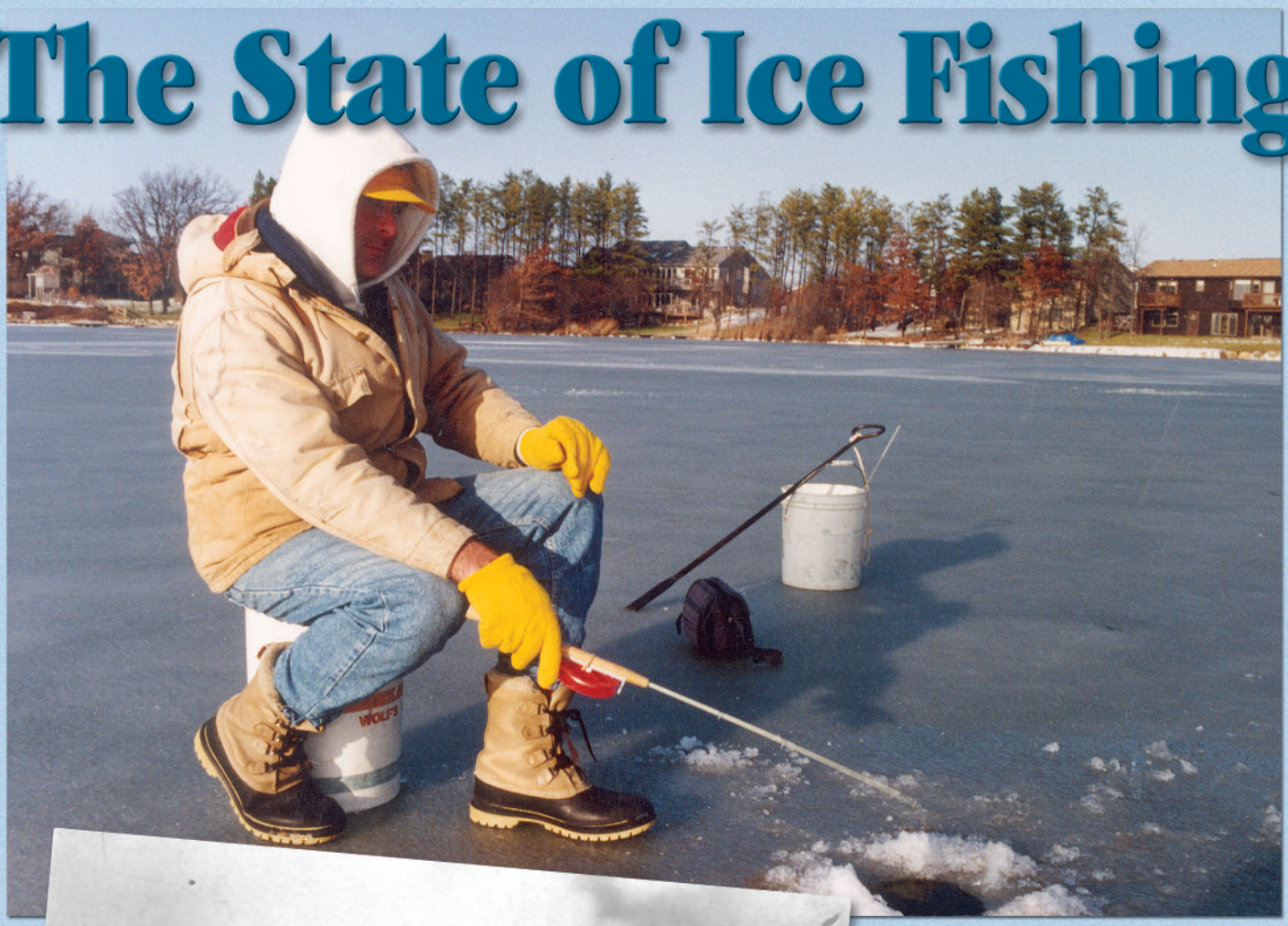
Winter anglers used to enjoy months of "good ice" in Illinois. Yet a trend of warm winters is melting a cool tradition.

The State of Ice Fishing



(photo courtesy Lakes Region Historical Society)

Years ago, ice fishermen weren't the only ones depending upon frozen lakes. An ice house on Loon Lake in northeastern Illinois represented the year's supply of ice for refrigeration in 1915.

Story and Photos By
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If there's one thing an ice fisherman can't live without, it's ice. And plenty of it. A few inches of clear, hard ice is the minimum for safe walking. But a foot of hard ice is best, especially when those seasonal communities of parka-wearing shanty residents congregate to socialize and drill holes everywhere. It's a northern ritual, mostly. But even in southern Illinois, lakes occasionally freeze thick enough to offer solid fishing opportunities.

The hearty tradition of pulling fish from frozen waters technically dates to prehistory—ice fishing is actually older than Illinois itself. Native Americans used to chip holes in the ice and wait for unwary fish to approach decoys before spearing their quarry. Good, strong ice might last until mid March in northern Illinois, having been formed in late November or December. For as long as any fisherman today recalls, there has always been good ice—and ice fishing—somewhere in the Prairie State each winter.

Even if only barely.

