



Photograph by the Voorhes

BUSINESS

Inside the Billion-Dollar Industry That's Keeping Your Beer Cold—and Saving Lives

Ice is essential to Texans in so many ways. So why does thinking about it give some of us a case of brain freeze?



By Lauren Larson

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For someone whose office has a view of a carnival, Lonny Warner is decidedly unwhimsical. The CEO of Reddy Ice, the largest producer of packaged ice in North America, Warner is tall and broad in slacks and a blue polo emblazoned with a white company logo. He wears a silver-chain necklace and bracelet and has close-cropped hair and condensed facial features. The large windows of his office in Reddy's Dallas headquarters overlook Interstate 635. Beyond the freeway, on the site of the former Valley View Mall, is the carnival, looking eerie and apocalyptic in slumber. One Friday morning in April, Warner stands at the windows, studying it. "That's

new,” he observes, pointing to a spire rising two stories above the other structures. He takes a seat in one of two blue accent chairs, first pressing his arms to his sides, his hands hidden in the seat cushion, and then placing them on the chair’s rigid armrests.

Warner joined Reddy in 2023. He’d had a long and varied career and had retired eight months before, but it didn’t take. (When I make a joke about his abortive retirement, he issues a rewarding string of dictionally perfect “ha”s.) He had never worked in the ice industry, and when he assumed his post he “went on *gemba*,” he says, using the Japanese term, popularized by Toyota, for when a company’s leader visits and evaluates the production floor. He took a grand road trip across Reddy’s domain, speaking with employees in manufacturing facilities and distribution centers across the country. He saw firsthand the industry’s intense seasonality—in the summer, Reddy’s plants sometimes operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week; in the winter and spring, plants typically run only during working hours, four or five days a week—and the extent to which ice is a critical part of daily life for huge swaths of the country.

Reddy has corporate clients, such as airlines, that serve ice in fabulous volumes, and a significant slice of sales comes from small businesses whose employees must be kept cool as they work outside and in warm spaces, doing things like HVAC maintenance or landscaping. But most of the company’s business comes from retail channels, including grocery chains and convenience stores—“c stores,” in the ice industry’s shorthand—which sell ice to individuals who are often buying it for some manner of gathering. Ice sales are a cornucopia of unexpected insights into how Americans hang out.

“I’ve learned that certain groups of people are much more social than other people,” Warner says. He had been passively aware of this, but, he says, “we’ve had some events recently that have impacted those groups. And you’re like, ‘Holy smokes.’”

Warner is speaking on tiptoe, avoiding generalizations. But Steve Janusek, who has been chief financial officer at Reddy for 26 years, is less opaque when I catch up with him the following week. “We did feel it last year with the immigration policy,” he says, referring to President Trump’s **aggressive crackdown** on illegal immigration. “There was less consumption because the Hispanic community, in general, did not congregate in groups at the same rate as in the past.” Many members of Latino communities felt anxious about making themselves targets through large gatherings.

Janusek can recall several such “abnormal volume disruptions” in his long tenure, some of which affected the entire nation. September 11 was one. “For, like, three weeks, everyone was sitting in front of the TV. All events were

canceled. Nobody did anything,” he says. Then there were the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, when Americans sheltered in place, cooling the spoils of their new mixology hobbies with refrigerator-made ice.



Bags of Reddy Ice at corporate headquarters, in Dallas.
Photograph by Brian Finke



Reddy Ice's CEO, Lonny Warner (left), and CFO, Steve Janusek, in June.

Photograph by Brian Finke

There have been many pleasant volume disruptions too. When I accuse Janusek and Reddy of being the conspiracists behind the cold-plunge trend, he laughs and brings up the Ice Bucket Challenge, which was a boon not only for Lou Gehrig's disease research but also, for at least a golden three-week period, for the packaged-ice industry. And during my visit, Janusek is looking ahead to the country's 250th birthday, which is expected to compound what is already the busiest day of the year, icewise, as well as the World Cup and its attendant watch parties.

Janusek is acutely sensitive to the variables that might complicate the nation's gatherings. He has a farmer's preoccupation with the weather, and lately he's been keeping an eye on the economic weather as well, wondering whether plump tax refunds might offset higher fuel costs and amplify the siren song that calls us to plan cookouts and lake hangs as soon as the temperature hits 85 degrees.

