

Polar Ice Company

Founded: 1892

Location: 177–179 (later 331) East Wabash Street, Indianapolis (1892–1902); 2000 Northwestern Avenue (renamed 2000 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Drive) (1903–)

Henry Louis Dithmer was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1869. His family moved to Indianapolis in 1872 after the death of his father, a German immigrant who became a toy and novelty wholesaler. Dithmer worked as a newsboy, office clerk, and bill collector, and for a brief time in his teens, co-owned a cigar store and newsstand on Virginia Avenue (although, as he joked later, the profits tended to go up in smoke). In 1885 he went to work for the Shover & Dickson Ice Company. In those days large chunks of ice were cut from ponds and lakes, hauled to the city, and stored until the summer. Dithmer learned the trade by collecting bills, cutting ice, and serving as a handyman. Shover & Dickson built the first artificial ice plant in Indianapolis in 1889 in a small building on Wabash Street. The machine produced twenty-five to forty tons of ice per day, which sold at \$1.00 per hundredweight.

Dithmer organized a group of investors in October 1892 who purchased Shover & Dickson. He became manager of the new Polar Ice Company; William P. Jungclaus, cofounder of Jungclaus & Schumacher, an established general building contractor, became president. Between 1902 and 1903, after the depletion of Indiana's natural gas fields, the company began selling coal as well, refashioning itself the Polar Ice & Fuel Company, moving to 2000 Northwestern Avenue, and growing to be the largest ice dealer in Indiana and one of the largest coal dealers in the area. The company did not convert to gas-powered delivery trucks until around 1914 or 1915 and at one time owned

as many as 110 horses and mules. Two particular mules, Kate and Queen, became local celebrities. The two mules, used in advertisements for Polar Ice, pulled an old-fashioned carriage at the head of the parade that opened the baseball season every year. The city held a downtown parade in honor of the two mules upon their retirement in 1928, and when Queen died in 1938, the *Indianapolis Star* declared the mules “a sort of civic institution, symbol of an era in the development of Indianapolis.”

By 1929 Polar Ice & Fuel Company had a daily output of 325 tons of ice. The company introduced a method of purchase based on coupon books that became widespread throughout the country. Dithmer became president of Polar Ice in 1923. In addition, he was prominent in city affairs, heading the Better Business Bureau for five years, becoming president of the Indianapolis Utilities District when the city acquired the Citizens Gas Company, and serving as a local administrator for the National Recovery Administration in 1934. Henry Louis Dithmer, Jr., began working at Polar Ice & Fuel Company the year his father became president and, upon his father’s death in 1945, became general manager and executive vice president.

By the late 1940s Polar Ice operated six plants in Indianapolis and others throughout Indiana, from Fort Wayne and Muncie to New Albany and Greensburg. In addition, it operated numerous cash and carry stations throughout central Indiana and in Indianapolis three Picnic Basket stores, which sold snack foods, canned goods, and frozen foods. By the early 1960s Polar Ice & Fuel had production and distribution facilities in twenty-four cities in Indiana and employed 140 people. It was acquired by Kodiak, Incorporated, a Minnesota-based firm providing industrial and commercial ice throughout the upper Midwest, in 1963, and after 1964, it was renamed Polar Ice

Company. Although the company had expanded throughout the state, it gradually sold many of its outlets and focused on the sale of ice to restaurants, taverns, hotels, motels, and individuals for parties.

In 1988 Daniel Beil bought the firm. Beil began his career in the ice business after buying Redbud City Ice Company of Anderson in 1975. In 1996 Beil sold Polar Ice to his thirty-year-old son, Scott, in partnership with the Indianapolis-based equity buyout firm, Cardinal Ventures, who hold a majority stake in the ice company. A wave of consolidations in the ice business began in the mid-1990s, and Scott and his partners hoped to become one of the largest ice firms in the Midwest. In eighteen months the partners bought seven companies in Indiana and Kentucky. By the late 1990s the company was making 17 million bags of ice per year, with sales surpassing \$11 million. By the end of the decade the company expanded into Michigan and Ohio and had eight manufacturing facilities, seven distribution sites, and six regional offices. In 1998 the firm incorporated, and Scott rose to the post of chief executive officer.