

## Winter is just around the corner – December 10, 2023

Winter is just around the corner, so it seems the right time to recount the winter activities of bygone days.

Frederick Austin Shriver, a 22-year-old in 1861, spent many an hour ice skating with friends during that winter on the ponds and streams near his home in Union Mills. Both the local Erb and Study families had mill ponds he mentioned in his diary which became part of the book, "Pastime: Life & Love on the Homefront During the Civil War, 1861-1865." On January 30 he and two other Shriver boys "were skating on Study's dam all the morning. Couldn't do much . . . as the ice was covered with snow. We had to shovel off a place large enough to skate upon." The Shriver boys must have anticipated more skating weather to come because the next afternoon they stopped at Feeser's store to buy caps.

Sure enough, about a week later, "Aust" wrote, "Extremely cold in the morning and the thermometer continued at 10 deg. On account of the cold weather there was very good skating on the [mill] Race and dam. K., W., the other boys and myself skating there the best part of the forenoon and enjoyed it better than any we had this season, the ice being the best we have. In the afternoon, was up to Study's dam, found the ice too weak and returned."

On Saturday, February 9, "Did nothing all day but skate. In the forenoon, myself and all the boys were at it on the race & dam in full blast. I split the wood of one of my skates and had to stop about 10 o'clock. Afternoon, all of us were on Erb's dams. The ice there was better than any we have yet had."

The dams which held back the water necessary to operate grist mills created shallow ponds which were ideal for skating. Old Carroll County maps often show the ponds themselves, especially if they were large. In summer those ponds were a fine source of fish and eels. In winter they became playgrounds for the surrounding community.

Few references to ice skating included women or girls, but Henry Wirt Shriver recorded in his diary on February 25, 1863, that it was "very cold this morning but became warmer very fast when the sun rose. Got the whole party on the ice after breakfast. The ladies were very timid at first but soon became bold enough."

It wasn't just country dwellers who enjoyed ice skating. Newspaper articles of the 19<sup>th</sup> century mention that Westminster residents could board the Western Maryland train bound for Baltimore and, for a special rate, hop off about a mile outside of town at Cranberry Station. There they could enjoy an afternoon of skating on the large pond at Winter's mill on the North Branch of the Patapsco River.

Ice skates in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were a far cry from what they are today – usually simple wood platforms attached to blades and held onto your shoes with leather straps. You can find antique skates pictured on the internet if you want to know how they looked.

Sleigh rides was another favorite winter activity. “Wirt” Shriver mentioned them in his diary during the winter of 1863. On Thursday, January 29, “The sleighing wasn’t good the snow being so soft below.” However, by the next day he continued, “The snow is frozen pretty stiff & there will be good sleighing yet if it does not get warmer.” Sleighs played an important part in winter transportation as well as a way to have fun. On February 23, young Shriver noted that he “started for Hanover in the sleigh with Sis. The sleighing was excellent on the Turnpike but not so good on the Littlestown Road.” Wirt’s diary reveals that he was growing very fond of a cousin, Mary Winebrenner, who lived in Hanover. It doesn’t take much to imagine they found opportunities to enjoy a sleigh ride together, both bundled up against the cold, but holding hands under a lap robe if he could manage the horse’s reins with just one hand.

Ice harvesting was a more serious winter activity, one which seems hard to imagine given the refrigerators and freezers of today. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Carroll Countians expended a great deal of energy storing enough ice to make ice cream six months later.

On January 8, 2017, the Carroll County Times published Kenneth Mays’ recollection of ice harvesting when he was a boy in the 1920s. It is reproduced below if you missed it the first time.

“The Mays family had a large, shallow pond on their property, ‘the home of thousands of frogs, tadpoles, snakes, and crayfish’ in the summer, and a source of ice when winters were colder than they seem to be in the twenty-first century.

“One cold, clear day when Ken was between five and eight, he remembers his father, uncle, and grandfather began cutting ice from the pond to store in their ice house and were already hard at work before the winter sun was up.

“They began by using an axe to break large holes in the ice so a cross-cut saw with one handle could be inserted and the ice sawn from above. Ken recalls seeing ‘my father standing on a large slab of floating ice after sawing it away from the main body. It was then pushed and pulled to a point in the pond bank using a long pole with a point and hook.’ The slabs were hauled up a makeshift ramp onto the shore where they awaited transfer to the ice house on a bobsled. ‘It was here that the axe [again] came into play, chopping the shiny, glistening, clear ice into manageable shapes — glistening because by now the winter sun had risen over the trees. The air felt a little warmer, but not warm enough to melt the ice.’ Sometimes the waiting piles of ice refroze and pieces had to be chopped apart before the bobsled could be loaded and pulled to the ice house by Grandpa Mays’ two-horse team. Unloading the sled was another job done by hand.

“On the Mays farm, the log ice house was almost totally underground — about 12-14 feet long, 10-12 feet wide and 12 feet deep. Earth covered the low walls wherever they extended above ground and the gable roof had a large overhang. A ladder attached to the inside wall below the door allowed access to the huge block of ice as it slowly melted or was chipped away.

“Before adding the first ice, a thick layer of fresh straw was scattered over the earth floor, and after the last load was delivered, more straw ‘was heavily strewn into every part on top of this ice cube to keep the cold in and the air out.’ When Mother Nature cooperated, there might still be ice in mid-summer.

“The Mays ice house could be filled with one long, hard day of work on the pond and loading and unloading the bobsled as many as ten times if all went well. At the end of the day, although

the men would be hungry and exhausted, the horses always came first — watering them at the pump and feeding them in the barn.”

Almost ninety years later, Ken Mays remembered making and eating homemade ice cream on a hot July Sunday using ice cut the previous winter.

*Mary Ann Ashcraft is a volunteer at the Historical Society of Carroll County.*

*Image 1 – Source: 1862 Martenet Map of Carroll County      Caption: This 1862 map shows the large pond at Airheart Winter’s mill where Westminster residents could enjoy ice skating after a short train ride from town.*

*Image 2 – Source: Library of Congress      Caption: This color engraving from the 1880-1890 period captures people enjoying an outing in their horse-drawn sleighs.*