

# MR. THOMPSON'S Frozen Asset

The Thompson Ice Harvesting Museum in South Bristol is a working operation, where pond ice is stored in the winter and sold in the summer.

BY JANET MENDELSON  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY RED BOUTILIER

NORMAN HAMLIN only knew Herbert Thompson as the man who delivered ice to his family's summer cottage back in the 1920s. Likewise, Herbert Thompson probably only knew Norman Hamlin as the boy from Northampton, Massachusetts, who spent summers in his family's place in Christmas Cove. But later in life their shared respect for history led to a partnership that has preserved a small ice-harvesting operation in South Bristol.

At its peak in the 1800s, ice harvesting was among Maine's biggest industries. It was as important to the state's economy as fishing, granite, and lumber. Even small operations, such as Thompson's Ice House on the Pemaquid Peninsula, were important, providing an essential community service. In an era before refrigeration, imagine what it meant to storekeepers, yachtsmen, fishermen, and seafood



all b&w Red Boutillier photographs courtesy the South Bristol Historical Society

The rebuilt ice house alongside the pond in South Bristol where cutting and storing ice for warm-weather use has been a tradition for generations.



Herbert Thompson, the last to own the South Bristol ice-harvesting operation before it became a working museum.



dealers to get regular deliveries of 25- or 50-pound blocks for their iceboxes.

The industry's most famous merchant was Frederic Tudor, a Massachusetts entrepreneur who in 1820 found a way to keep large quantities of ice solid during lengthy journeys in the holds of oceangoing ships. Harvesting ice from ponds near Bath and Boston, Tudor reportedly introduced iced beverages to the Caribbean; he subsequently became the first to ship fresh fish from northern waters, pre-dating the frozen food industry by a century. By 1860, he had customers from South Carolina to Singapore and Brazil. Competitors sprang up quickly, including many on the Kennebec River, vying for business in South America, India, and China. Even small operations were important—undated photographs of Thompson's Ice House show trucks from Boston's James Hook Lobster Company being loaded with crushed ice for the trip to markets in Florida.

The ice industry began to fold in the early 1900s when electricity made artificial refrigeration possible. Still, to this day, some fishermen and yachtsmen prefer natural ice, because the lower air content makes it last longer than the mechanically made type.

Herbert Thompson's great-grandfather Asa entered the trade in 1826 when a home-improvement project became a business opportunity. On a farm founded by his grandparents in 1752, Asa Thompson dredged a stream, built a dam, and created a pond to supply his family with ice to preserve fish and other perishables. He built an ice house beside the pond with lumber cut from the surrounding woods. That first winter he had more than enough ice stored for his needs and plenty left over to sell to his neighbors, many of whom were fishermen. In later years the horse-drawn Thompson Ice House wagon became a familiar sight in the South Bristol area as the company grew, delivering ice to the region's growing summer community for a penny a pound.

For 159 years, Asa Thompson and his descendants harvested pond ice with picks, chisels, tongs, poles, and busting bars forged from iron, tools whose design changed little over 200 years. However, they were not averse to modernization to improve efficiency. They rigged a Model-A Ford with a plow to clear the frozen pond of snow. A four-cylinder motorized buzz saw on a sled was used to make the deep cuts in the ice. And when competition from electricity reduced profits, Herbert Thompson installed an ice crusher for the region's fish packers and truckers.

- 1 The worker in the foreground is scoring the ice preparatory to cutting it.
- 2 The two workers on the left are holding busting bars, which are used to break the blocks free.
- 3 Two workers are required to drive a sled-mounted buzz saw for cutting the ice.

Eventually, when age and its ills caught up with Herbert Thompson, he contracted with others to do the work. Ken Lincoln was the last of those to manage the operation.

“My dad worked the ice harvest,” said Lincoln, whose roots are deep in South Bristol. “When us kids were big enough to move ice in the channel we went to work. I started in 1968 when I was about eight years old. A lot of us did—my dad, kids, siblings, cousins, and friends. It was a big commercial operation until 1981. Unfortunately, ice harvesting is a lot of hard work with little pay.” Lincoln switched to construction.