“I used to go up and down Wall Street saying we’re recession proof,” he says, recalling the years from 2005 to 2012, when the company was publicly traded. “We’re not recession proof. We’re recession resistant.” When there has been disproportionate unemployment, as during the 2008 financial crisis, Janusek has seen significant dips in sales. “When people have less money, it’s not, ‘I can’t afford the ice.’ They’re not doing the things that drive the ice.”

There may be no more tangible an indicator of when Americans are and are not having a good time than Reddy Ice’s sales figures.

And yet a young woman at happy hour most likely does not think too hard about the ice in her drink. “Ooh!” she’ll remark to the bartender, delighted by the tall cylindrical ice disguising the mere tablespoon of beverage in her glass. The unusual shape may hold her attention for a moment. But she does not ask herself where the ice came from or whether it is safe to consume.

She does not know that while the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and a regulatory body called the International Packaged Ice Association oversee standards for large producers like Reddy, the ice that many retailers make on-site is not always up to industry standards. She hasn’t read a 2017 study in the *Journal of Food Protection* in which researchers found staphylococcus in 34 percent of the ice it sampled from convenience stores and other businesses that made their own ice, as opposed to ice made by a major manufacturer. Perhaps she assumes that the alcohol in her beverage kills any harmful bacteria. (Not always so—a researcher in a 1985 University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston study concluded that the alcohol content of a beverage would have to be so high to kill certain bacteria that it is “not really a practical recommendation.” Everclear aficionados rejoice!) Or maybe she assumes that the cold surface of an ice cube is a hostile environment for bacteria. (Another misconception; many bacteria can survive and multiply after being frozen.) She orders another vodka soda.



The Reddy Ice cold storage facility in Farmers Branch.
Photograph by Brian Finke

There are, of course, ice snobs, cocktail extremists who prefer their drinks with perfectly clear, optimally shaped craft ice. A market has arisen around these people and their kink. Reddy, for instance, has a craft-ice brand called IceBlox; the ice is frozen more slowly, is denser, and has fewer air bubbles than regular ice, which means it also melts more slowly. Another company called Gläce Luxury Ice sells forty-piece cases of cubed and spherical ice for \$325. Gläce says the ice spheres, “the most mathematically efficient way to cool your drink,” are “purified of minerals, additives, and other pollutants that may contaminate the taste of premium spirits and drinks.”

For the most part, though, we take ice for granted. “I think the industry has, over time, been conditioned into being seen as a commodity,” Warner says. He would like for people to pay attention to their ice—not to spend \$325 on forty ice spheres, necessarily, but just to look for the IPIA accreditation badge on bags, which indicates that the producer is subject to inspections and testing. Many people, he points out, don’t even clean out their refrigerators, freezers, or ice makers, all of which are potential cesspools. They don’t test their water at home, he says in a disappointed tone. Our happy hour hero shifts in her seat, recalling the foggy cubes in her own ice tray, shrunk after months of languishing, probably full of *E. coli* or the larvae from *The Thaw*.

Before coming to Reddy, Warner says, “I was just like the regular population. You never really think about it. It’s just part of everyday life.”

Warner joins a long procession of icemen who have bemoaned the lack of interest in their trade. “We are so familiar with water in its liquid and its solid form, that we seldom think of it as a mineral, and still less as a mineral product of any considerable industrial importance,” wrote W. P. Blake, an American geologist and mining consultant, in an 1883 report on the country’s ice trade. And yet, he wrote, “the industry is peculiarly American, and in no other country has the business of cutting and storing ice been so well systematized and perfected.”

By the time of Blake’s findings, people had been experimenting with making and keeping ice for centuries. In India, possibly as early as three thousand years ago, people used clay pots to cool water: The water’s evaporation through the clay removed heat, leaving chilled water or even ice under the right conditions. The technique is still used, especially as the country experiences record heat waves.

