

continued from page 17

The tip-up is little more than a tool to hold the line, hook and bait and also visually notify the ice fisherman of a fish. This is accomplished by delicately balancing the tip-up so that when a fish is on the hook, the balance is lost in favor of the fish. The end of the tip-up toward the fish is pulled down and the other end swings into the air. This basic principle of the tip-up has been refined extensively over the years.

The most basic tip-ups described were simply switches which were found along the bank of the lake or river, stuck into the snow next to a hole and rigged with line and bait. Lafe Young remembers using red tag elder switches 1/2-inch to 3/4-inch in diameter and tying a slip knot in the line on the end of the switch, so that the fish would be able to pull out some line and not snap the line on the rough ice of a spudded hole. Extra line lay on the ice next to the hole for the fish to pull out. When the fish took the bait the tip of the red tag elder would bend towards the hole and notify the fisherman.

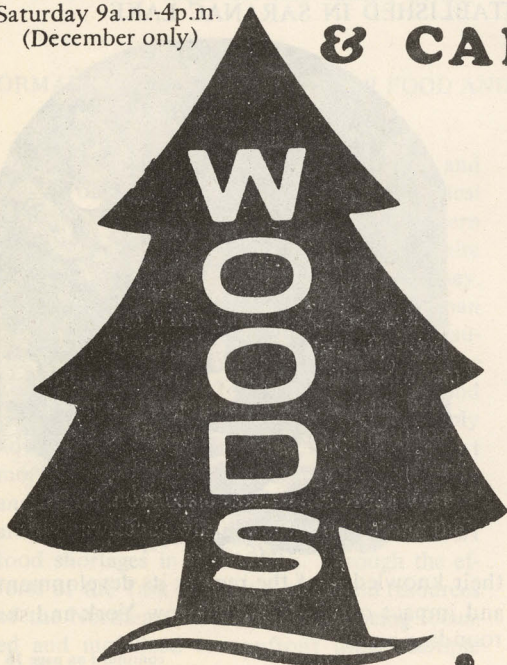
McLear calls the "Black Lake tip-up." It consists of two pieces of wood—one being the dowel which acts as a fulcrum for the other piece, the swinging piece that holds the line. The most primitive of this type have a round hole in the swinging part through which the dowel fits. A further development in the tip-up took place when the hole was replaced with a slot. The slot allows easier balancing of the tip-up, especially if there is a heavy sinker or minnow at the end of it. The tip-up can be moved until it balances perfectly. Harold Brenno emphasized the fact that the tail of the tip-up should just be touching the ice. At this point in the development of the tip-up, patterns were made and fish-shaped and bone-shaped tip-ups appeared. The materials used in these handmade tip-ups vary from individual to individual. Cedar shingles, pine and ash are common.

The wind and the freezing water can adversely affect the operation of the tip-up, but the fishermen have discovered ways to counteract these problems.

The next tip-up developed is what Avery

There are two ways in which to attach the  
continued next page

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## BAIT

line to the tip-ups. One can either leave extra or "slack line" between the tip of the tip-up and the bait, or have the line tight from the bait to the reel. The extra or slack line is wound into a ball and a determined attempt made to have the ball tight enough so that it would not unravel when it was placed in the water. Again, many different techniques have been invented to take advantage of the positive aspects of these two methods and minimize the disadvantages of each.

Another type of handmade tip-up, similar in principle to the dowel tip-ups are ones that have a small stand which balances the pole. The pole is delicately balanced on the stand and swings when there is any pressure on the line. These are handmade and are available at fishing tackle stores. Here they are referred to as the scientific walleye tip-up, and at least one walleye fisherman seems assured that they are the only thing that will catch a walleye. The walleye is so sensitive that the flag tip-ups scare it away when they trip it.

