

ICE by Vivian Yess

May Miller turned sixteen more than one hundred years ago. Her diary of 1904 was included in a box of small black diaries of her brother, John.* The siblings lived in a farming family in Bullville, (Orange County) NY.

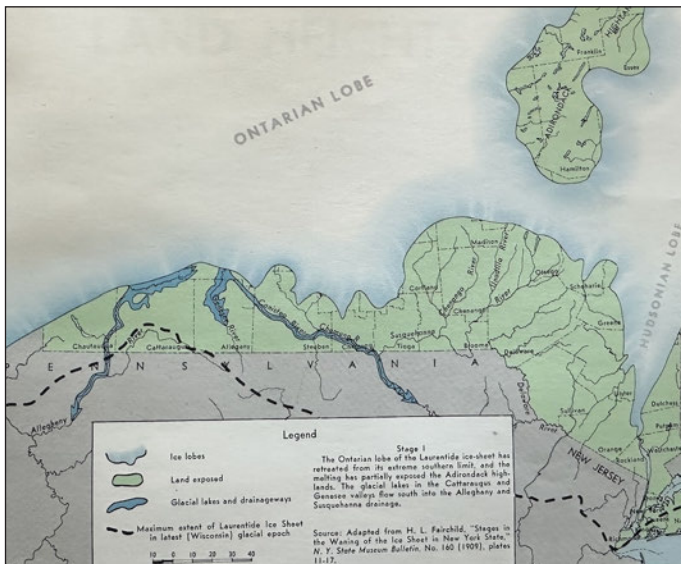
John’s diaries begin in 1874. For the next 30 years he chronicled his life. His words are featured in a story published in *About Town* in the Winter of 2015-2016. That article began with the following:

“John G. Miller of Bullville, Orange County. I am 16 years old on July 26,” reads the fly leaf of John’s first diary. His daily entries charted the vagaries of Mother Nature for the next three decades.

His simple routine of writing every night gives us insight into life in a farming community at the end of the 19th century and start of the 20th. He presented the daily influence of weather on his life. Not that he complained. Weather just was.

Sister May’s diary entries differ markedly from John’s. Where John’s focus was the weather and farming, May’s is filled with the chit chat and details of a young girl in whose December 30th, 1903 entry, she laments, “This is my birthday and I am 16 years old I have a slow life of it not much fun.” May had disdain, not only for her dreary life, but for using comas, periods, or other punctuation.

After a description of another brother’s souvenir from some local church event, she wrote, “The old year is all most gone so I will bid it good-bye before I go to bed I hope I will have more good out of the coming year than any other I hope I shall not loose (sic) any friends



and gain more.” As to other aspirations, May added, “I hope God will be with me and make me a better girl.”

In the next several days, May wrote about ice. Ice on roads, cutting ice, ice melting, and more on cutting ice. She also noted the temperatures when they were below zero, which was often. May wrote on January 1, 1904, “George Christian will go and help Mr. Gardner with his ice tomorrow.”

January 2, 1904, was a Saturday and May related, “It snowed all day to-day George went to help Frank Gardner with the ice. I am making a collar.” Later, “George got home quite late and said they were not done with the ice.”

Well, in fact, neither are we. Nor will we ever be “done with the ice.”

Ice formed and continues to reform our landscape, our livelihoods, our work, our folklore, and our leisure. It has done so since we ventured out of Africa into the colder climes. Some of those climes and times were much colder than others.

In *A New York State Atlas* by Hanlon and Rayback (published circa 1956), four maps show the latest of the several glaciers that masked most of New York State during the last 100,000 years. On one of those maps, shown left, is a green island—the Adirondack Mountains peeking through the latest mass of moving ice

Images, top down. A greeting card found in the scrapbook of Anders H. Anderson, founder of Elverhoj Art Colony (1912-1930) in Milton, NY. Card is one of two in the scrapbook made by cutting construction paper and painting. Unknown artist. Original size is each is approx. 5”x 3.5” Postcard section showing the large Knickerbocker ice house on the Rondout below the Wilbur RR bridge. Glacier map is from the New York State Atlas of 1956. Images from the author’s collection.

known as the Ontarian Lobe of the Laurentian ice sheet. Twelve thousand years ago, Ulster County was ground under the Hudsonian Lobe of that glacier.

The multiple glacial flows over the time—ebbing and flowing frozen bulldozers—carved our landscape, gouged our bedrock, and blunted the Catskills. At its largest, the *Atlas* noted, the Laurentian glacier “...covered nearly five million square miles.”