"There was one winter, we called it an open winter, where we almost didn't have any ice," recalls 93-year-old Ed Sorensen, who still operates his landmark bait shop near the Chain O' Lakes in northeastern Illinois, the heart of Illinois ice-fishing country. "The Chain," as locals describe the network of glacial lakes at the Illinois-Wisconsin border, has a well-deserved reputation as an ice-fishing powerhouse. Crowds of ice fishermen would converge on the Chain between December and February, and tournaments attracting thousands of "hard-water" anglers meant big business for those supplying everything from bait to boots.

Antioch bait shop owner Ed Sorensen, 93, (left and above, with fisherman Steve Young) recalls just one winter that compares to last winter's thin ice.

Sorensen (featured in a 2005 *Outdoor*Illinois article about his long career), still remembers the near panic that gripped the region during the bizarre winter of 1931-32 as the annual supply of ice for food refrigeration appeared to be in jeopardy.

"The ice companies waited and waited for enough ice to form on the lakes so they could begin cutting," Sorensen said. "Finally, when they had maybe 3 inches of ice on some of the lakes, they decided to go for it, and it's a good thing they did because it was the only ice they got that year. It was funny to see the guys carrying the sheets of ice instead of blocks—it almost looked like a pane of glass."

For those too young to recall, the ice boxes which preceded modern refrigerators relied upon blocks of ice which had been cut during winter from frozen lakes. After being cut, the blocks were stored in insulated ice houses and delivered to neighborhoods throughout the remaining months of the year. Decades before anyone heard the term "global warming," the winter of 1931-32 (the warmest Illinois winter on record) caused widespread fears.

Born in 1914, Sorensen thought he'd never again witness such a strange winter. That is, until earlier this year, when even the most reckless of ice fishermen didn't dare stepping off shore.

"I haven't been ice fishing all year," offered 76-year-old Steve Young, a longtime pal of Sorensen's and an avid angler. Young visits Sorensen's Bait Shop to drink coffee and swap fishing stories almost daily, but he had no ice fishing stories to offer that day. As of early January—the usual heart of the Illinois ice-fishing season—a mere skin

In early January, Bill Levin of Antioch figured he had a sure thing: He bet his buddies that the Fox River wouldn't freeze within two weeks.

of ice had formed on a few shallow bays at northern Illinois lakes, and Young was already thinking spring.

"I've got daffodils up this far right now," he reported, holding one hand above the other, 6 inches apart.

"None of my friends have gone (ice fishing)," Sorensen added.

Daytime temperatures reached the upper 50s in Chicago last January, and ice fishermen—and those depending on the seasonal business opportunities—were awash in gloom.

Yet, down the road from Sorensen's Bait Shop at the Bridgeport Inn along the Fox River, the unusual weather provided a hot topic for debate inside this traditional wayside for sportsmen. With winter half finished, friendly bets were being made predicting when, exactly, ice would form on the river.

"The bet is that the river won't be frozen solid by January 19," announced Bill Levin, a customer from Antioch. "They said they'd be snowmobiling (on the river) by the 19th, and it's just not going to happen."

Amid jeers from the ice crowd, Levin strolled outside in a T-shirt to demonstrate the obvious. There would be no ice formed on the Fox River that day. Inside, customers betting on hard water included ice fisherman Mike Spaid from Waukegan, who said his winter ritual had been a washout thus far.

"I try to get out once a week on Channel Lake or Lake Marie," Spaid said. "But I haven't been ice fishing yet this year…I've never fallen through the ice, and I sure wouldn't want to risk it now."

According to statewide records maintained since 1895 by the Illinois State Water Survey, the average high temperature in Chicago in January used to be below freezing, with average lows around 16 degrees. (During the late 70s, nearly every day in December and January included temperatures below freezing in Chicago.)

But State Climatologist Jim Angel said our winters have departed from the prolonged deep freeze ice fishermen depend upon for safe angling.

"We seem to be in a pattern where we don't sustain winter weather," Angel said, noting that temporary cold snaps increasingly are followed by unusual warmth. "If we look at the historical data, during the last 20 to 30 years, we've been trending toward warmer winters with less cold and less snowfall."

Does this mean ice fishing is finished in Illinois? If a cluster of record-setting winters are any indication, ice fishermen might be in for a long wait.

"The winter of 2001-2002 was the second-warmest on record, Angel said. "The third-warmest was the winter of 1997-1998."

Throughout recorded history, peculiar fluctuations in seasonal temperatures—such as the recent warm winters—are not unheard of. Yet, amid tremendous concern about human influence on our climate, the melting fortunes of ice fishermen today provide additional cause for concern.

Spaid, whose success on hard water includes a 33-inch northern pike taken from Lake Marie, said he would gladly trade his seat indoors for a seat in a shanty on good ice. But he isn't willing to take chances.

"I like at least 6 inches of ice," Spaid said before invoking memories of the good old days. "In the 70s, it was nothing to drill through 2.5 feet of ice."

For the record, the winter of 2006-07 proved to be somewhat average overall as February temperatures suddenly plunged statewide, compensating for the earlier warmth.

"The season came on late," Ed Sorensen reported months later. "Fishing picked up and business picked up and the guys ended up catching a lot of fish."

At the Bridgeport Inn, those good-natured river bets were abandoned amid disagreement over the rules.

"The river had ice on it, but it wasn't enough," explained employee Charlie Stenseth. "You couldn't walk on it—and you sure couldn't drive a snowmobile on it."

(Photo by Adele Hodde.)

Snow-covered lakes can be deceptive: Always check for "good ice" before stepping offshore.