Flat tip-ups or underwater reel tip-ups reflect the most recent developments in tip-ups. The reels are underwater, which prevents them from freezing into the ice. When a fish is taking line, the tip-up is tripped and a flag goes up. Generally, these are purchased, but tip-ups on this principle have been homemade. Gordon Hartle made his from maple soaked in cupernol. He also made the hardware. The metal piece that flies up with the flag attached is made, in some cases, using the stays from a woman's corset. Tricky modifications, such as penlights and 22 caliber blanks that are set to trip make it easier to fish at night. Fluorescent tape is also added to some of the old-style dowel tip-ups for easier night fishing.

Store-bought aluminum tip-ups, open water poles and the pocket fisherman are also used today, but the old hand-made tip-ups can still be found without a difficult search.

Many practical jokes revolve around the tip-up as a prop. Bill Turner said that he remembers Edwardsville blacksmith, Mr. Phillips, pulling in a band saw blade on his tip-up. Jokesters have also tied boots, stones and, in one case, even a rabbit, on the ends of the lines of their unwary companions.

Certainly one of the most important items in the whole operation is the bait. Artificial bait in the form of yellow, green and white jigs, perch eyes, Swedish pimples, and mousies are commonly used. Ray Loucks suggests small 1-1/4 inch chunks of meat and Moses Villnave uses pork rinds on which he first spits.

The most widely used bait, however, is the live minnow. Years ago many seined (netted) their own minnows in the fall for ice fishing and stored them over the winter in carbide tanks submerged in the water. Most did this for themselves, but one man developed it into a business. Although some people still seine for their minnows and keep them in minnow boxes in winter, most prefer to purchase them from a bait shop today. The size of the minnows used, as well as the size of the hook, is also debated. One man says that he always spits a little tobacco juice on the minnow, a trick he picked up from his grandfather.

## SETTING THE TIP-UP

Once the location has been chosen, the holes dug and the minnows, hooks, sinkers and tip-ups on hand, one is ready to set the line into the water. The first step is to measure the depth of the water so the hook will be set for finding the proper depth above the bottom. A weight is dropped to the bottom and the depth of the water is then known. The bait is then attached at various positions above the bottom of the lake or river.

At this point several ice fishermen have devised a method for marking the depth of the water so that they would not have to take new depth readings every time they removed the line from its proper position. They placed a button on the line and moved the button to the surface of the water. In this position they could look at the button and know whether the line was in its proper position after rebaiting.

## CATCHING A FISH

The taking of a fish can be an exciting moment and is the source of many ice-fishing narratives. Pulling a fish from the hole and removing it from the line can be a tricky

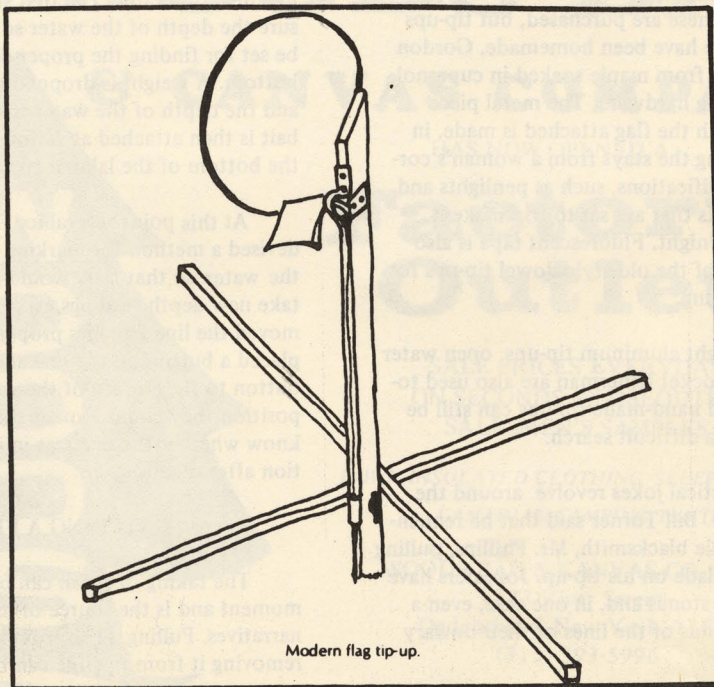
business. The skillful use of a gaff hook is often required. Tom Cree remembered a time when his line broke as he was hauling up a big one and he reached into the water right up to his armpits to retrieve it. Mrs. Ruth Hutton and Avery McLear remember catching fish that wouldn't fit through the holes. It was a tense time while a companion enlarged the hole, being careful not to hit or break the line.

