

## Harvesting Ice from the River

Nights dropped to forty below zero, or lower. The thermometer on the front porch only went down to forty below, so we weren't sure of the lowest temperature. Coldest nights, all the mercury condensed down into the bulb of the thermometer and shivered in misery there.

Days hadn't been above twenty degrees for two weeks, when Jim came up to see us.

Laura and I had talked about cutting ice from the river to keep our food cool during the summer. In the barn north of the house is a room the ranch owners used to store grain, when they used horses for most of the work on the ranch. The barn isn't used much now, and the grain room isn't used at all. The room is sturdily built, with an air space between its floor and the ground, and sunlight never shines into that part of the barn. I thought it would be an ideal place to store ice.

I had gathered sawdust from logs we brought into the corral as part of an order for house logs, culled in favor of better logs, and cut into firewood lengths. It wasn't nearly enough sawdust, but it was a beginning. I was content with that, and I prepared to sit around and visit with Jim, maybe play a game of chess.

But Laura wasn't content with that. She had to get containers to freeze ice in, get them to my mother's freezer in Sumpter, pick the ice up when she was in town, and put it into the disabled freezer we used in lieu of a real icebox for our electricityless house. She didn't feel secure about next summer's ice, and she was ready for action.

She said, "Jim, would you be willing to help Jon cut ice from the river and store it in the barn?"

"Sure would. My saw's in the pickup, ready to run."

I said, "I don't have anywhere near enough sawdust."

Laura said, "By the time you get enough sawdust, will there be any ice on the river?"

Jim said, "We could drive down to Baker and see if they'll give us a pickup load at the mill."

I could see chess and sitting and visiting were iced out. I didn't know if I was ready, but I decided it was better to go willingly than to be dragged along protesting, so Jim and I visited on the way to Baker and back.

They did give us sawdust. They even loaded it for us with a big machine. The sawdust was damp, and damp sawdust isn't

ideal insulation, but Laura was right. If I waited until everything was ideal, the river would be running warm, and daytime temperatures would be in the eighties and nineties. Damp sawdust beats no sawdust.

We shoveled about a foot of sawdust onto the floor of the grain room. We left my pickup, with the rest of the sawdust still in it, parked in the barn, shoveling distance from the door of the grain room.

The next morning, grey clouds full of snow hung close above the valley. We cut ice. Scott had two sets of ice tongs he kept for their antique value, and while Jim drove up to see if he could borrow those, I got my saw ready. Jim came back with the tongs. I loaded my tools, and we drove down to the river through two feet of snow.

We walked on the ice. I said, "This is deep through here. If we stay where it's deep, we won't cut gravel and mess up a chain. We need to empty the oil tanks. Water will lubricate the chains enough, and we don't want to put oil into the river.

Mike walked in the pickup tracks through the snow to the river. "You guys going to cut some ice?"

"We are."

"I'll help you if you want me to."

"The more help the better. We'd appreciate it."

"Okay. We have to mark the surface. Then we have to build supports for the saws, so the bar goes 90 degrees from the surface. I'll need a straight-edge eight or ten feet long and a square."

Mike had worked with Gene, cutting ice from a pond Gene built in his yard. Gene is a precision worker in all projects.

I told Mike, "This is just ice. I'm not going to build anything with it. Precise measurements don't matter in this project. If it bothers you not to have the blocks all exactly the same size, then Jim and I will handle it, and thanks for the offer anyway."

"They have to be exact. That's the way we have to do it, because... ."

Jim and I both yanked cords, and the saws started. Jim cut north to south. I started at his starting point and cut west. He came back to the starting point and cut two more sides. He cut a piece from the edge of the main surface, and I pulled that piece out and pushed it aside, and we had room to get the tongs onto the bigger piece.

When I looked around, Mike had the other pair of tongs in hand, and he moved toward the floating block. I thought, "Good man. Even if we won't argue it out, you'll still work." I didn't say anything, because Jim cut into the next block, and his saw made the only conversation anyone would hear for a while.

Mike and I had everything we could do, working together,

to get the first block up onto the surface of the river. Once we did, I tried to lift it. Jim saw the problem and adjusted his cuts, so by the third block, he cut them to manageable size, somewhere around seventy-five pounds.

Dry, small flakes of snow drifted down from the dark clouds above us. Clouds opened up, and the sun shone for about six blocks of ice, and the clouds closed up again and let go of a few flakes of snow at a time through the rest of the afternoon.

Jim cut most of the ice. Mike pulled it out of the water and slid it over to me. I loaded it into Jim's pickup. We tried not to get wet, but we did lug some ice around when water froze on our clothes.

Mike dropped out after the third load we hauled to the barn, and he went home with thanks and an invitation for lunch and dinner soon. Jim and I cut the last load and hauled it and stacked it in the grain room just before dark. We took the roof boards off the room the next morning and finished shoveling sawdust around the sides and over the top of the ice.

"Well," Jim said, "I'd best get on down the road."

"Thanks Jim. Don't forget to get up here next summer and help us eat some of the food this ice keeps from spoiling."

He didn't forget. He did get up there.

I dug ice out of the sawdust all through the hot summer and covered up the mass that was left, until I took the last of it out of the grain room in early September. By that time, the seventy-five pound blocks had melted down to less than ten pounds, and by that time, I'd found an affordable propane-powered refrigerator to keep our food cool.

But, even if Laura had to push a little, I wouldn't trade that experience for electric refrigerators or anything else.