Americans in the nineteenth century, the dawn of the modern ice industry, had it easier. “The natural supply of ice in the United States is almost beyond calculation,” wrote a U.S. census agent named Henry Hall in a report submitted in 1883. Since at least 1805 so-called natural ice had been harvested from northern lakes, rivers, and ponds in a process accurately and musically depicted in the opening scene of *Frozen*, a rare cinematic nod to the ice industry. (In Eugene O’Neill’s 1946 play, *The Iceman Cometh*, a salesman has told his alcoholic friends that his wife is at home with the iceman. The iceman in question is meant to evoke death—the woman has been killed—but anxieties around swole deliverymen entering homes and seducing wives seem to have been prevalent in the twentieth century.) Using long handsaws and a variety of improvised plows, Northerners would cut

grids in the ice and remove blocks, which were then stored or sent to warmer locales by ship or rail in insulated containers.



Trucks loading up for distribution.
Photograph by Brian Finke



Branded freezers at Ice Express, a distributor in Houston.
Photograph by Brian Finke

Thanks to a man named Frederic Tudor, some of these destinations were quite far-flung. Tudor was a merchant from Boston, more mutton chop than man in his later years. He would ship natural ice from Thoreau's Walden Pond, which is startlingly Whole Foods-y branding for the nineteenth century.

Tudor envisioned a global ice industry. Perhaps he was motivated by the limited market for his Gläce-priced ice blocks in the U.S. or by the prevalence elsewhere of tropical fevers such as yellow fever, as the symptoms of these were often soothed by cold water. (In 1851 a doctor named John Gorrie experimented with creating a cold sickroom for malaria patients' high fevers, effectively inventing air-conditioning.) In 1806, Tudor attempted to ship blocks of ice to the island of Martinique, a speculation that is detailed by Jonathan Rees, a history professor at Colorado State University Pueblo, in *Refrigeration Nation*, one of three books he's written about refrigeration. First, the owner of a boat Tudor had chartered got cold feet, convinced, as many shipowners were, that the ice would melt and sink the ship. Tudor

chartered another ship and successfully delivered his wares to the island, but Martinique had no icehouse in which to store it, and it began to melt, as ice does. Customers also had no idea how to transport it from his hold to their homes or keep it cold once they did; Tudor advised them to wrap their purchases in cloth. “He still got complaints, since it melted anyway,” writes Rees.

Tudor could very well have gone down in history as the father of the modern Potemkin start-up rather than the father of the modern ice industry, but he persevered. He saw that in order to create the worldwide ice trade he envisioned, he would have to build a global network of icehouses. Eventually his empire grew vast, and historians call Tudor by the absolutely sick moniker the Ice King.

Texans across the state received their ice from Illinois and Missouri by rail and by ship in Galveston. When it arrived, it was sometimes unloaded into open-roofed icehouses. Each of these stored one hundred tons of ice under sawdust, and icemen—hide your wives—would deliver blocks from the facilities to customers’ cellars or iceboxes, which typically were insulated wooden receptacles lined with metal; an ice block was placed in an upper compartment and cold air moved downward, cooling perishables in a lower compartment.

Already unable to resist the seduction of an icy blast, Texans began gathering at icehouses. In South Texas, a pub-like culture grew around them. Today Texas bars are liberal with the use of “icehouse” in their names, hoping to capture the informal community of the time before air-conditioning. On a sweltering day there is no better marketing. But some of those bars, such as the nearly century-old **West Alabama Ice House**, in Houston, really did sell ice.

In the nineteenth century, the method of transporting ice from north to south was imperfect. Hall estimates that by the 1870s each delivery was cursed by a 25 to 30 percent loss, with significant further melting during storage. The product was also too expensive for most Texans and other Southerners, and for decades it remained a luxury item.



A cold delivery to Ice Express.
Photograph by Brian Finke

By the mid to late nineteenth century, artificial ice makers were being invented across the globe. Texans—perhaps shaken by the Civil War, which hindered the shipment of ice, and also likely motivated by the state’s growing beef industry—were aggressive in the ice race. By 1867, notes Rees, when the United States had only eight ice plants, three existed in San Antonio. Some early refrigeration machines used compressed ammonia, which is still widely used as a coolant. In the coming decades, ice plants bloomed across the state like frost on a window.