There are also stories about fish that pull the tip-ups right through the holes! This happened to Ruth Hutton and Avery McLear. Ruth lost the tip-up, but the outcome of Avery's story is somewhat different. He said that the ice was clear and they were able to follow the fish and ti-up around on top of the ice. He said that the fish would stop traveling and he and his fishing companion would start to spud through the ice. The fish would hear the noise of the spudding and take off again. Mr. McLear and his friend played this cat-and-mouse game with the fish for a good part of the day before the fish finally tired and they were able to retrieve the fish and their tip-up.

## SHANTIES

Shanties have been used for a long time as a shelter from the cold. They have been improvised from canvas, snow, tree boughs, a model A ford, a hay wagon, a cattle truck and have been constructed especially for the purpose. Some are stationery for the entire season and others are mounted on runners for portable use. Hardwood runners were common in the past, but now pipe and fiberglass runners are common. Many ice fishermen used the most portable ice shantie—the car or truck. Bill Turner said that years ago it was easy to tell if someone had a flag up by the sound of the car door slamming. Besides coming in all shapes and sizes, shanty interior designs vary from the rustic to the almost luxuriously heated, furnished and sometimes even painted and curtained. Many, however, still prefer to fish without the shantie.

John Goldie told an interesting story about fishing in his shantie, set up in "Fish City" on Black Lake, amidst several other shanties. He was jigging there one day when he discovered he had quite a bite. He fought the fish for 15 minutes in vain. A friend, Mr. Baker, did some investigating and found that Mr. Wayne Spearance had also been battling a large one for several minutes. Mr. Baker figured out that one of them had caught a fish which had tangled the



Modern flag tip-up.

lines under the ice and they were really battling each other. Both Mr. Goldie and Mr. Spearance were afraid to really pull and thereby break the line on a big one.

### WAITING FOR THE FISH TO BITE

Once set up, waiting for the fish to bite can be tedious. However, ice fishing is actually fairly social, and many recreational activities take place in and out of the shantie. They include listening to ball games on the radio, cooking up hotdogs, hamburgers and fish, and card playing—although one fisherman said that he stayed away from card playing since he lost a big fish once when he was engrossed in the game. Others have checked out the area's trapping possibilities, gone rabbit or coon hunting, or practiced target shooting. Young kids have played kickball, fox and rabbit, and skated.

Skating was a part of ice fishing for the professional ice fishermen, too. Harold Barlay noted that he checked his holes by skating around, and Avery McLear once skated to a location on Tin Island that he and his brother wanted to reserve for themselves for the winter when the ice was little over an inch thick. Mr. McLear explained that good spots were reserved when professional fishing was common on Black Lake and reservations were first come, first serve. He was punished for his daring by his father, but was glad to get a good fishing location for the winter. Mr. McLear felt the winters must have been more severe with less snow years ago, because he remembers lots of good skating on Black Lake.

### OPINIONS, BELIEFS, AND TRICKS

There are many interesting opinions on the effect of the wind on ice fishing, the depth at which the fisherman sets his hook, and the best time of day for ice fishing. Some of the most unique behavior used to attract fish involves pouring ginger brandy down the hole and waiting for the fish to arrive (made famous by Sid Patterson when he won the Sacketts Harbor Ice Fishing Derby and appeared on "Wide World of Sports").

Mrs. John Storie spreads liver in the place she intends to ice fish to draw the fish to that spot. Ron Gravlin claims that he attracts fish by using a spinner and applying mercurochrome to his minnows to simulate the coloring of goldfish, which are illegal to use as bait.

When questioned about the best time of the day in which to go ice fishing, the response regarding walleye was almost unanimous—in the very early morning and late afternoon with a lull in the midday. Some thought there didn't seem to be much difference in the time of the day when fish are caught, especially in the perch and pike category. One person, however, disagreed with most of the others in maintaining that the fishing seemed to pick up for the interval between 11 a.m. and 2:30 p.m.

