

Take the Ice Road to the Island

When we visited Bayfield, Wisconsin some time ago, I remember reading about an adventure involving the winter ice on Lake Superior and the moving of a whole house. The plan was to wait until the ice was as thick as it could be, then use tow trucks to slowly skate the house on sled blades two miles across from the mainland to a nearby island. Several other houses were already on the island. It had been done before, apparently, and ice fishermen, cars, trucks, and those little ice houses had been going out on the ice for years with few consequences. But, as newspaper articles of the time explained (with photos), the ice gave way about a mile out from shore, and that pretty house and the tow trucks disappeared into the deep. Fortunately, all the workers escaped, but the house was swallowed up.

I was thinking about this event when I was asked to drive my car out onto the ice of Lake Minnetonka. I was following the vehicle of the guy who wanted me to tune the piano for a family member who lived on an island nearly a mile away. This was the first time I had tried that, and I felt a little nervous about it. Thousands of adventuresome souls drive on the ice every year, but this was my maiden voyage. The home was one of about a dozen that were safely standing on the island in splendid natural isolation. I gathered that boat travel was the most common mode of access to these houses, but during certain periods of winter, when the ice houses gathered out beyond the island's point, it was perfectly safe to drive cars there. In fact, this mode of transportation was quicker and more efficient in deep winter than motor boats were in summer. A winding track led across the lake, worn into the ice by frequent traffic. It must be safe, I figured.

We arrived without incident, but my heart rate had elevated. We parked by the boat launch/dock area and hiked in about 80 yards on a footpath that ascended through a forest of dramatic bare branches. I carried my tuning box with me, and soon, after a turn in the path, we came upon a picturesque house from about 1920. My recollection has painted a picture of gingerbread decorations around the front door. The widow in her late 60s, who lived there alone, came out to greet us with a smile; she was the man's aunt, and he was gifting her some much-needed piano care. By prearrangement, she had lunch on for us, with tasty hot-beef sandwiches and cocoa. This remarkably independent woman was a real naturalist, who, when drawn out, had some expansive ideas about environmental and scientific subjects that most people never hear about. I had noticed an animal pen as I came near the house, empty at the time. I asked her if she possibly kept goats during the warm months, and she launched into a colorful description of her three "darlings," who were spending the cold months at a boarding farm nearby. I mentioned that I had heard of a scientific experiment involving the use of goats to cultivate in their systems some sort of medicine that people could use to treat a rare malady of the blood stream. Or some internal organs, maybe? I don't remember. (Could it be a chemical that clarifies a person's memory? I could use that.) She laughed at that revelation, new to her, and commented happily that "finally modern science has found a way to put goats to use."

The piano itself was sadly neglected. It needed not only a tuning but some repair of the soundboard, which had developed some remarkable cracks in the annual dry winter season. (Wood stoves are terrible for piano soundboards, I've found). We hunted around the work area of her dearly departed husband (probably mostly untouched for ten years), looking for an electric drill, some drill bits, and some appropriately-sized screws. On old pianos, the separated ribs of the soundboard can be carefully pinned down to stop the buzzing sounds, helping the piano to resonate properly when played. We found everything I needed. The repairs yielded moderate success, and the piano sounded fairly normal once the tuning was done. I recommended that she put a big jar of water in the bottom of the piano, beside the pedal levers, to keep more humidity in the piano during the winter.

It was a sweet encounter for me. This bright woman and her cheerful nephew made my time there go easily. Interesting people really can make life more stimulating, and as I headed my car down the ice road back to shore (no need for a guide anymore) I thought about how rich and rewarding this kind of profession can be. Thank you, lucky stars!