

Keeping an Ottawa Valley tradition on ice

BY ELIZABETH BOND

Many will say there has been more than enough snow and ice this winter, but Cam Hilborn can't seem to get enough of it.

Cam recently marked his 10th ice harvest on the Ottawa River at Oiseau Bay, eight miles downriver from Deep River on the Quebec shore.

Following a long pioneer tradition of harvesting ice in the Upper Ottawa Valley, Cam stores the ice in a partially sunken cedar ice house until the summer months, when he will use it in ice boxes for his off-grid cottage rental operation.

"Guests love when I deliver blocks of ice to them every couple of days in the summer. And the kids are just fascinated by the ice-house and like to help me with my deliveries," says Cam.

"These days, people really enjoy seeing what living sustainably is all about, and that makes all of the

hard work in winter worth it."

And hard work it is.

This year, Cam cut and stacked 600 blocks of ice, each measuring 12 inches cubed and weighing 50 pounds.

The process was spread over four days, and included the help of many friends and resort guests who were excited about the idea of participating in an old fashioned ice harvest.

The long days were capped off with meals of maple venison stew cooked on the wood stove.

"I always look forward to this time of year," says Eric Hilborn, Cam's brother.

"It's a great opportunity to enjoy the winter in a very unique way."

Cam is able to take advantage of some modern conveniences that the early settlers would have been envious of.

Instead of hitching up a team of horses to pull a heavy line marker through the ice, he used a chainsaw

set in a jig that is pulled along a straight-edged board.

"We always use a self-lubricating saw to ensure that no oil comes in contact with the ice or the river," says Cam.

A grid was cut in this way, and then each block was hand chiseled to release it.

Using large ice tongs, the blocks were loaded into a sleigh that was towed by the 1953 Willy's Jeep specially outfitted with chains.

The blocks were taken up to the icehouse where they were packed in snow to await the summer months.

"Nothing beats opening up that cedar door on a hot July day and seeing a wall of ice," says Cam.

In the meantime, Cam will be icing his sore muscles from the experience as he plans for next year's ice harvest weekend.

To see more photos of the ice harvest, visit the resort's website at www.oiseaubayresort.com.