

History on ice

The story of Sandpoint Ice & Fuel — one of the longest-operating local businesses

By Hannah Combs
Reader Contributor

In the summer of 1930, Mr. Selle's shop was swarming with boys for whom the novelty of the new freezer hadn't yet worn off. They were no bother to him — he loved telling jokes and stories, and if the kids got too pesky, he had plenty of odd jobs to dole out. But before he could get out the first few words of his favorite joke that ended with the punchline, "It's only the iceman!" he was met with groans and, "We've heard that one a million times! Tell us the story about the runaway wagon!"

Selle pointed to the gas-guzzling delivery trucks in the yard.

"We think we have troubles now with automobile wrecks, but we used to have our share of run-aways in the early days," he said. "I remember one time the team that Eddie Merton was driving on the ice wagon ran away. Some boys [here he glared at them for dramatic effect] scared the horses and they spooked. They took off down the street... south Boyer, and headed for the barn. They missed the corner, banged up the wagon, lost the ice and crippled one of the horses."

Selle gave them a moment to gasp in horror, then went on: "But the story really goes back to long before any of you were born..."

Charles Wood, then 14 years old, first fell in love with Sandpoint on a horse herding expedition with his father in 1898. They had traveled from Spokane up to the Pend Oreille River, crossing north at Seneacquotteen and eventually camped in Sandpoint. Young Charles liked the area so much that he vowed to return and settle there. He was only 17 when he fulfilled his dream and started the "Sandpoint Ice & Fuel" company in 1901.

Over the next few years, he developed a threefold business model that outfitted households with all of their heating and cooling needs, using inexpensive products that were cheap to source.

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Wood leased a small prop-John Selle paid Wood \$1,100 for erty on the southwest corner of a half-interest in the business, as Lake Street and Third Avenue. well as full ownership of most On this "wood yard" he set up a of the tangible property. Selle steam-powered wood saw that invested in a third wagon team chopped four-foot cordwood into to help manage deliveries and appropriate lengths for wood and started adding on to the buildings cook stoves. He sourced scrap on the property. wood from local mills, includ-Selle and his young son, ing snags and other undesirable Charley, lived in a back room of byproducts of the industry. the office for several years until Additionally, he sold coal out of they built a large house on the two sheds on the east side of the other side of the block. In January Northern Pacific railroad track, 1911, Selle bought the rest of and he stored ice blocks in a shed the business from Wood, and his on the west side of the tracks.ambitions only grew from there.

Each winter a team of men The following year, he installed a would cut blocks of ice from the public scale at the wood yard and lake, then packed them in sawdust built a 3,500-square-foot icehouse in a dark, cool "icehouse" until next door, which greatly expand- the following summer, when folks ed his harvest potential. would buy the blocks to keep However, while lumber was in their perishable foods cold. An seemingly endless supply — and Ice & Fuel punch card from 1934 while coal could be shipped in guaranteed 1,000 pounds of ice from Wyoming, the Dakotas or delivered on demand for \$8.even Alberta — the ice was a fin- According to his daughter, icky business partner. Selle tried Roxie Wood Critchell, at some to put away 2,000 tons (4 million point in the early years Wood pounds) of ice each winter and "had a partner who stole all the occasionally the conditions ex- money, took off, was caught ceeded his expectations. Over the and sent to jail." He then ran the winter of 1923, he remarked, "It operation solo until 1906, when is the best ice in 16 years, clear as two brothers, John and Henry glass," and up to 18 inches thick Selle, bought the property leased — though 12 inches was optimal by Wood. The following summer, for most home iceboxes.

Harvesting ice on Lake Pend Oreille was by no means an easy sport. Over the two coldest weeks of the winter, 25 to 30 men and nine horse teams would go as far as a mile and a half from shore to find clear ice. They would score the ice with iron spikes then saw individual blocks free. Each 250-pound block would be hauled out by a horse team and put on a sleigh. The horses would drag the ice to where the Third Street Pier is today and up Third Avenue to Selle's icehouse.

By the late 1920s the lake became a more dangerous and unreliable source of ice, and Selle had to pivot quickly. He bought a new lot on the corner of Fifth Avenue and Oak Street and invested in modern equipment that allowed him to freeze water on site. The city water he used in this process was considered safer because it contained less sedi- ment than lake water.

Horse-drawn wagons were exchanged for orange trucks, the facility grew and technology continued to improve. Howev- er, the improvements that made Selle's business easier to run also meant that households were be- coming less dependent on him as home refrigeration became more

Left: Sandpoint Ice & Fuel horse team on their delivery route. Photo donated to BCHS by Charles Selle.

Right: Sandpoint Fuel & Ice adapted to changing demands by renting out cold locker space. Here, Harold Marley and Kathryn Coker from the IGA grocery make ice cream in the locker building in 1968. Photo donated to BCHS by the Sandpoint News Bulletin.

affordable.

In 1938, Selle leased part of his property to "Ira's Cold Spot," which rented "refrigeration lockers" to households that were eager for the convenience but weren't ready to take the plunge and buy their own refrigerator. By 1943, Selle sold part of the property to the Farmers Union Co-op for an ice cream and milkshake counter.

Despite the shifting demands, Selle held onto the Sandpoint Ice & Fuel company until his retirement in 1944. His successors Emmett Marley, Loren Book and Clyde Marley kept it running for 47 more years, until Emmett Marley died in 1991. Their combined efforts make the Sandpoint Ice & Fuel company one of the longest-operating businesses in Sandpoint.

Research provided by the Bonner County Historical Society.