Ice-Cutting Machine Encyclopedia Article

Ice-Cutting Machine

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At a Boston, Massachusetts, party in 1805, young Frederick Tudor and his friends jokingly speculated about sending ice from nearby Fresh Pond to the tropics. Within a year, Tudor had secured financial backing and sent a $10,000 shipment of 130 tons of ice to Martinique in the Caribbean. Tudor followed his cargo, educating residents about its use. Although Tudor lost money on this first venture, he persevered and traveled widely throughout the Caribbean and the southern United States, promoting iced drinks. By the mid-1820s, 3,000 tons of ice were shipped out of Boston each year, most of it by Tudor, the "Ice King." But competition was growing, and Tudor sought to lower his costs through more efficient harvesting and storage.

Meanwhile, Nat Wyeth, who had a hotel with an ice house, became interested in the ice-shipping business. In 1825, he patented a machine that cut the surface of a frozen pond into deeply grooved, uniform parts. The result was ice blocks that were easy to remove, stack, and which resisted melting as well as shifting in the hold of a ship. Many patented and unpatented improvements in cutting, shaping, moving, and storing ice followed Wyeth's invention, but ice harvesters continued to use cutters like Wyeth's throughout the 1800s.

Tudor soon purchased rights to Wyeth's invention, which greatly reduced the price of harvesting a ton of ice. He also built ice-storage houses at his southern depots and improved insulation methods by using sheepskin, sawdust, and wood shavings. In 1833, Tudor sent 180 tons of ice to Calcutta, India. In the 1840s Boston ice was being shipped around the world--to Australia, China, and the Philippines. It was also shipped to places throughout the southern United States, where it contributed to the increasing popularity of the ice box. As ice became more commonly available, its use spread to the middle class and changed what people ate and drank.