In the late 1920s, Southland Ice Company had eight plants and 21 retail locations in Texas, from which it provided ice for the iceboxes of residents in surrounding areas. (Widespread adoption of refrigerators was still several decades away and was driven, Rees tells me, by the lure of ice in the home. “The argument was always, ‘Get rid of the iceman. Buy a refrigerator.’”) Southland eventually became Southland Ice Corporation, and its icehouses, which had grown into convenience stores called Tote’ms, were rechristened 7-Elevens. In 1972, as 7-Eleven was growing into the brand that would stain the lips of countless middle schoolers with its neon Slurpees, Southland rebranded its large ice operation, calling it Reddy Ice Division.

Reddy was not yet the acquisitive ice empire it is today. For most of the twentieth century, regional producers thrived. But then, in the early nineties, the packaged-ice industry encountered an innovation: the in-store bagger. Refrigerator ice makers already existed but were not a particularly virile threat, as it would take a long time for a refrigerator-door ice maker to fill a cooler. In-store ice baggers were a different story.

The machines had been perfected by a young man named Jim Stuart, a former accountant who had consulted for a company called Automatic Ice Machine, or A.I.M. Inspired by that work, he began selling what he called the Ice Factory, a machine that automatically made and packaged ice at grocery stores and other retailers that had previously bought their ice from local businesses. Stuart began acquiring these flailing producers. His Houston-based company, Packaged Ice, quickly achieved ice supremacy, and in 1998, Stuart bought Reddy. (It still makes the Ice Factory.) A 2001 New Yorker profile christened Stuart the Emperor of Ice.

Ice was everywhere, and with Stuart's machines, it was in seemingly infinite supply. Europeans may have evolved to survive tepidity and would likely be appalled by the ice-to-Aperol ratio of a Texan's spritz, but Americans have come to crave cold in the century since refrigeration became the norm. "I would confess I can't stand just about any drink without ice in it, and a lot of that has to do with temperature. But a lot of it has to do with the sound of ice hitting the side of the glass," says Rees. "Europeans think we're completely insane. Who wants to water down your drink just for the temperature? But we do. Almost overwhelmingly."

In a 2020 survey of two thousand Americans commissioned by home-appliance company Bosch, over half the participants said they will not drink water unless it's cold: Give us condensation on the side of the glass, or give us death. The survey estimated that an American consumes over four hundred pounds of ice in a year. Stuart's ice machines could have been the end of the packaged-ice industry, but today Reddy is bigger than ever. That's because in the U.S. demand is also seemingly infinite, and not just because we prefer our beverages frosted. In so many ways Americans never consider, ice has become a critical public utility. We're hooked.

They Keep It Cool

It's the ultimate icebreaker: What's in your cooler? To find out what Texans are buying bags of ice for, we camped out at two 7-Elevens in the hometown of Reddy Ice, North America's largest packaged-ice manufacturer and distributor. — Amanda Albee

For a product so crucial to both leisure and life, the methods of making and distributing ice are startlingly old-school. General Electric has been heralding a method using magnets rather than chemical compression for cooling, but this, notes Rees, would be one of the first changes in refrigeration technology in 150-odd years. For now ice making and ice distribution look much like they have for decades. “At a higher level, it gets more complex,” says **Jesse Mireles IV** of San Antonio’s **Mireles Party Ice**, the ice manufacturer and distributor he cofounded with his father, Jesse Mireles III, in 2001. “But, you know, ultimately it’s just freezing water and storing it and delivering it.”

Back in Warner’s office, I ask him why a company like Amazon doesn’t revolutionize the ice industry. He explains that the natural limitations of ice ensure that it is likely to remain as local a business as it always has been. “It’s not like paper and other commodities,” he says. “You can only transport ice so far. It becomes cost prohibitive to transport ice all the way across the country.” And upon arrival at its destination, ice must be kept cold, which requires special storage facilities. It would take a long time and a major investment for a company to build a network of plants and distribution centers to rival Reddy’s, which, after decades of growth and acquisitions, now has 192 facilities across North America. Some small outfits continue to make ice in their own plants, but Reddy is aggressive about buying these mom-and-pop operations—one former ice maker referred to Reddy as an “exit strategy” for indie producers—and, lately, other large companies. This year Reddy bought one of its two closest peers, Arctic Glacier, solidifying its dominance.

