

Cool as Ice

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Nothing quenches thirst on a hot summer day, like an ice cold drink. However, Whiting's early residents couldn't just open up the freezer and plop a couple ice cubes in their glass of lemonade. The reliance of an ice company was necessary to not only keep their drinks cool but to preserve any perishable food on hand.

Herman Vater and Heinrich Eggers were pioneers in the shipping of ice from inland lakes of the Whiting area to Chicago. They formed a partnership with Frederick Zuttermeister, who erected a large icehouse on Berry Lake. In addition, the partners shipped sand and gravel by railroad to the Chicago market. In 1890 Eggers sold his portion of the business to Zuttermeister, who was not aware of Standard Oil's future plans to drain the lake.

Likewise, the Knickerbocker Ice Company was one of the largest ice cutters in the Calumet Region. The Knickerbocker firm was located in Roby, where Cerestar resides today. In January 1895 the company hired a work force of 2,000 men to begin its ice cutting operation. An abnormal warm winter made ice production slow for most of Northwest Indiana. The *Whiting Democrat* stated, "And where is King Winter? That is the question agitating the iceman."

Another problem during that season was reported in the January 17, 1895 *Whiting Democrat*, "The ice men in the Calumet region went on a strike last week demanding higher wages. The strike lasted but a day or two when the men went back to work again at their old wages, eleven cents per hour. The wages it is true are miserably small, but a strike at this time in such an industry, with thousands of men seeking employment is one of the most futile efforts ever undertaken by labor."

In February 1895, ice was cut for storage from Lake Michigan by a South Chicago firm. This was the first time in twenty-one years that this was attempted. The *Whiting Democrat* claimed that the ice was "clear as crystal and about fourteen inches thick." According to Powell A. Moore's 1959 book *The Calumet Region: Indiana's Lake Frontier*, "The cutting, storing and shipping of ice from inland lakes was also a flourishing business. Ice was not obtained for commercial purposes from Lake Michigan as its quality was poor and operations difficult as well as dangerous."

The summer of 1913 was brutal for Whiting residents and the Knickerbocker Ice Company. Whiting citizens were outraged by the infrequent deliveries and lack of preparation of Knickerbocker. The July 2, 1913 *Whiting Call* was a vehicle for residents' lament, "Boiling sizzling, burning hot day would succeed the same kind of day, day after day, and the heat would grow worse, and no ice forthcoming." The article continues saying that even when residents were reconciled to pay exorbitant prices for ice, they were still denied the privilege of purchasing it. "It would appear that the greedy company were deliberately holding back their ice for the purpose of 'education.' that the people would be so 'hungry' for ice that they would pay whatever was asked for it without a complaint." The *Call* goes on to state, "To stint on ice in this kind of weather is a crime against the human race, and most especially upon the infant portion thereof, where it practically becomes indiscriminate murder, almost as diabolical and as effective as the edict of King Herod."

In the past the Knickerbocker company had been successful in stifling all independent competition and private enterprise that threatened to take away any of its monopoly on the ice market. Knickerbocker executives pledged to give ice away before letting a competitor infringe on its turf. The *Whiting Call* claimed that the only way to topple this ice monster was for the people

to have their own ice company. “Are we so weak, so helpless, so subservient, that rather than come out and band together like men to protect our rights and our families, are we going to lay down in our misery and let this ice king crack his frosty scepter over our truckling forms.” To address this assault on mankind a meeting was held on July 8, 1913 at city hall.

In anticipation of the upcoming meeting the July 2, 1913 *Whiting Call* released an editorial detailing the evils of the Ice Company. “It would seem that the people did not appreciate the great blessing that it was for them to have the ice, which they could get in no other way; they must feel what it is worth to them; they must watch their little babies gasp and gag and suffer and die from milk or food that has been exposed too long to the destroying heat, they must see the food itself, for which they were paying higher prices than ever before known in times of peace and plenty, spoil before their very eyes, and thrown away as waste; then they would know what a great benefactor this ice company is, who will send their great wagons, filled to the top with the glistening ice, and give you just enough to last about six hours, and the next trip along your street will take place a week or so later.”

The initial attempt to overthrow Knickerbocker’s reign on ice was unsuccessful. During the sparsely attended meeting, their just was not enough interest from Whiting’s pillars of the community to do anything drastic. According to the July 9, 1913 *Whiting Call*, “Either the men of the city lack interest in the serious problems that confront their wives, or they let a little rain deter them from showing it. It is the housewife who knows what it is to have the ice give out during the hot weather, and though the man pays for it eventually in dollars and cents, it is the little woman who suffers the agony of the loss, and who works the hardest to try and save a few articles from the ravages of heat.”

As a result of continued public outcry, the Whiting Pure Ice Company was formed. Business men and other prominent members of the community “subscribed liberally for the stock” ensuring that there would be plenty of money to make the company sound from the start. The *Whiting Call* urged the populace to be strong and resist the Knickerbocker’s slithering tongue. “There is little doubt that their agents will be on hand offering to make contracts at rates way below what it would cost to furnish the ice, but you will all know that they would not do this if they were not trying to kill off the effort of your own people to give us an adequate supply of guaranteed pure ice.”

The Whiting Pure Ice Company’s founders were not without risk. They put their money into a company that would be worthless if they did not secure enough business from Whiting to make its operation profitable. Their promise to the people was simple as seen in the November 14, 1913 *Whiting Call*, “The local company will supply you with pure ice, and keep you supplied. Their plant will be located right here in this city, and emergency calls can always be met. They will not charge you any more for the ice than is consistent with the expense of manufacture with a fair profit, and by sticking to them you will be many times better off than you have been in the matter of getting ice.”

The Whiting Pure Ice Company was located at 954 Schrage Avenue, today it would be 2457 Schrage Avenue. The large storage building formerly used as an icehouse by the Manhattan Brewing company was used as a depot from which ice was delivered every day. Initially, the company purchased their ice wholesale from an outside firm, but over time they began to produce their own. The company began making deliveries on March 1, 1914. The Board of Directors consisted of the following: Clarence A. Hellwig, President; Dr. Bertrum U. Doolittle, Vice President; John C. Hall, Secretary; and Walter E. Schrage, Treasurer.

The Whiting Pure Ice Company went on to be known as the Whiting Ice and Coal Company. Today, it just takes water and a little time in our ice box and we have crystal clear ice cubes. We do not have to worry about our perishables unless there is a power outage. And, we even have machines that cool down our homes. If you want to know more about Whiting's history stop by the library's local history room.