

The Genessee Valley Canal

An address delivered before the Chautauqua County Historical Society at Mayville October 4-1941. by Herbert S. Sweetland.

From the dawn of history until the present day transportation has been one of the most serious problems that mankind has had to contend with. ~~Mankind~~ has always had need to travel from place to place.

The products of the farm and factory had to be delivered to the consumer so that the methods of transportation have been ever studied and frequently changed.

Every nation has had its own particular method of transportation.

The Arabs had their horses. The Beduins of the desert their camels.

The Hindus had their elephants and so on without number.

Every age has had its own particular method of transportation.

In the past one hundred and twenty five years we have changed in this country from the ox team traveling over the trails at two and a half miles an hour and the horse teams only a little faster to the autos filling our improved highways traveling at sixty to seventy five miles an hour and the air is filled with planes traveling at three or four hundred miles an hour.

One of the oldest forms of transportation the world has ever known has been that by water. One of the oldest historical books we have, the Bible, tells in numerous passages about the men going down to the sea in ships although the ships they mention bore but little resemblance to the ships of the present day.

Water transportation is the cheapest form the world has ever known for the natural waterways were placed where they are for mans use by the Creator . Where natural waterways have not existed where mankind wanted to go and sufficients need existed they have built artificial waterways or canals. Where or when the first canal was constructed history does not record but ruins have been found showing that the

Assyrians , Egyptians and Hindus built them at a very early date.

The first canal of which history fixes a definite date of construction was the Royal canal of Babylon built six hundred years before Christ⁵. The Grand canal of China, 650 miles long, was built in the 13th century A. D. . From that time on canals were constructed quite rapidly. Less than one hundred years ago Great Briton had 5300 miles of canals. Although many of the minor canals of this country have been abandoned owing to the competition of the rail roads and trucks yet in some countries where labor is the cheapest they are still largely used. More tons of freight are now transported over the canals of the world than ever ~~was~~ ^{before} yet it is done with the heaviest types of commodities and largely in such canals as the Panama, Suez, Sault St. Marie, Welland and Erie.

If one studies the early settlement of this country it will be seen that for many decades the settlements were all near the shores of the Atlantic. The interior was an unbroken wilderness ~~peopled by~~ ^{filled with} wild animals and birds ~~inhabited by~~ and the native Americans. There was no method of reaching the interior but by walking following the Indian trails. But these early settlers ^{were} an adventurous group. Before and after the Revolution many groups explored the Ohio valley and the future possibilities of that rich were seen at a glance. The only possible method known to connect the interior with the seaboard was to build a canal and the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Co. was organized with George Washington, himself a civil engineer, as president. Their plan was to make a canal of the Potomac river and from its head waters build a canal through the mountains to the Monongahela. Had this plan been fulfilled it would to some extent at least changed the geography of the country ^{for} as one of our very largest seaports would have been located at the mouth of the Potomac. The lack of money and the death of Washington caused their ambitious plane to be abandoned. The interior of the country had no outlet to the

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seaboard until the completion of the Erie canal in 1825 and this was the first great step in the development of the country.

Clintons ditch started New York City on the road the become one of the largest and greatest cities in the world and this state to become the Empire state.

Before the completion of the Erie canal it was seen that if it would reach and benefit all sections of the state it must have feeders so several connectins canals were built. The Black River canal connected the Erie at Rome with the Black River north of Boonville and thus with the entire north country. Its a very pictures^{que} drive up the improved highway which follows this old canal nearly all the way.

Most of the hewed stone locks are still intact and in good condition and many of the wood gates to the locks still hang idly on their rusty hinges. In my museum I have irons from some of these locks. Among the canals connecting the Erie with different sections were the Oswego connecting with the lake by the name? ; Northern canal Lake Champlain with the Erie at Troy;; The Chemung connecting with the Chemung river at Elmira; Delaware and Hudson and others.