When asked about the specific weather conditions favorable to ice fishing, several thought that bad weather, cloudy weather, or a storm was good. John Goldie felt that there were fewer people out on the ice making noise during a storm and that favored the fishing. Mr. McLear felt the fishing was best just before a storm. Harold Barlay even went so far as to say that sunny weather was not very good weather for ice fishing.

Wind direction and barometric pressure was felt to have some effect on the fishing, although many fishermen said that when they wanted to go fishing, they went regardless of the wind direction or weather. Various advice, generally consistent with the following jingle, quoted frequently, was given.

*When the wind blows from the east,  
the fish bite the least.  
When the wind blows from the west,  
the fish bite the best.  
When the wind blows from the north,  
the fisherman goes not forth.  
When the wind blows from the south,  
it blows the hook into their mouth.*

Opinions about the best time of the season in which to ice fish are also fairly unanimous, although the reasons given for this phenomenon are not. Most fishermen think that the thin early and late ice are the best times to fish.

Yet another variable felt to be crucial to successful ice fishing is the depth from the bottom at which the bait is located. Most of the ice fishermen we spoke with realized the value of changing the depth at which they were fishing if the fish were not biting at that depth. All those interviewed, except Mrs. Storie, a Yellow Lake ice fisherman, keep their minnows within three feet of the bottom. Mrs. Storie located her minnow one to two feet from the top of the

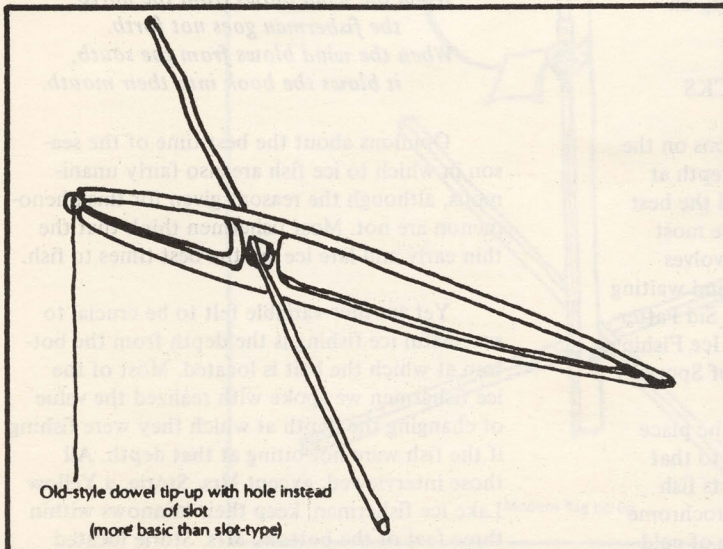
water. It was suggested by Bob Bailey that the amount of light reaching the fish has something to do with the level at which the fish lived. He and many others felt that by trial and error they might be able to discover at what depth the fish could be found.

Bill Turner related a setting-the-depth ritual practiced by the fishermen at Edwardsville. Generally, they fished 18-20 inches off the bottom. When the 4:00 p.m. toot of the train was heard, however, everyone reset the bait to be located closer to the bottom 6-7 inches up. The fishermen felt that they had a better chance of getting walleye at that depth of that time of day.

A great deal of lore in the form of personal narratives about encounters with game protectors is generated by the ice fishing experience. Again, the concerns about regulation are part of the fabric of the story. In a non-malicious way, the ice fisherman usually manages to outsmart the warden. One such story told by a North Country fisherman involves an unnamed man who had taken his young son with him for a day's fishing at Yellow Lake. After catching more than his limit of northerns, he became concerned when he saw the game protector approaching him. He quickly buried several of the larger fish in a pile of snow nearby. The game protector came up and commented on the large northerns the man had caught, which were lying on the ice next to his hole. The