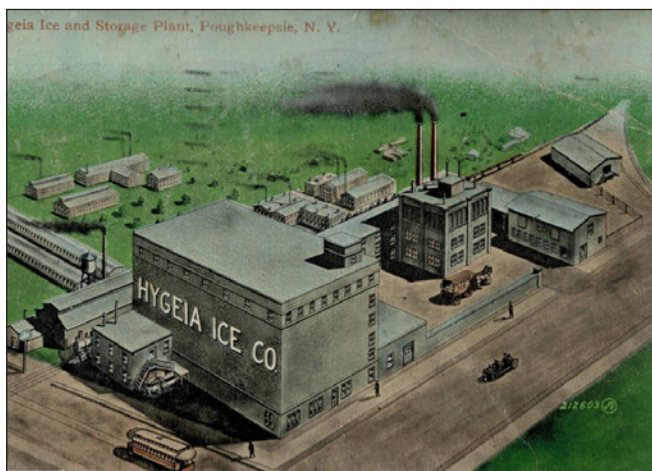
Today’s visible impact of that ice-blanket in Ulster is etched in our bedrock. Hikers on the Mohonk Preserve or the Minnewaska State Park Preserve have probably noted the striations (deep grooves) under foot in the rock. These marks were made by loose boulders scraping along under the weight of the half-mile high ice—glaciers so heavy, they actually pushed down the earth to the extent that the sea levels rose.

As powerful as the advancing ice was in restructuring our terrain, its melting is said to have shaped our landscape even more. The *Atlas* explained,

“Yet in spite of the power of moving ice, the receding glacier rather than the advancing one, caused the most change in New York’s landscape. Stream erosion and the deposit of glacial debris, which accompanied the melting and recession of the glacier, created surface features that are common sights on the landscape today.”

The accumulated rocks, sands, and other debris again covered the once scoured bedrock. Softer surface rock eroded into gullies, then streams, then rivers, as the melt rushed to seek equilibrium.

Snow-trapped waters sometimes formed huge seas that when freed by the sudden rupture of a blockage, washed fields of debris into lower lands creating moraines—concentrations of material often hundreds of feet deep. Today, these large mostly gravel deposits are mined and daily give up seemingly inexhaustible wealth. Smaller gravel sites in the Hudson



Valley were often emptied of this largess and now stand as shallow ponds or boggy wetlands. At one time, though, each pit provided sand, soil, pebbles, rocks, and boulders for building and landscaping on a non-glacial scale, i.e. ours.

The shadow of glacial impact still hovers... Some of the waters (think Hudson) have long stretches of shores comprised of clay and silt deposits. Robert and Johanna Titus, authors of *The Catskills in the Ice Age*, and *Hudson Valley in the Ice Age*, are the titans of area geologic history. Their books deliver the grim news to some in our area that their structures are in danger of slip-sliding away—because they are not built on bedrock, but on the soft glacial droppings and river debris.

Among the places identified as in danger of landsliding into the Hudson are FDR’s Springwood and the Vanderbilt Mansion, both on the east bank of the Hudson in Dutchess County.



Comparing the two sides of the Hudson in that area, the more gentle slopes on the east bank were conducive to building. The west bank’s rugged cliffs of gnarled upward thrust rock, quite stable, geologically speaking, were far less hospitable for siting mansions close to the river vistas.

So far, we have peeked at ice up close and personal in May’s journal and from time before recorded history with the Tituses. However, there is another interesting transitional time in the ice story. It was after May’s, but before yours— and it’s the story of refrigeration’s impact replacing the cut-ice businesses and the subsequent abandonment of the ice houses that once dotted the shore of almost every river, lake, and pond.

At its 19th century peak, the cut-ice industry employed about 90,000 men and 25,000 horses. Workmen’s shoes were cork-soled and their horses’ shoes spiked to give them all purchase on the ice—but the ever-present hazard for man and beast was drowning.

Early Ulster County ice harvesting entrepreneurs included the Schantz and Valentino families of Highland. They each used the ice house, shown above left, filling it from the pond next to it. The Valentinos continued in business into the 1950s. John Valentino, who lives on the shore of the pond today, built a detailed table-size replica of the ice house complete with moving conveyor system hauling ice to the upper floors.

The Binnewater Lake Ice Company, another local firm, was founded in 1910 when the principals, Edward Shultis and Walter Crane, began selling ice cut from the 3rd and 5th Binnewater Lakes in Rosendale, NY. According to their website, they began with four ice wagons delivering to area customers. After the Williams family purchased the lakes in 1929 for their soon-to-be famous resort,** the ice company continued to harvest there. According to the late Anita Williams Peck, the Binnewater Lake water was so clean that a rare and very

picky species of tiny freshwater jellyfish thrived there.

The US cut-ice industry shipped its product all over the world, New York's ice was particularly prized in India. Within the US, the beer-brewing industry used the most ice, first in the brewing process, then in storage, and finally in keeping the tapped kegs cold.

