



# Historical Society of Hilltown Township Newsletter

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## February 2021

Welcome to a new year! We are certainly looking for an improvement over the last one. We remain optimistic about the coming year. Attached is a schedule of our 2021 coming events that are **planned**. Changes, postponements or cancellations may be made due to Covid-19. We will try to keep you informed, via email or Facebook. Feel free to contact us at our email listed on top of this page.

## Dues & Donations

You may find a copy of our membership application in this envelope. If you have already paid your 2021 dues or are a Life Member, we thank you! Forward this to a friend.

## Diary of William Hemsing

In 1885, William Souder Hemsing was a 19-year-old bank clerk (We know this bank now as Univest Bank and Trust Co.) living on Main St in Souderton. He kept a diary sporadically from 1885 to 1918. This diary provides us with life in Souderton well over 100 years ago. A winter entry follows:

**Jan 24 1885** – On this day, William went to an outdoor ice-skating rink in Souderton.

His thoughts on women's fashions- "I took notice of several ladies who were there. Some were dressed fashionably in the extreme. It made a sorry sight. Several used more reason in their attire. They were dressed fashionably enough, no doubt, but more simply. It would be queer if a woman could not combine beauty with simplicity in her dress. I can't for the life of me see why at the waist a corset must be used to press in those parts to make it slender while below the waist a bustle must be used to expand the skirt so as to make a monstrous shape for a human being. It is for me inconceivable, why the shape in which a woman was created should now be altered by pressure where too full, and stuffing where not full enough to meet the fashionable fancies of the age. I do hope the time where corsets, hoops and bustles and other feminine foolishness will no longer be in vogue." Interesting comments from a 19-year-old man.

## Ice Harvesting

As a boy, I heard older people referring to their refrigerators as ice boxes. I didn't give it a second thought, maybe like people calling cars automobiles. Of course, with no electricity, the old ice box was a great home improvement. How did the ice get into the ice box to keep food cool in the summertime? And how was ice cream made in the dead of

summer? It starts with a great effort in the dead of winter.

It started out small. A small creek would be dammed up to create a pond. By the end of January, it was hoped that the ice would be sufficient to cut and store. As the water would begin to freeze to a depth that it would be safe to walk on, workers would drill holes in the ice, allowing water to come through and freeze, making the ice thicker. It was thought that a minimum of 10" would be best. The thicker the ice was, the more efficient the ice harvesting would be.

The first job in the process is to clear the snow from the top of the ice. A horse would then pull an ice plow, a device to mark grooves, typically 24" apart and up to 4" deep. A small operation may have two grooves scored at a time, while a large operation may have a device that could groove 10 at a time. Some of these grooving devices were adjustable, so blocks could be marked in a checkerboard pattern of 18" x 24". Once the surface of the ice was grooved, or marked, the cutting operation would begin.

A man would start sawing through the ice, using the previously made grooves as a sawing guide. He used a Tiller Saw, a long, large-tooth saw. Initially, these slabs of ice were cut to form a water channel to the ice block's destination, an ice house or possibly a delivery wagon. Each block would weigh in the vicinity of 300 lbs. Using this channel allowed the remaining cut ice blocks easy access to the ice house.

The ice blocks stored there had to last through the summer. Beneath the first layer of ice, several inches of straw or sawdust were laid down. Between each layer of ice, more straw or sawdust would be applied. Small icehouses could be underground, with stone walls. These stone walls would support a roof structure over the ice. Larger ones, above ground, needed a conveyor system to

move the large ice blocks up. Before steam engines, horse power was used. Even in the early 1800s, ice was a large industry, employing thousands of seasonal workers.

The distribution was varied. Large ice companies sent ice out in train box cars. Barges were used for ice from the Perkiomen Creek and Lehigh River. Ships came from New England. Ice deliveries to houses were by a horse drawn wagon. Some people would put a sign in their window for the ice-man, indicating how much ice they wanted, usually in increments of 25 lbs. In 1882, ice here cost 60 cents for 100 lbs.

The ice man cut a large piece of ice into smaller pieces for sale. In the process of cutting these blocks into smaller pieces, small chips of ice broke off the larger block. When the ice man carried the ice into the house to the ice box, the chips were appropriated and eaten by the kids who just happened to be nearby.

On a Thursday night in May, 1903, a disastrous fire swept through the downtown Telford business district. It started at Shelly's feed store, hay press and coal store. Twenty-two buildings were destroyed, including Shelly's wood frame ice house. While the building was consumed, the ice remained intact, although somewhat melted. It was moved to Fenstermakers the next morning.

During warm winters, ice was imported to Philadelphia from Maine and the Hudson River.

Local ice was in demand in Philadelphia since their rivers were polluted. Any ice cut in the Schuylkill River was above Norristown. This created a boom for the businesses in Bucks and Montgomery counties. The local house delivery was made using ice thongs to carry a block to the house. The ice block was chipped or hammered down to the appropriate size.

Although I am too young to remember the ice delivery man, I am old enough to remember the Three Stooges short with Curley carrying a block of ice with tongs up many, many steps to a house, only to discover that it had melted by the top of the steps. Time and again, he made this journey, always to fail.

As refrigerators followed electricity to virtually every home, this labor-intensive industry fell by the wayside.



Ice Tongs used to carry blocks

### **2021 Membership Drive**

In our December newsletter, we asked for donations over and above the yearly dues. The result was superb! The Society thanks the following people for their generosity.

#### **Platinum Life members**

Ivan Jurin  
Donna & Greg Usavage  
Elyse Fox  
Bill Stahl

#### **Gold Category**

Scott & Elsie Tagg

#### **Silver Category**

Jennie Sperling  
Sandy & Tom Moore  
Lawrence Owen  
Donna King

#### **Bronze Category**

Bruce & Leslie Harper  
Roy & Alicia Snyder  
Ray & Jean Strelzik  
Elizabeth Anderson  
Paul & Mildred Lewis  
Bruce Markley  
William Wilson  
Cindy & Mark Jackowski  
Lois & Bill Black  
Jean Stahl  
Scott Fischer  
Beth Taylor  
Mike & Marybeth McMurray

We also received a large donation of books from Mary Lou Wilson. The subject matter was varied, from Pennsylvania Dutch history and customs, Fraktur, antique guides and art. A big thank you!!

### **Valentine's Day**

For many, February 14<sup>th</sup> means love, flowers, dates, or quite possibly, chocolate. Here are a few facts about this wonderful food.

Cacao beans were so valuable in ancient Mexico, that the Mayan, Aztec and Toltec civilizations used them as a means of currency to pay for commodities and taxes.

Chocolate was considered such a prestigious luxury that King Louis XIV established a court position entitled Royal Chocolate Maker to the King. He ruled France for over 72 years, so we must assume that chocolate is key to a long life.

In 1907, the iconic Hershey's Kisses were introduced. Hershey's now makes over 70 million of these treats in a day!

The Historical Society wishes you a Happy Valentine's Day!