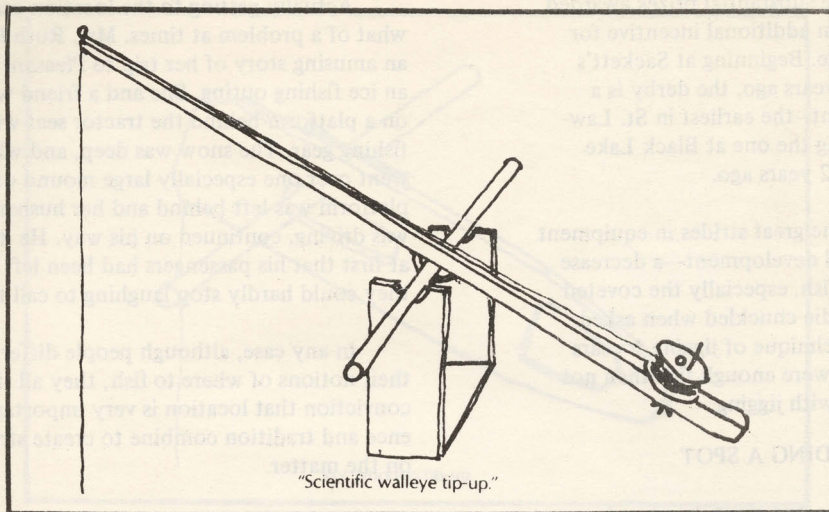
man's son piped up, "If you think those are good, you should see the ones over there buried in the snow."

This story was related by another unnamed ice fisherman who practiced his ice fishing on Black Lake. He and a fishing companion were fishing with a shack and during the course of the afternoon had been quite successful in catching black bass. These fish are not legal to keep in the winter time, however. They had quite a catch lying on the ice nearby, when one of the men saw the game protector approaching. They quickly tried to find a hiding place for the black bass. There was not enough snow on the ice to bury them so they finally decided to put the fish under the shantie. The game protector approached and asked if he could use their shantie, saying he would like to do some jigging and bring home a perch dinner to his wife. They agreed to allow the game protector to use their shantie. During the course of time, the game protector heard a flapping noise under the shantie. One of the fishermen noted that the ice seemed to be shifting about quite a bit. The game protector went back to his jigging and heard the sound again. However, he never did find out what was making the flapping noise under the shantie, much to the relief of the fishermen.



*The information in this paper is based on initial interviews of from one to three hours with Mr. Roy Apple, Mr. Bob Bailey, Mr. Harold Barlay, Mr. Emmett Booth, Mr. Al Bogardus, Mr. Harold Brenno, Mr. Dick Burrell, Mr. Tom Cree, Mr. Dalton Fay, Mr. George Finley, Mr. John Goldie, Mr. Ron Gravin, Mr. Gordon Hartle, Mrs. Ruth Hutton, Mr. Duff Lavigne, Mr. Ray Loucks, Mr. Avery McLearn, Mr. Ben Nichols, Mr. George Paige, Mr. Royal Phillips, Mr. Jim Robinson, Mrs. John Storie, Mr. Gene Turnbull, Mr. Bill Turner, Mr. Moses Villnave, Mr. Lafe Young and Glen and Eileen Young.*

*Information was also supplied by Mr. Roscoe Swem, Mr. Lyle Woodcock, Mr. Ralph Young, Mr. Steve Robinson, and Mr. Don Sloan.*



"Scientific walleye tip-up."

## Ice Fishing Traditions in St. Lawrence County

By *Melanie Smithers, Peter Murphy,*  
*and the Staff of the Center for the Study of North Country Folklife*  
*Drawings by Deborah Weeks*

*[This article was first published by the Madison County Historical Society, Oneida, New York, in their annual Craft Days booklet in September 1978. It is reprinted here with their permission. The article, as it appears here, was edited by Valerie Ingram, Assistant Director of the Center for the Study of North Country Folklife.]*

The materials of ice fishing and the motivation of ice fishermen have changed drastically over the last 50 to 75 years. It seems that years ago one had to be dedicated to ice fishing in order to participate. Much time and energy was spent making or obtaining the tools of the trade—tip-ups, spuds, gaff hooks and minnows. Ice fishing was taken seriously as a valuable source of food or income. Before professional fishing was banned from Black Lake in the early 1940's, many men received a good share of their living from fishing there.