In 1974, Thompson’s Ice House was listed on the National Register of Historic Places, making headlines in *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Audubon* magazine, and elsewhere as the only commercial house on the register to have stored naturally frozen ice harvested in the traditional way from a nearby pond.

Credit for actually preserving the ice house goes to Erica Mather Welter, who, beginning in the 1940s, would stop by twice a week in summer as much to hear Herbert Thompson’s stories as for the burlap bags of ice he loaded into her car. Some folks feel a personal loss when the old ways fall by the wayside. Welter was among them.

“Herbert Thompson’s enthusiasm was contagious,” wrote Welter in “My 40 Year Dream,” her account about the saving of the old ice house. It would be a fitting memorial to a disappearing industry, she told Thompson, that if, when the old building collapsed, as they knew it would, a smaller replica were built with salvaged lumber. Thompson agreed.

## TODAY’S ICE HARVEST

Ice is ready to harvest when it is about 12 inches thick. A 30-foot wooden straight-edge is laid on the pond, now called a “field,” to lay out a grid on the ice. Most years, Ken Lincoln and his brother handle a buzz saw mounted on a sled that’s used to cut grooves in the surface of the ice along the grid. First-time volunteers can cut ice with hand saws. Other workers use hand saws to cut “rafts” of ice, long sections that are broken into 250-300 pound blocks with busting bars. Another group of volunteers with poles pushes the rafts along a channel, or canal, to the base of the wooden ramp that leads to the ice house. Using busting bars, needle bars, and picks, workers move the blocks into cradles on the ramp; a pulley system is used to haul them into the ice house. As the blocks race in, a crew of experienced hands does the dangerous work of stacking them six tiers high. Finally, an insulating layer of salt marsh hay is placed on top of the stack.

Harvesting ice is real work made festive with hot food and cocoa, and sometimes ice skating on the far side of the pond.



Over four decades, Welter's grassroots efforts kept the idea alive. South Bristol school children made "Save the Ice House" posters. Welter met with preservationists in Augusta. In 1964, her husband, Amthor Stone Welter, photographed the ice harvest for the Lincoln County Cultural and Historical Association. Some of these photos, now fading, are displayed in an outdoor exhibit named for him beside Thompson's Pond.

Which brings our story back to Norman Hamlin.

During summers in Christmas Cove, Hamlin heard about Erica Mather Welter's plan. By the time Thompson's Ice House closed officially in 1985, he had retired after 25 years as a professor of naval architecture at the Webb Institute in New York. What may have spurred him to action was news that Herbert Thompson and his wife Gwen had turned down "big money" for his sweet piece of land on Route 129. Welter's seed began to grow.

"Mr. Thompson wanted someone to turn his business into a museum so the ice industry would be remembered," said Barbara Hamlin recently. (Norman, her husband, died in 2007.) "He refused to sell his family's land to someone who would put up vacation condos."

Norman Hamlin had time and talent to offer. A longtime volunteer at the Maine Maritime Museum, where he taught another

- 4 (left) Guiding blocks of ice onto the conveyor that carries them into the ice house.
- 5 (right) Picks are used to guide the blocks into position inside the ice house.

disappearing skill—how to use a slide rule—he, too, believed Maine’s past was too important to forget.

“Norman sat for many hours with Mr. Thompson planning this museum,” recalled Barbara Hamlin.

In 1987, the Thompsons deeded their property to a newly formed non-profit, the Thompson Ice House Preservation Corporation. Norman Hamlin agreed to steer the project as president of a board that would include preservation experts and neighbors who shared their love of history. A local architect was hired to tackle the rebuilding of the dilapidated building, which was completed in 1990.

Thompson’s Ice Harvesting Museum, a piece of Maine’s past that is now frozen in time, is open two months (July and August) and one day in February a year. Every July, it hosts an Ice Cream Social, which features the old-fashioned taste of summer hand-churned from ice that was harvested the previous February from a spring-fed pond. The ice was cut into 300-pound blocks by volunteers who used tools and techniques handed down through five generations.