And then, refrigeration entered the story. More from the Binnewater Ice Co website:

Binnewater Lake Ice Co. began to manufacture ice on South Pine St. in Kingston. The ice industry in the Hudson Valley was a cut-throat business. Rival companies competed fiercely to establish their customer base. On August 23, 1938 the wooden framed Binnewater Lake Ice Company building was burned to the ground. Arson was suspected but never proven. The loss was estimated at \$100,000. The company was rebuilt and continued doing business.

It is not surprising that it was a very competitive business—initially, the product had been free for the taking, especially from the Hudson and Rondout Rivers. Of course, one had to harvest it, store it, and ship/deliver it. And talk about an expiration date! Early on, only about 20% of cut ice reached the final consumer. Improvements in technology upped that to about 40%, enough to make the market world-wide by 1856.

On page 2 is a postcard image of an early refrigeration complex at Garden Street and Parker Avenue, in Poughkeepsie. Named for the Greek Goddess of Purity, “Hygeia,” the 1901 Hygeia Ice (and later Storage Plant) was one of the area’s earliest ice making facilities. It went into bankruptcy in 1905, and was purchased by Dr. D.W. Wilbur who added the cold storage facility—hailed as the largest manufactured ice storage building in the US at the time.

A May 7, 1913 article in the *The Poughkeepsie Daily Eagle*, headline read: “Condemn Hygeia Ice In Report.” The paper went on to say the city (Poughkeepsie) bacteriologist found typhoid bacteria in the sample from Hygeia.



The Poughkeepsie Daily Eagle of June 6, 1913, provides a glimpse of what was involved in producing purified ice. Owner Wilbur stated, “I have two boilers with a combined capacity of 235 horse power. Every bit of water that goes into my ice has to go through these boilers...” He continued, “I am as big a crank on sanitation as anyone but I can not conceive of any way that dirt and bacteria can stay in water after it has been distilled and filtered.”

Wilbur said his plant burned one ton of coal for every five tons of water produced. He now distilled only Poughkeepsie city water as he was prohibited from using the highly polluted Fishkill Creek any longer.

The Poughkeepsie Evening News of June 17, 1919 chronicled Dr. Wilbur’s warning that the winter’s ice harvest from the Hudson and the increase in the need to store agriculture produce could foretell an ice shortage in the city.

Possibly Wilbur was wrong on the ice shortage, or the competition was overwhelming, but the business closed.

In 1922, the Hygeia Ice building was to be used for growing mushrooms. The new company, which included Wilbur, would be using a new technology, the nature of which was not disclosed in the *Eagle* article. However, since at least one new owner was involved in the production of electricity in Dutchess County, one can assume it must have at least involved that.

Another concern driving the local ice-harvest industry out of business was cities dumping raw sewage into the Hudson River. Elsewhere, contamination concerns were raised about ice harvested from a pond near College Hill in Poughkeepsie. A medical facility nearby was treating people for tuberculosis.

Beginning in 1914, the expiration date for the cut-ice business was fast approaching. In that year, the US industry produced about half harvested-ice and half mechanically-produced ice. By 1942, refrigeration made ice cutting and water-side storage uneconomical. The luxury of an iced drink quickly became something we expected. Industrial refrigeration was simply one more instance of Joseph Schum-

peter’s “creative destruction” by new technologies.

Fortunately, ice had other charms for humans—it could be fun. Ice boats, ice skates, Polar Bear Clubs, ice castles, ice climbing, and ice sculptures, not to mention that cold beer, continue to enriches our lives.

And so, we return to the Williams Lake Resort’s beautiful Binnewater lakes. The resort became a recreational hotbed in the winter. In addition to crosscountry skiing trails and a ski jump (yes, one of two in Rosendale), guests and friends could brave the pure cold water in an ice-surrounded pool cut for just that purpose.

As to May Miller, we can’t say if she went on to a life filled with loving friends or lived up to her hope for God’s approval. What we can venture a guess about is that she eventually had a refrigerator in her life and never again had to think about cutting ice.



* John G. Miller Winter story is available online at AboutTown.us

** The Williams Lake Resort, parts 1 & 2 appeared in two separate issues and are available online at AboutTown.us.

Sources:

- 1904 Diary of May Miller
- John G. Miller Diaries 1874-1904
- *New York State Atlas* 1956
 - Robert and Johanna Titus: *The Catskills in the Ice Age*, and *Hudson Valley in the Ice Age* (Purple Mountain Press & Black Dome Press)
- John Valentino, Highland, NY
- Postcard/image collection of author.
- Binnewater Ice Co. website
- *Poughkeepsie Evening News*
- *Poughkeepsie Eagle News*

May Miller’s 1903 Diary book which contains her entries for 1904.