Now, one can ice fish with convenience

and little work because of modern technological advances. The power auger has replaced the axe and spud for digging the holes in the ice; the underwater reel tip-up has replaced the handmade wooden tip-up and the more basic switches; shanties have replaced shelters improvised from tree boughs, snow, plastic or canvas. The snowmobile or four-wheel drive truck makes fishing on different spots easy and render the use of horses and walking with toboggans obsolete. Clothing has also improved over the years, thereby encouraging the less hardy to take up the sport—down jackets and insulated boots have replaced the wool and sheepskin of an earlier day. While years ago all equipment was handmade by the fisherman, friends, or the local blacksmith, all equipment can now be purchased (including battery-powered aerators).

Many people still fish for food, but for many others, it is strictly a sport. The increase in the type of ice fisherman may be partially explained by the recent rise of the

fishing derby. The substantial prizes awarded at derbies create an additional incentive for some to participate. Beginning at Sackett's Harbor about 15 years ago, the derby is a relatively new event—the earliest in St. Lawrence County being the one at Black Lake beginning about 12 years ago.

Along with the great strides in equipment has come a parallel development—a decrease in the number of fish, especially the coveted walleye. John Goldie chuckled when asked about using the technique of jigging \* years ago—he said there were enough fish then not to have to bother with jigging.

#### FINDING A SPOT

The first thing one must do when ice fishing is to find a location on the ice. In many cases that depends on the type of ice fishing one intends doing. Everyone has their own ideas about the ideal places to fish and each has their favorite spots. To name a few—on the St. Lawrence River, George Paige has found that the area around Kring Point is a good place for perch fishing. Tom Cree suggested shallow water (5 ft.-14 ft.) as a good spot in which to catch northerns and perch. This is usually on the edge of a weed bed. As far wall-eye, one person suggested the edge of a current. Another felt Norwood Pond or Colton were the only places walleye could be caught. Several mentioned the importance of shoals as a spot over which to place tip-ups. They located the shoals by use of triangulation points; that is, they carefully noted landmarks on shore opposite all sides of the shoal. In that way they could precisely locate the shoal each time that they decided to fish over it.

\*"Jigging" is the technique of moving the line up and down by hand to attract the fish. This technique is generally used only for the non-game fish.

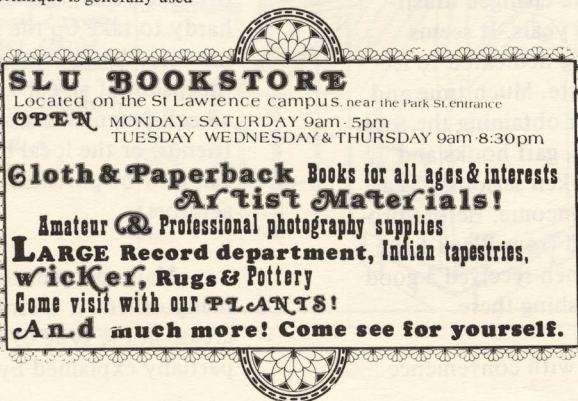
Actually getting to the location can be somewhat of a problem at times. Mrs. Ruth Hutton told an amusing story of her trip to Pleasant Lake for an ice fishing outing. She and a friend were riding on a platform behind the tractor seat with all the fishing gear. The snow was deep, and when they went over one especially large mound of snow, the platform was left behind and her husband, who was driving, continued on his way. He didn't realize at first that his passengers had been left behind, and they could hardly stop laughing to call to him.

In any case, although people differ widely on their notions of where to fish, they all share the conviction that location is very important. Experience and tradition combine to create strong feelings on the matter.

