Up Front

Curator's Corner
By Emily Ruby, Curator

Jerry the Ice Man

Ice is having its moment due to the popular Disney movie Frozen. Here at the History Center, the history of ice is always at the forefront because the original building was home to the Chautauqua Lake Ice Company. Ice was critical in the days before electric refrigeration, and many an ice man delivered it door to door. The turn-of-the-century tradition faded decades ago except for one holdout: Jerry the Ice Man.

With Sinatra tunes blaring from his radio and a sign that read, “When the ice is gone, the party is over,” Jerry drove his red pick-up truck throughout the streets of Pittsburgh to peddle his wares from the bed of his truck. His 50-pound bags were packed from ice machines at his family’s home in Beechview. He was known for his constant smile, friendly flirting, and, of course, the Sinatra music. The sign borrowed the “party’s over” tag line from an ice company in Bridgeport, Ohio, that had the wording on its bags. He had the sign made for $140 with this same tag line and put it on his truck.

Jerry began his career by delivering ice and coal with his father, Gerardo Conistrano, and his brother Louie around the Hill District in the 1930s and ’40s. Their home was right behind the original Crawford Grill. Change came to the Conistranos in the late 1950s when they were forced to move to make way for the Civic Arena and they relocated to Beechview. As home refrigeration increased, there was less need for their ice delivery services and Jerry switched to construction and hauling slag.

However, it seems Jerry was meant to work with ice. His brother Louie began delivering bags of ice to downtown businesses in the 1960s and within a decade Jerry was full-time in the ice business again. When his brother died in 1989, Jerry took over the business. He woke up every morning at 5:00 a.m., filled his truck with bags of ice, and made his way downtown. He delivered ice to businesses throughout the city until his retirement in 2006.

Before Jerry passed away...
last year, a few days after his 83rd birthday, he donated a few mementoes of the family business to the History Center.

The size of the Chautauqua Lake building is a testament to the demand for ice in the growing industrial city. Large shipments of ice from northern lakes were brought to the History Center building via rail and then delivered throughout the city and beyond by wagon, rail, and ship. With demand long gone, the building that was once the center of ice delivery now houses treasured artifacts from that very industry.

Jerry’s advertising sign.
HHC Collections, gift of Jerry Conistrano Jr., 2008.126.1.