LAST AUGUST, on a sunny afternoon, Barbara Hamlin and fellow museum trustee Judith Manchester showed me around the property. We strolled behind the barnlike building on one of those clear coastal days you wish would last forever. A warm breeze chased away most mosquitoes. The ice pond rested before us, surrounded by birch and pine. A dragonfly lit on swaying reeds by the water’s edge. Birds sang, oblivious to the occasional burping of frogs. Every so often, I heard a low groan.



“What’s that?” I asked, puzzled by the oddly familiar sound.

“Ice shifting in the storage house,” said Manchester. It was the voice of the previous harvest, a rumble I knew from winter walks along our tidal creek.

“Ice houses don’t last long,” said Hamlin. “They either burn or get torn down. As the sun moves across the roof, the ice begins to slowly melt. Ice houses all lean to the south, and in the end, this one was sagging badly.”

A fairly new and sturdy looking wooden ramp, ending just short of the ice house roof, rose from the shore, bringing to mind a small ski jump abutting the ice house. Platforms at two midpoints pressed against shuttered openings in the building’s back wall. When the whole contraption is put into action, a pulley system carries the blocks of ice in cradles that drop their load from three staggered heights onto a chute indoors, where experienced hands maneuver the heavy blocks into place. But none of that is visible from the road. (See sidebar, p. 57.)

“You could drive by this place and it looks like nothing,” said Manchester, “but if you stop, you’ll likely be surprised.”

I expected a blast of cold air when we opened the door between the tool museum and the ice storage room. I was wrong. Manchester explained that the ice house remains a cool 40 degrees Fahrenheit even in summer; double walls with ten inches of sawdust insulation between them, as well as salt marsh hay spread over the top layer of ice, keep it that way. Here it was nearly Labor Day and the room still held enough 300-pound blocks to fill a good-sized backyard pool. Following the tour, in a lean-to furnished with folding chairs, we watched a video history, narrated by Erica Mather Welter, with scratchy footage of the harvest in 1991.

These days, ice is sold from a cooler in the yard on the honor system for \$1 for a 25-pound block. Every three years, elementary school students from Damariscotta’s Great Salt Bay School visit on a marine studies field trip that originated with Norman Hamlin, who taught youngsters what ice once meant to the fishing industry in Maine. Since the museum opened in August 1990, two major events a year each attract more than 300 folks, locals, summer people, and

tourists alike. The first takes place in February, on the Sunday of President's Day weekend, when volunteers harvest the ice. The second, a summer event, is on the Sunday closest to the 4th of July, when the museum hosts the Ice Cream Social.

But all was quiet on the afternoon of my visit until late in the day, when Margaret Sudrabin and her daughter, Emily, 12, of York, and Chloe Schmir, 12, of Eliot, came in for a visit from Bremen Island. Like most kids their age, the girls hid any interest behind bored faces. Both declined to watch the video. But I noticed that Emily was showing her friend the old tools and when I asked if she'd been here before, Emily smiled and confessed that she hasn't missed the Ice Cream Social since she was two years old.

When Judith Manchester opened the storage room door, the girls gaped at the huge blocks of ice. Their reaction matched mine and that of nearly everyone else who visits the Thompson Ice Harvesting Museum: "Cool!"



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Mr. Thompson's asset, unfrozen.

### **Thompson Ice Harvesting Museum**

Located on Route 129 in South Bristol, 12 miles south of Damariscotta. Open in July and August on Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday from 1-4 p.m. Suggested contribution: \$1 adults, \$.50 children. 207-644-8551 (summer); 207-644-1882 (South Bristol Library, ask for Ellen Shew).

### **Upcoming Events:**

#### **Ice Harvest**

Sunday, February 14, 2010.

#### **Old-Fashioned Ice Cream Social**

Monday, July 5, 2010.

### **Online**

To see clips from the museum's DVD "The Iceman Stayeth! Or Mr. Thompson's Frozen Asset," visit [www.maineboats.com](http://www.maineboats.com).