink or fresh to eat. But up until the 1930's people owned an icebox.

What is an icebox?

An icebox was an insulated wooden cabinet in which people put all their perishable foods so they would not spoil. The food items were in the lower level. On top there was a hinge which opened to store ice. The very bottom had a container that would catch the water. It was important to empty the tray everyday. Otherwise you would wake up to a big puddle on the floor.

Why do you think the ice was on the top and not the bottom of the icebox?

We know that heat rises but cold air does not.

History of Ice harvesting:

Cutting ice on lakes, ponds and rivers in the Connecticut Valley was a flourishing business until the refrigerator replaced the icebox in the late 1930's. This print is taken from an original painting by George Durrie of harvesting ice on Congamond Lake in Southwick, Massachusetts. In January 1912 the "Western New England Magazine" claimed that Southwick had the largest icehouses in the United States. There were five icehouses on the ponds each covering approximately two acres. Combined they harvested about 222, 000 tons of ice annually. The business was owned by Knickerbocker Ice Company of New York. They began operations in Southwick in 1874 after closing their operation on the Hudson River because of pollution problems. Southwick was ideal for transporting ice because of the rail facilities. At its peak the company shipped 60 – 90 cars a day six days a week with a total dollar amount of one million dollars.

Process of Harvesting Ice:

Harvesting ice began in early December and ran through January and February. The ice would be ready to cut when it reached a thickness of 12". The perfect working conditions were when the temperature read 32° F. They worked even when it dipped below 0°.

The foreman would begin his day at 4:00 a.m. He would prepare the equipment and harness the horses which were shod with a special shoe so they could walk on ice. The workers would use creepers which is a special spike attached to the sole of a boot to provide traction. Today we know baseball players, soccer player and golfers need to wear spikes so they won't lose traction and fall down.

The workers would arrive around 6:00a.m. And work would commence around 7:00 a.m. The size of the crew depended on the business. A small community might use 10 – 20 men a larger one up to 100 workers were needed. This print shows 4 men working and

one man in the distance. There would also be several men who would work inside the ice house.

The men who worked these jobs were usually immigrants from Italy, Ireland, Sweden and Poland. Sometimes high school boys would work on weekends or school vacations harvesting ice. They were paid \$2.00 - \$5.00 /day depending on experience.

Although the job of ice harvesting was not complex it did take a lot of manual labor. After the foreman would mark off the area, the ice would be cut into desired size chunks. Members of the crew would push the ice to the sides in the direction of the wagons. Once inside the ice house, a planner would shave off the upper surface to remove impurities and then they would be covered with hay, straw or sawdust.

Once spring arrived and the cards were delivered, the iceman would begin to prepare his vehicle. An iceman's day would begin at 6:00 a.m. when he would harness his horse and wagon and back it up to the loading platform and assist the crew in filling his cart. He would begin to deliver to costumers around 8:00 a.m. When the iceman reached a house with a card in the window, he would cut the desired amount weigh it on a scale and then using ice tong carry it to the house on his back which he had placed a rubber-covered garment on to keep his clothes dry. There were always children chasing after the wagon picking up the ice chips left behind as a treat - much like we eat popsicles today. The iceman worked six days a week. Sunday morning he would spend back at his barn greasing the wagon wheels, repairing the harness and sharing a meal with the rest of the crew.

Current Day Implications:

If I were using this print with a class I would show my students these three food items: sausage, cheese and pickles. What does this Currier & Ives print and these food items have to do with each other? They all represent ways that people have preserved foods through history.

These food items are also ways that people have preserved food. Sausage, which we know tastes good on pizza and sandwiches, was developed as a way to preserve meat. The salt, seasonings and drying of the meat allowed it to stay edible much longer than fresh raw meat could. Cattle and pigs were usually slaughtered in late fall or early winter. Why? So that the animals would not have to be fed over the winter, when fresh food was scarce and preserved foods needed to last until summer when fresh food could be found again. They also gave a family plenty of meat to eat during the long winter months.

Cheese is another example of a food developed to preserve valuable resources. Animal's milk spoils quickly without refrigeration. Cheese has been around for so long that we don't know when it was first invented. What we do know is that the process of making cheese prevents milk from being wasted from spoilage. I thought cheese was invented because it tastes so good – but it was really to preserve a valuable resource.

Pickles and jams are how people have preserved fresh vegetables and fruit for centuries. In climates where produce can only grow in the summer, eating preserves was one way to eat fresh produce in the winter. And the summer harvest would often be much more than could be eaten in the summer alone. If the food were not turned into jam it would spoil.

This discussion on food preservation brings us to today, where we can easily buy fresh fruits and vegetables all winter long and our food travels thousands and thousands of miles to reach us. We no longer need to preserve our foods for winter. We can also keep food cold in a refrigerator instead of needing to harvest ice from frozen lakes. This has recently become a timely topic as fuel prices rise. How is it possible that we can eat fresh fruit and vegetables during a time of the year when they cannot possibly grow nearby?

As early as the 1870s there were attempts at refrigerating train cars using ice. By the 1940s train cars could be air conditioned to transport meat and other perishable foods. Food could also be frozen for shipment.

Fresh fruits, vegetables and meats are now shipped in refrigerated containers on ships or trucks. Most fruits and vegetables grown in the United States travel an average of 1,500 miles. Much of the produce eaten by Americans actually comes from other countries on cargo ships and trucks. Here's an example: produce grown in Chile travel nearly 6,000 miles to reach the US. And they may travel further to reach other parts of the United States.

Now back to the print *Getting Ice*. Ice harvesting was the predecessor to modern refrigeration and refrigeration is why we are able to enjoy fresh food in the middle of winter and food that has traveled many miles. This print shows students how Americans once preserved their food using a naturally occurring resource - ice. The food that was stored in an ice house would likely have come from a local farm. Today we rely on refrigeration and transportation which both requires large amounts of energy production. If in future we need to re-access our food transportation system, will we once again harvest ice from frozen New England lakes and preserve our backyard garden produce for winter?

Suggested class activities:

- Have students bring in a piece of fruit or a vegetable. On a world map, have the class pinpoint with tacks where their fruit or vegetable was grown. Calculate how many miles the food traveled and discuss what possible route was taken.
- Assign each student to a select fruit or vegetable. Determine where the food is grown and what the growing season is. Next, do this activity again limiting the food choice to something grown within 100 miles of your school. Discuss what you would be unable to eat if you only ate food produced within 100 miles. This is the mandate for the current "Local Eating" trend.

- If a farmer drives 100 miles for a farmer's market to sell 200 tomatoes but a truck driver from California travels 2,000 miles to sell 1 million tomatoes, which is more fuel efficient? Why?
- Have students interview someone who remembers an icebox in their kitchen.

Sources and additional websites:

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