As in many other aspects of modern life, regulation has affected the phenomenon of ice fishing and dictated changes in this traditional winter activity. The regulations have also served to challenge the ingenuity of the resourceful fisherman. Years ago, ice fishermen were allowed to dig and tip-up fish fifteen holes and leave the holes baited overnight. This number was reduced to ten holes and finally to the five holes and two hand jigging lines allowed today.

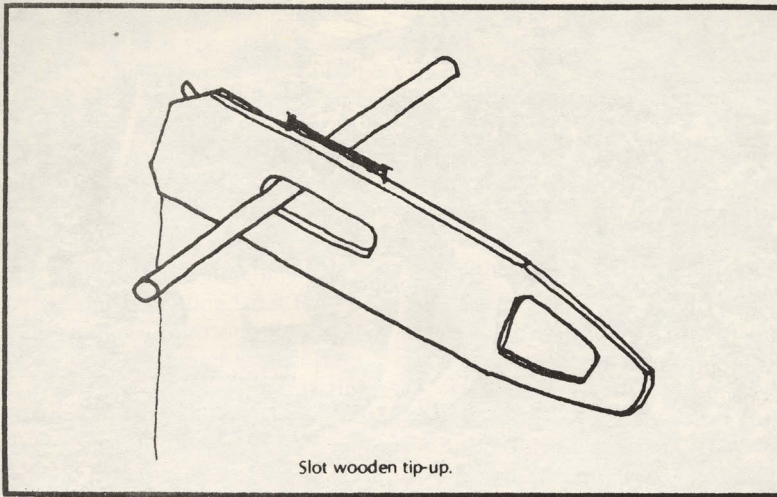
Several fishermen shared stories of how *their friends* had been able to rig up extra holes. In one, the holes were dug, a stick with line, sinker and bait was set up next to the hole at the end of the small channel. The stick was covered with snow and the channel was allowed to refreeze, but the "blind hole" next to the set up was kept open. From the surface it just looked like an abandoned hole, but fish were retrieved from it using a specially-made L-shaped rod.

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Slot wooden tip-up.

## DIGGING THE HOLE

Although many people now use a gas-powered auger to dig their holes, the use of a combination of axe and spud is the most traditional way of accomplishing this task. The size and shape of a spudded hole is different from that made with an auger. Especially if the hole was started with an axe, it is football-shaped and very large near the surface. Lafe Young said that he would start his hole in deep ice to be the size of a table-top at the surface. Duff Lavigne liked the spudded hole because it was so large, and was thinking of ways to enlarge the hole made by a power auger by wiggling the auger around in the hole.

In years past most of the spuds were either made by the ice fisherman, by a friend or by the village blacksmith. Bob Russell, Potsdam blacksmith, made Royal Phillips' spud from a car steering wheel, which Mr. Phillips then filled with lead. The Madrid blacksmith made John Goldie's spud from the rear axle of a buggy. John remembers that he paid 50 cents for the spud and it weighed ten to twelve pounds. Pearly Bogardus, Depeyster blacksmith, made Ruth Hutton's spud and a Hammond blacksmith, Fred Mayor, made Avery McLearn's spud. Avery McClear remembers that the spud was actually a 3-inch chisel welded onto a pole, although now he would choose an even narrower chisel of not

more than 1½-inches in width. Several men estimated that 20 minutes was about the time required to dig a deep 36-inch hole in the ice. One experienced fisherman pointed out the wisdom of cleaning out the hole with the ice skimmer just before going through the ice with the spud. He felt this saved a lot of clean-up time. The ice skimmer is an important tool the ice fisherman uses to keep the hole free of ice.

The hand auger and Swedish spoon, both of which work on the principle of a bit and brace are tools that rank, technologically, between the spud and the power auger. None of these methods are completely obsolete. You will still be able to find individuals who spud their own holes, but the switch is on to faster and easier ways to dig the all-important hole.

## THE TIP-UP

It seems safe to assume that the very first ice fisherman lowered a line into the water and held onto it. Man's ingenuity quickly passed this stage and the use of an instrument which held the line for him was conceived. It probably did not take long before ice fishermen realized that they could catch more fish if they knew when the fish was on the line, and the tip-up came on the scene.

continued on page 26