

Ice — Cikuq

NANWAT CIKUMAUT. – THE LAKES ARE FROZEN OVER.



Photo: Ice in the Ouzinkie Harbor. Photo courtesy of Tim and Norman Smith.

Kodiak may lie south of the frozen arctic regions of Alaska, but from 1852 to 1870, it was known for its ice. In the 1850s the California gold rush was in full swing, and the west coast needed ice to preserve food. Russian American Company officials saw an economic opportunity and established contracts to sell ice in San Francisco.

Ice production began in Sitka in 1851. However, as the weather in southeast Alaska was not reliably cold, the enterprise moved to Kodiak's Woody Island a year later. Here the company damned Lake Tanginak to create a broad, deep body of water for ice cutting. Nearby by they constructed support facilities; an ice storage house, a sawmill to make sawdust for packing ice, a wooden flume and iron rails to help haul the ice, a thirteen-mile road around the island, and a twelve-acre oat field. The rails, the road, and the oat fields supported horses. The animals, imported from Russia, powered the ice-cutting saw.

Alutiiq men from Woody Island and other communities worked for the company. In the winter, they cut and stored ice. In the summer they hunted and fished. Accounts from Woody Island indicate that Native workers received a small daily wage, along with their noon meal and rations of vodka or rum. The meal was often a salmon and potato soup thickened with graham flour.

After the sale of Alaska to the United States in 1867, the Kodiak Ice Company bought the Woody Island business. It operated until 1872 when the development of the ice machine made it unprofitable to ship ice from Alaska to California.