

The Ice House

By

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On a recent sentimental visit to Alexandria, Louisiana where I was born, a memory was resurrected when I turned onto Rapides Avenue near downtown. Traffic was slowed to one-lane with a bored worker holding a sign which on one side read “stop” and “drive slowly” on the other side. She was the gatekeeper directed by another worker several blocks away to impede or allow traffic to flow. Listening to a classical selection on the town’s public radio airwaves, I looked to my right while waiting for the traffic gatekeeper to give me to go ahead.

To my astonished and dismayed eyes an old ice house from days of my youth was being torn down. Heaps of red brick lay strewn near a crane fitted with a large wrecking ball as steam shovels scooped up the debris and deposited it in the beds of waiting trucks. I felt a part of my childhood was being molested. I stopped my car down a side street from the site, got out and began to walk back. The sounds of machinery seem to fade as I stared at the parts of a simpler time being chipped away. The fog in my mind of yesteryear seemed to part and I saw myself in front of the ice house, a child of six or seven. The image seemed to relax my body which was full of tension and anxiety from not knowing how to face the coming years.

My life was at present in a state of extreme flux. My wife of 51 years had recently died of a massive stroke tending her beloved flower bed in the backyard of our home in Lafayette, Louisiana where I taught English literature at the university until I retired three years ago. I had to get away from the home we shared, where we reared three children, played host to friends and relatives, a home that still had her perfume fragrance in every room. I decided to visit places where she and I had spent enjoyable times over the years exploring our home state. I was trying to keep her alive in

my mind because I knew time would wash away nuances of our relationship I didn't want to lose. I was building memories.

Now memories washed over me that had nothing to do with my late wife. Memories of shaved ice and oysters. I smiled.

It was at the ice house my Daddy would stop every two days or so on the way home 20 miles up Highway 71 toward Colfax to get a large block of ice. When he arrived home he would lift a hinged lid and the the ice was placed in a tin insulated square section in the top of an upright container which measured about four feet high and two feet deep. No one called it a refrigerator. It was simply known as an ice box. The bottom section was insulated and chilled by the ice on top. A door allowed access to the lower area. Depending on the size of the ice block one could also put bottles of soda drinks in the top portion or special treats my Daddy would get just for me: Baby Ruth and Butterfinger candy bars to be eaten sparingly on hot summer days. For iced tea at dinner Daddy would lift open the door at the top and chip chunks from the block with an ice pick.

When Daddy got off work at noon on Saturday, we would drive to the ice house. In those days of early 1940's the work week was a firm five and a half days, sometimes a full six days for a weekly salary. He was an auto mechanic for the Oldsmobile dealership and many families could only bring their vehicles for service on Saturday, having to use the truck on the farm and the car for transportation during the week. I would often travel with him on Saturday from our home in the rural part of Grant Parish to Alexandria where I would visit with my city cousins, walking or riding the bus to my destinations and always arriving back at his shop in time to leave for the stop by the ice house. At times Daddy would come to my aunt's home...his sister...and visit, saving me a bus trip downtown where he worked.

The ice house was a large red brick structure standing three stories high with a front loading dock. Offices were on the top floor with a series of windows overlooking the parking lot on one

side, bayou Rapides on the other. A heavy, thick door led into the place where water was frozen into large sections of ice. Men with well muscled arms would saw the blocks into sections they put on a conveyer with rollers. The conveyer led to a section of the wall at the loading dock and when an order was placed, the blocks of ice would roll out an opening covered with hanging strips of rubber to keep in the cold and keep out the hot summer temperatures. A bell on the wall of the dock would clang and a thunderous rumbling would alert whoever was standing nearby to get out of the way or risk serious injury as the blocks were extremely heavy. The ice swiftly emerged and was stopped by two large posts covered with pieces of worn out tires at the end of the ramp. From where they were draped over their shoulders, the workers smoothly lowered their tongs shaped like pliers with sharpened tips and lock them into the block of ice, pinching inward with all their strength to wrestle the load onto the back of pickup trucks onto waiting burlap bags which would be wrapped around the ice to retard melting. In our case the ice would be loaded into the trunk of a 1936 Chevrolet two-door sedan.

Whether it was going to places like the ice house on a Saturday afternoon or a grocery store where we paid off last weeks charges, it was also a chance to visit. It was not like the modern fast-paced society where a person goes from one place or another and quickly transacts business, in and out barely speaking to anyone. It was a time to talk, a time to share stories, a time to offer opinions on events which shaped lives. My Daddy would amble over to a group of men, take out his can of Prince Albert tobacco, his LLF tissue thin cigarette papers and roll his own, lighting it with a kitchen match which he fired up by flicking off the top of the match with a thumb nail. Then he would listen a while and join in the conversation. The pace of life was slower back then.

I would ask permission of the loading dock supervisor to enter the ice house as I had done many times before. After a stern warning from a frowning face to be careful and not get in the way of the men working inside I would use my entire little boy's

strength to open the heavy wooden door with a stainless steel latch and feel the rush of cold air hit me. Little ones these days never get to experience the wonders of how the world operates as companies cannot allow it due to government rules and the threat of lawsuits. In those days you learned how to stay out of harms way or get hurt and thereby lessons were learned.

In a few moments inside the ice house as my eyes adjusted to the dimness I could feel my body temperature going down, see my breath as a mist before me and become aware of stacks and stacks of ice blocks waiting to be cut into sections that would end up in somebody's ice box at home or a soda pop machine in some rural store where my Nehi orange drink would be waiting so cold it would hurt my teeth when I drank it. A worker inside recognized me and called me over giving me a cone shaped paper container.

