ICE HARVESTING ON LAKE ERIE

During the winter of 1911 and 1912, Sandusky, Ohio, commercial photographer Ernst Niebergall documented the farmers and fishermen living along Lake Erie's southern shore as they harvested vast quantities of ice in preparation for the coming summer's sweltering heat. The series of ice harvesting images is now part of the Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center's Charles E. Frohman Collection.
Sandusky was the largest ice producer west of New York City during the latter half of the 19th century. Noted for its solid, "crystal blue, clear as glass" ice, the city became known as the "Ice Capital of the Great Lakes." Icemen eagerly watched the waters of Lake Erie until they froze to a depth of 8 to 16 inches. For as long as "good ice makin' weather" held, Sanduskians endured ten-hour days of harsh winds and frigid temperatures for a daily wage of $2.

Harvesting quality ice depended on selecting the perfect field. Great care was taken to locate areas of solid ice containing little snow or slush. Once the field was selected, men used wooden scrapers pulled by teams of horses to create a smooth surface free of snow. Marking plows followed the scrapers, scoring the ice at right angles until the entire field was divided into two-foot squares. The harvesters then guided teams pulling cutting plows over the scored ice. Each square was cut to a depth of 6 to 12 inches. Sawyers wielding ice saws finished the job by separating each block from the field. Finally, "pikers" used sixteen-foot poles to guide the ice cakes down an open channel to the shoreline. Men then pushed the blocks up planks to a conveyor that carried the ice into a storage shed.

Sanduskians harvested 400,000 tons of ice each winter. The greater portion of the harvest was stored in some fifty sheds that dotted Lake Erie's shoreline. Sandusky provided most of Ohio's cities with ice, including 90 percent of the ice consumed by the city of Cleveland. According to the local paper, Sandusky's "crystal quality put the murky, sewer-tainted" Cleveland ice to shame. Most was shipped across the lake as needed from a string of icehouses located on Put-In-Bay's Peach Point. But ice dealers from distant cities such as St. Louis took advantage of the cold weather and shipped their ice by rail immediately. As many as 500 ice-laden cars departed Sandusky each day during the season.

By 1920, commercial refrigeration made producing "artificial" ice cost efficient. Within a few short years, the ice harvesting industry, which had once employed as many as 2,000 Sanduskians, began to wane. Local breweries and fisheries continued to harvest ice until 1941, when, for the last time, the icemen ventured onto Lake Erie to bring in the final crop of Sandusky "crystal, blue" ice.