

Do You Remember?

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“Speck-ulating” About Ice

I am using the word “speculating” in the sense of thinking about something, not as it is used in business investments. Today, people consider ice as something handy for the cooler when camping or refreshing in a glass of water when they press a refrigerator button. They usually do not think of it as a necessity. But refrigerators are fairly new, coming to the valley in the late 1930s. Jack Gleese, who lived up on Morgan Territory Road, remembered well his family’s milestone in 1938 when they purchased a Norge refrigerator because they also bought a generator at the same time that powered not only the refrigerator but also lights in each room and outside on the porch. “And when you turned too many of them on, the generator would start to labor, why then you knew you had to shut off something. It was our first power, and that was a big deal.” What did people do before refrigerators? Meat was bought fresh each day from the butcher or butchered on the farm. Sometimes small structures were built over a spring, or food was kept in a cooler cage in the basement. Johnie Schneider’s son, John, remembered that, while his family lived on Morgan Territory Road, his mother would lower Jell-O down into their well so that it would congeal.

In the days before mechanical refrigeration, the ice on rivers and lakes

was a money-making crop. When the railroad came to Livermore in 1869, enterprising merchants began to ship ice here that had been cut from Sierra lakes in the winter. In December 1906 the Union Ice Company advertised in the *Herald* for men to harvest the ice crop at Boca, east of Truckee on the Truckee River, for a month. Transportation was supplied, and wages were \$3.50 per day, but the men had to pay \$30 for their month’s board. Most of the ice blocks cut were two feet wide by six feet long. First, a horse-drawn “ice marker” cut a pattern into the ice. Next, a horse-drawn “ice plow” cut nearly through the pattern. Finally, workers sawed through the remaining ice. The ice had to be hauled out of the water with giant tongs, loaded onto a wagon or truck, and transported back to Livermore by train. The icebox, a wooden chest with an ice block kept in a top metal tray, became common kitchen furniture. I remember as a child we still called our refrigerator an “ice box.”

In 1883 the Livermore Ice Company was managed by J.L. Mitchel at Livermore’s Southern Pacific Railroad Depot; the company shipped 160,000 pounds of ice that year. The butchers, of course, were some of the ice company’s best customers. Ten years later the Union

Ice Company advertised its office at the Southern Pacific Railroad Depot in the *Echo*, and J.L. Mitchel, now the railroad and Wells Fargo agent, was also this ice company’s sales agent. Tilli Holm Calhoun remembered the small ice house located conveniently near the railroad depot. Today, its site would be between the depot and the Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet. The ice kept cold all year in the ice house, where it was most likely insulated with sawdust supplied by the local lumber yard. You could buy ice there, or wait for the ice man’s wagon to come to your house with his blocks for sale. You signed up ahead of time, and the ice man had a regular route through town. In 1889 the cost was 1½ cents per pound.

Teddy Scullion wrote about children keeping cool in the “long long hot Livermore summers.” The streets were dirt, so the town had a sprinkling wagon that came around and kept the dust down. Teddy remembered, “We had our own cooling system—the water sprinkler. The driver always got confused on our corner and had to turn around several times before he found his way. This kept us cool for hours. The ice man also had a problem on our corner. The amount of small pieces of ice that fell off his wagon was amazing.”

In 1902 Warren Lamb became the distributor for both the Union Ice Company and the Livermore Soda Works. When writing my book *Vasco’s Livermore, 1910*, one of the problems was to identify many of the 43 subjects of the caricatures who had no name written on their drawing. One of them was “Speck.” I discovered that this was Ernest Utendorffer, who was the ice delivery man in town for a number of years. The Livermore Heritage Guild has a delightful photo of him standing by his horse-drawn covered wagon in a leather coverall. One boy is at the opening of the ice wagon, and four other children, two boys and two girls, are anticipating their treat in a small line at the back. Speck worked for Warren Lamb and then in 1910 he became a partner with Lamb in the soda works company. He even served on the Livermore town council for almost four years.

As time went on, mechanization came to the ice house. For 25¢ dropped in a slot, the customer in the 1940s could have a 50-pound block. The ice house was torn down, perhaps in the 1950s. Do any of my readers remember? Today, Dom’s Outdoor Outfitters maintains an ice house in their parking lot on M Street, only a block from the original one near the train depot.

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