"Here, boy," he grumbled. "Hold this."

He took out a knife like instrument with a straight edge blade at the tip which he controlled in and out with a moveable button. He reached down to a block of ice and began back and forth movements that ended with a pile of ice shavings which he put into the cone shaped paper cup I was holding. Unsnapping the flap of an upper pocket of the bib overalls which covered a red sweatshirt, the man took out a small bottle of vanilla extract which he had watered down and poured it over the ice shavings in the cup I held out for him.

"See how that tastes," he told me.

I then took a bite of the flavored shavings, so cool and so enjoyable even in that cold atmosphere. I smiled and the man smiled back, turning to resume his labors warning me not to eat the ice too fast or I'd get a headache. Over the hot summer days we repeated the ceremony many times.

Then there were the oysters.

Before refrigeration in every store and restaurant, most people could not enjoy fresh oysters except in months that contained the letter 'r'. That was because hot weather in the other months when

there was no refrigeration would spoil the seafood giving rise to possible food poisoning. In cooler months the danger was less. That's why crates of oysters would be transported after being scraped from their Gulf of Mexico beds to places like Alexandria where they would be stored in ice houses to prevent spoilage. Each day cooks from restaurants would come after placing an order or regular customers, like my Daddy, stopped by.

The ice house was also at times used as storage for the dearly departed as was the case in the deadly flu epidemic of 1940. So many died from the flu that year that hospitals, the coroner's office and funeral homes ran out of space. The cold in the ice house would preserve the bodies until time for their preparation for burial. They were kept in a smaller room with a separate door apart from the main room where ice was made. Fans drew frigid air into the room and experts assured everyone that no flu germ could live in an environment that cold. We accepted that as gospel.

My cousin Jesse was five years older and had an express purpose in life of tormenting me. Knowing we stopped now and then at the ice house, Jesse begin to revel me with horror stories about dead bodies awaking each midnight to do a macabre dance to a fiddle brought up from hell by the devil himself. He warned me that the dead could only be brought back alive by capturing the breath of a youngster like me.

"They especially like little boys from Grant Parish for some reason," he told me. "I would never let my Daddy take me to the ice house. You had better not either if you know what's good for you."

Then Jesse would do a dance he said was the one the bodies did each night. I didn't believe him, but it was several years until that thought finally went away and I entered the ice house without trepidation.

The ice house was also a place to get the coldest watermelons in town. Farmers would bring the melons to store them off to the side of the blocks of ice. The ice house owners would either buy the

melons outright or sell them for the farmer on consignment and then either accept a few melons for the service or take a small percentage of the selling price. Now and then Daddy would buy a melon and crack it open right there for us to eat. The melon meat was so cold it would make your teeth ache as you ate it.

About once a month when Daddy and I would stop by the ice house, he visiting and I exploring inside, and before leaving, he would buy a white container, sometimes two, with a wire handle similar to those used by Chinese take out restaurants. Inside would be a slimy mixture crammed with two or three dozen shucked oysters piled on each other. Daddy would place the container next to the block of ice in the trunk of the 1936 Chevy and we headed home.

Now, Mama hated the sight and smell of oysters, in fact anything seafood, even fresh fish which she begrudgingly fried in a cornbread and milk batter but would not eat, saving the delicacy for Daddy and me or other family members. So when Daddy brought home the raw oysters in the familiar white carton she would refuse to be in the kitchen and always found something to do outside. As Daddy drove past my Uncle Mack's place down the dirt road to our home on twenty acres of piney woods he would toot the horn, signaling that my uncle was to join us.

The white container was placed in the center of the kitchen table, complimented by plates for three, forks, saltine crackers, a small bottle of Tabasco sauce, also know as Louisiana catsup, and glasses of iced tea. Then we sat down to one treat that defines being a Southerner. There are two basic ways to eat raw oysters: spear one with a fork, put on a drop or two of Tabasco, let it slide into your mouth and down the throat, munching a cracker afterwards; or spear the oyster, put it on a cracker, spice with Tabasco, and chew before swallowing. Either way freshly shucked chilled oysters are a taste treat to be thoroughly enjoyed.

It didn't take long before we three would finish off the oysters, always longing for more. Daddy and Uncle Mack would clean the

kitchen, roll their cigarettes, light up and begin talking. Only then would Mama return to the house and I would lazily go to my chores, sated with oysters and thoughts of when we would stop once more and get another container from the ice house.

Later in life I would enjoy raw oysters in a variety of places like Lafayette, Abbeville, Lake Charles and New Orleans. I always located oyster bars where I lived, but they never seemed to have the same delicious flavor of those oysters my Daddy would bring home from the Alexandria ice house.

The fog of times past lifted as I realized I had stopped at the yellow warning tape tied to a wooden picket fence at the soon to be no more ice house and thought of the memories and emotions that had flooded over me. I couldn't remember if I told my wife about the ice house. She would have enjoyed the story. I smiled at the thought. I stood there for some minutes. My Daddy and Uncle Mack are gone and soon the ice house itself will join their fate. Those days of youth cannot be recaptured, only looked back upon with fondness.

I hadn't realized why my wife and I often went to drive up restaurants like Sonic or Dairy Queen to order crushed flavored ice smoothies. Perhaps my youth was influencing my adult taste without me knowing it.

And the oysters are still here and I still enjoy them on crackers with a touch of Tabasco.

I walked back to my car to continue my travels. I knew then that I would make it. I realized I could revisit all the best times in my life anytime I wanted.