Reddy also works with a vast lattice of ice distributors, the modern-day icemen. Convenience stores and grocery stores buy ice in bulk directly from Reddy, but restaurants and other major consumers of ice are typically served by distributors who themselves purchase ice from Reddy facilities. “Yes, ice is everywhere,” Warner says. “But it’s not because I’ve got this national *thing*. It just doesn’t work that way. It’s all local.”

Many ice distributors have built relationships with local businesses over decades and generations. These distributors are not just mom-and-pops but mom-and-pop-and-grandmom-and-grandpops. Despite their longevity, though, they are vulnerable to all sorts of disruptions. Reddy’s territory is so vast that though it may have to deal with abnormal volume disruptions like the pandemic, Warner and Janusek are somewhat insulated from the nation’s meteorological tantrums. Ice distributors’ lives are more intimately connected to the weather.

“In the summer it’s like somebody takes a faucet, and they just turn it on,” says Ryan Horton, who is the plant-operations manager at **Polar Ice**; along with Mireles Party Ice, it’s one of the increasingly rare businesses that both makes and sells its own ice rather than distributing for a larger producer like Reddy. Horton’s family has owned the Brenham-based company since 1985. By the end of the summer, he looks forward to the first fifty-degree morning of the fall. Summers are taxing, he says, and he is always stunned when someone approaches him to remark as he’s out delivering ice that he has a cool job (pun presumably intended). “It’s like, ‘Man, I am rolling in sweat right now.’”

Some ice distributors’ entire business models orbit around establishments with broken ice machines. Earl Toler, of Dallas-based **Emergency Ice**, used to make his own ice but sold his production business to Reddy in 2021 and now distributes private-label ice. He grew his company by marketing himself as a first responder for businesses in crisis because of failed ice makers. This is likely to happen in the summer, he explains, when the water flowing into ice machines is warmer and strains the systems.



Ice Express keeping water cold for World Cup supporters at Houston's FIFA Fan Festival in June.

Photograph by Brian Finke

He and his wife homeschool their children partly so that the family can travel and take vacations during the winter. “I had a meeting with somebody the other day about another service venture, and the first thing he said to me was ‘quality of life,’” Toler says. “And I looked at him, and I said, ‘Well, you need to rethink your plans, because you’re doing the wrong thing if that’s your first priority.’”

The job has only become more intense as summers have grown hotter; distributors speak with pained wonder about the summer of 2023, the state’s second-hottest ever. It’s common for swimming pool owners to call them asking for block ice to cool the water. “They’re ordering a three-hundred-pound block and dropping that into ninety-degree, one-hundred-degree water. It melts really quick,” says Horton. He tries to explain to these customers that ice is not an effective way to chill a pool—another distributor, which offers a “Cool That Pool” service, estimates that it takes about two thousand pounds of ice to make a noticeable difference in water temperature—but some still insist. (The image of a huge volume of ice being dumped into a pool seems to have a powerful placebo effect.) So do the customers who pull up to Polar Ice in the summer asking Horton to fill the beds of their trucks with ice to create a giant cooler. This works better, Horton says, if you line the bed with a tarp, “but be prepared for a huge mess when you open the tailgate.” In its ephemerality, ice remains a joyous spectacle and an opulent luxury.

“It’s a very weird product to make a living off of,” says Paul Carpenter. He is the owner of Ice Express, which serves the Houston area. I meet him on a Thursday afternoon toward the end of the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo’s three-week run, in March. The grounds are bustling when he pulls into a discreet parking lot at NRG Center in his truck—a GMC Denali with cooling seats, which is, he protests when I admire its amenities, “the only nice thing I own!”

Carpenter, who is 52, is compact and quick. He wears a black zip-up with the Ice Express logo, blue jeans, and sneakers. He grew up in Houston, and though Ice Express has provided the ice for the rodeo for over forty years, since the days when his father still ran the company, he does not own cowboy boots or a hat, presumably because neither is optimally aerodynamic. “If I’m rushing you, let me know,” he says as we power walk to the rodeo’s beverage office. He and his staff are on-site daily, checking to make sure there’s plenty of ice for the food-and-drink providers that surround the stadium, the arena, and the center where events are held. Carpenter drops a stack of invoices on a desk in the office, nodding to a man in a black cowboy hat who is talking on the phone about alcohol stock, and then he’s on the move again.

