

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, May 26, 2014

Refrigeration at Auburn Heights: (Portions of this subject have been mentioned in the *Weekly News* of June 1, 2005, September 12, 2005, and February 5, 2007). I'm sure a large ice box was among the furnishings of Auburn Heights when it opened for occupancy in 1897. This may have been the first refrigerator I remember, or it may have been an earlier one. It must have been located either in the original kitchen itself or in the room immediately below, usually called the "laundry." If it was below, we know there was an active dumbwaiter in a small pantry just off the kitchen (and laundry), the platform of which was activated by a heavy rope and a pulley system that worked like a block-and-fall. Foodstuffs were stored in the basement, especially in the summer, where it was considerably cooler.

Wherever that first ice box was, large cakes of ice, possibly 50 pounds each, had to be added daily. The first such unit I remember had six wooden paneled doors and was varnished but not painted. The top two doors were the smallest with a beveled mirror in each. These opened to the ice compartment. The larger four doors below were in two rows and opened to take food in and out. At least one shelf separated the bottom from the top. About the time my parents were married and my grandmother moved out in 1921, a small room was added just off a pantry of about the same size in the area between the original kitchen and the dining room. Two small rear dining room windows were closed off because of this addition. In this room is where I first remember a refrigerator, but I think ice still had to be used to cool it. Shortly thereafter the dumb waiter area was converted into a dish closet on each floor, although the old rope and pulleys were intact until 1996 when some new electrical wiring utilized this channel.

The first improvement, still in the 1920s, was to install cooling coils in the old ice box, with an electric compressor in the basement below, using sulfur dioxide as the coolant. This worked well, and a gas leak could be detected easily by an odor of rotten eggs. Ice trays and with cooling coils occupied the original ice compartment. The old converted ice box remained in daily use in this small room until 1934, when the new kitchen addition was opened.

The 1934 kitchen allowed for a large, modern refrigerator in the kitchen itself, and the old converted ice box was removed to the kitchen porch at the Yorklyn Gun Club, where it served well until 1950 when the last "shoots" were held there. The new refrigerator, also using sulfur dioxide with its compressor under the back porch, had four doors with ice trays inside one of the top doors. It was painted with a modern white enamel. The old refrigerator room became a "flower room" in 1934.

Clarence Birdseye, who had experimented with freezing fish, was credited with "inventing" frozen foods about 1928. In the mid-1930s, the first of these became available to housewives in the form of frozen peas and other green vegetables. They were immediately popular, as the taste was so much more like fresh vegetables in season than was the case with canned vegetables, a major industry in downstate Delaware. Unfortunately, however, freezers were not readily available in small sizes, and frozen lockers were rented out like safe deposit boxes in commercial places. The closest place of this kind was in Avondale. By the late 1930s, however, this inconvenience had been remedied at Auburn Heights. A separate freezer was installed in the laundry, and a much smaller "quick freezer" was in the small closet off that room. In addition to buying Birdseye frozen peas, my mother began to freeze her own fresh vegetables, especially pole lima beans. The main freezer was kept at about 20 degrees Fahrenheit, but the quick freezer was at 5 degrees below zero. It was said that to maximize the flavor, vegetables (and later beef and poultry) must be frozen *fast*. So, the item went in the quick freezer for 12 hours or so before being transferred to the large freezer. This system seemed to continue for about 25 years.

In the latter years of using the 1934 kitchen, a smaller, self-contained single-door refrigerator replaced the four-door one, and when the second floor kitchen was built in 1956, another new refrigerator was purchased. A small used refrigerator had occupied a temporary 3rd-floor kitchen during and just after World War II, and the same was true for a makeshift kitchen for the apartment over the garage. When the apartment-over-garage (now the FAHP office) was rebuilt in 1981, when the main (1934) kitchen at Auburn Heights was remodeled in 1987,

and when a new 3rd-floor kitchen replaced a bathroom in 1988, all had modern refrigerators, easily available. A freezer was retained in the laundry room, and a used refrigerator has occupied a spot on the floor of the garage for many years.