

STOCKING THE LARDER IN 1840

With the arrival of the new year, the Rideau Canal is once again plunged into the icy grips of winter. This is the time of year when one remembers those important preparations that should have been done weeks ago, but somehow never got done. Few of these are life and death matters in the present day, however, in the early years of the canal's history, those preparations were vital for survival.

The daily journal of Peter Sweeney, lockmaster at Jones Falls from 1832 until 1871, provides us with an insights into the preparations required in the 1840's. Stocking the larder meant hard work for men, women, children and animals alike.

Lockmaster Sweeney was fortunate to have the assistance of his lockmen, his oxen and his trusty black horses, Bonny and Daisy. With them, the wheat was cut and drawn, threshed and taken to Furnace Falls (now Lyndhurst) or Beverley (now Delta) to be ground into flour. Not much good land was available for crops, so, although he had an abundance of potatoes and cabbage, Sweeney was short of hay and oats for the livestock. A neighbour supplied him with what he needed, accepting one of Sweeney's sleighs as partial payment.

Hogs were put up to fat (slaughtered) and salted along with a steer or two. Catherine Sweeney, Peter's wife, saved and rendered the fat for the yearly chores of candle and soapmaking. Sweeney built shelters for his sheep and guinea hens, and then, upon discovering the mink were taking his rabbits, he built a shelter for them as well.

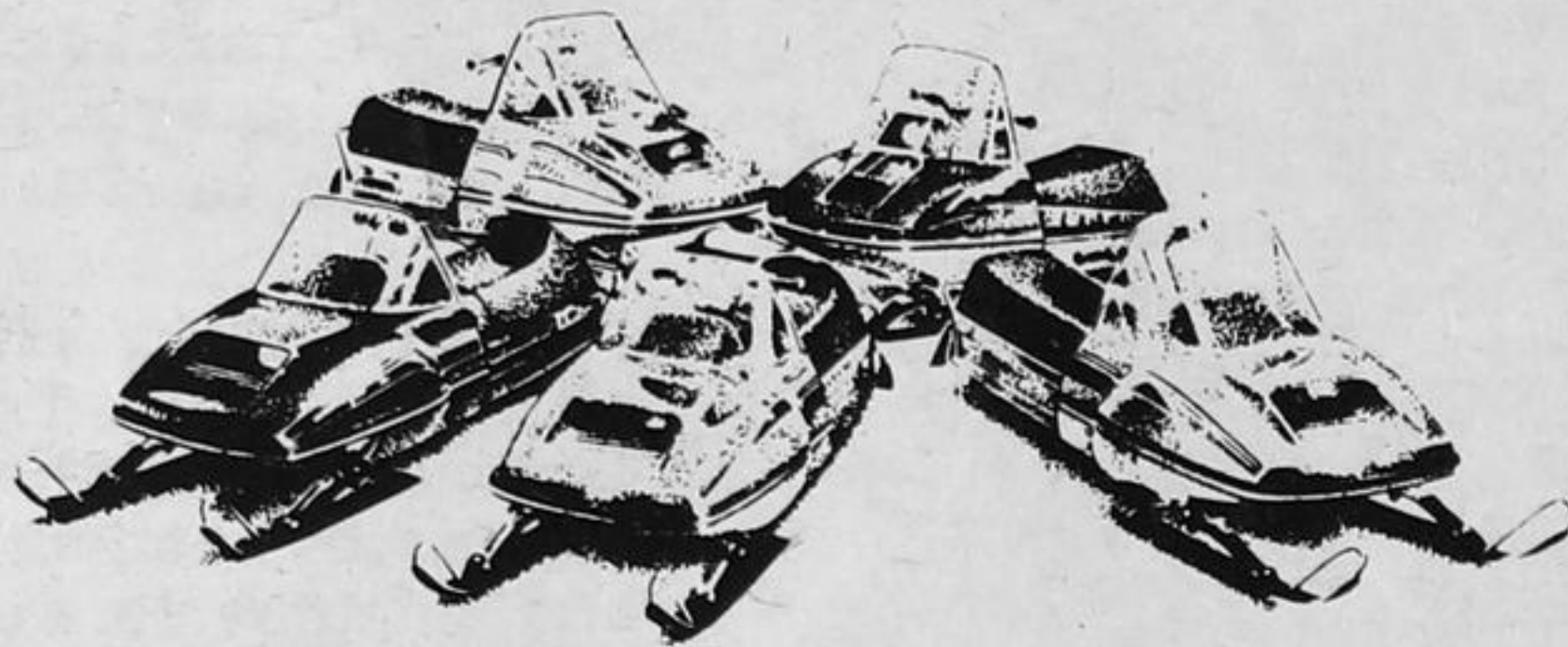
Sweeney's children, Tommy and Kitty, were sent to their neighbour Henderson for some plums. These were dried or preserved either as dessert or as an accompaniment to meat. The lockmen would spend many hours with Catherine and Kitty peeling, slicing and stringing apples to dry over the fireplace.

Last, but not least, the cookstove was brought back into the kitchen from the cookhouse, a sure sign that winter was arriving.

Most of their preparations centred around food, for in those days there were no grocery stores nearby to run to when the cupboards started getting bare. The cold winds of winter began to blow, and all thoughts turned to survival.

by Aurel Hart
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