He exits the office, passing through a horsey-smelling loading dock where the rodeo's rolling pianist, who zooms through NRG Center on a spinning stage on wheels, practices "... Baby One More Time." He then climbs into a Kawasaki 4×4 and heads for the stadium. He navigates the vehicle through the lunchtime crowds with ruthless efficiency, stopping only when a long rope of kindergarten-aged children crosses a walking path. He then begins inching toward them until their teacher hustles the stragglers along.

He drives into the deserted NRG Stadium, where jewel-toned spotlights beam around the seats of the empty arena in which Lainey Wilson will perform. He gets out and rides an elevator up to the Director's Club, a VIP area with an expansive view of Houston. There, he pauses to point to a vast complex, the 1,300-plus-acre Texas Medical Center. Ice Express employees are on-site at MD Anderson Cancer Center there six days a week, ensuring that the hospital's labs have enough dry ice to keep research materials cool. The hospital goes through six to ten thousand pounds of dry ice each week. Between that and the regular ice the cafeteria uses—more than two thousand pounds a day—the hospital is one of Ice Express's largest clients.

Distributors are more aware than most of the extent to which we rely on ice. It's not just medical research. Even our infrastructure depends on it: Because concrete sets faster in hot weather, ice or another cooling agent must be mixed in with cement when its temperature is over 85 degrees. Without it, says Pete Garcia, who has worked at West Texas highway construction contractor J.H. Strain & Sons for almost fifty years, our highways would have more cracks, and the concrete would not stand up as well to traffic and trucks. The roads, he says, "would fall apart, basically."



Paul Carpenter, owner of Ice Express, making it snow.
Photograph by Brian Finke

Not far from Reddy's headquarters is a storage facility with twelve thousand pounds of ice that's kept on reserve—kept on ice!—for emergencies. When natural disasters level our critical systems, as ritually occurs in Texas, ice is suddenly even more crucial. “When a hurricane hits and power goes out, we’re a lifeline,” Warner says. “It’s not for drinks at that point. It’s ‘how do I keep my food cold?’” In the event of a crisis, Reddy works with H-E-B, Walmart, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency to distribute ice, often thousands of pounds of it. He vividly remembers when Hurricane Beryl tore through Houston soon after

the Fourth of July in 2024. Celebrations had cleared out Reddy and its distributors' reserves, leading them to scramble to get ice from across the country to Houston. "We had H-E-B calling us for ice, and we were just trying to get it anywhere we could," Horton, of Polar Ice, recalls.

The moments when ice is needed but unavailable are as irritating and unsettling to us as the breakdown of any utility, even in much lower-stakes contexts than a hurricane's aftermath. "Ice is actually a very high-passion business," says Juan Estrada, who directs Reddy plants in the Metroplex and across the state. Customers might stop at a convenience store on the way to a party, gather some snacks, and then ask for a bag of ice at the checkout. If there is no ice available, Estrada says, they'll likely abandon all their other purchases and walk out. For most of us, these small but searing disappointments are the only times we think about the role of ice in our lives.

But for many Texans, ice can be the only thing keeping us from succumbing to our surroundings. In 2024, Harris County Public Health reported that heat-related illnesses had increased by 329 percent between 2019 and 2023. Texans who are exposed to heat as part of their work in industries including agriculture, construction, and delivery—as is the case for more than 35 percent of Americans—are disproportionately vulnerable, as are older adults and children.

Those of us outside those groups are not immune. As early as March of this year, a ranger at Big Bend National Park tells me, she and her colleagues were responding to between four and six heat-related incidents each week. Rangers bring ice on almost every medical response; it's crucial for stabilizing patients during what can be an hours-long journey from the park to a hospital. In the summer, says San Antonio Fire Department medic Ashley Long, **everyone is vulnerable to the heat**, even those who have been hydrating all day. Much like the ice distributors, Long responds to ten times as many emergencies when it's hot. "The hospitals are just slammed. Every single bed is taken," she says. "Every disease and debilitation that people have is magnified by the heat."

Perhaps we don't think much about ice because doing so requires us to consider how implausible it is that we're able to live comfortably in such heat. How lucky we are to enjoy a snow cone on a one-hundred-degree day.

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