None of these furnished the desired outlet to the much desired Ohio valley. Families desiring to settle there were traveling overland to Olean and loading their goods on rafts they floated down the Allegany . For a time they were able to travel on one of the two little steamers that were supposed to make regular trips between Pittsburg and Olean. In order to open up southwestern New York, northwestern Pennsylvania and the Ohio valley it was felt necessary to build a connecting link between the Erie Canal and the Allegany. One suggested route was to build south from Buffalo along the lake until arriving at Irving , make a canal of the Cattaraugus Creek to Lodi, now Gowanda, then over Dayton hill ~~connecting with the~~

striking the C^vnewango Creek at South Dayton making a canal of that stream and the Chadpquoin River, connecting with the Allegheny at Warren. This route was quite level much of the way and would require a minimum of locks but the obstacle that could not be overcome was the fact that but very little water was available at the high point over Dayton hill. The other route considered and which was finally adopted, was the Genesee valley route. When built it connected with the Erie Canal at Rochester, followed the river near the east bank, crossing the river at Portageville, then followed the west side of the river to Belfast, then over higher ground striking Oil Creek valley near Cuba and followed that creek to Olean. Scores of meetings were held all along this route, the first such meetings being held at Cuba and this meeting was presided over by General Chamberlain.

In 1827 Governor Clinton recommended to the legislature that an appropriation be made to cover cost of surveying this route. This was done, the survey was made, and the report estimated that the canal could be built for \$850,000.00. Nothing came of the matter as at that time it looked like a lot of money. The project was continually agitated and in 1834 another appropriation was made to pay for another survey and the report then estimated that a canal could be built for three and one half millions of dollars. As a matter of fact when completed it had cost over eight millions of dollars. Times have not changed so much for that is about the ratio that the Panama Canal and other similar great projects have over run their estimated costs.

An appropriation was finally made and work of construction was started in 1837. You must remember that this was before the day of labor saving machinery. The work was done by pick and shovel largely handled by brawny Irishmen fresh from the old sod, supplemented

⁵ by dump scrapers drawn by ox and horse teams. The canal was completed, *also w branch to Dansville* and boats running as far as Mounth Morris in 1840. Costs had far exceeded the estimates and the legislature refused to make a farther appropriation and work was at a stand still for a year or two and in fact the ~~re~~ were other and similar delays before it was completed. Legislatures did not spend money with such a lavish hand then as now. Contractors, sub contractors, bosses, foremen and engineers were housed with the common laborers in boarding houses built along the route. It is said that pay day was celebrated by plenty of fist fights. After many delays the canal was completed ^{and open to traffic} to ~~Oramel~~ *Causada* (the home of the Senecas for many years) in 1851 to Belfast in 1853 and to Olean in October 1856. There had been a great strife between Olean and Allegany, two miles west, as to which should be the canal terminal. Allegany even changed to Allegany City to attract attention. But Allegany was at a lower level and water would run from the canal ~~instead~~ into the river instead of from the river into the canal. The water supply for the canal was largely obtained from the Genesee river and the creeks and streams along the route. The difficult part is always to obtain a water supply for its highest level and the highest point in altitude ²⁰⁷² was the dividing line between the Genesee and the tributarys of the Allegany. There was what was known as the ten mile level without a lock and Cuba was at about the center. To obtain water for this level was the problem. The eastern part of Cattaraugus County is drained by Ischua Creek which rises near the north east corner flowing south emptying into the Allegany near Olean. Just ^{East} of Maplehurst one can now see where this Ischua creek ~~was~~ was diverted over the highway and into the high level. Two miles north of Cuba three or valleys ~~met~~ came together and there was an oportunity to obtain

a water supply. A dam sixty feet high was erected and an artificial lake resulted and on early maps it was named Cuba Reservoir. When built it was said to be the largest artificial body of water in the world being seven and half miles around. In size it is now dwarfed in size by the many power~~s~~ and irrigation dams built.

It was found that the canal entered the river at Olean at too low a level as the canal became a feeder to the river instead of the river to the canal. The legislature authorized an extension of the canal up the river six and one half miles to Millgrove which was completed in 1857. When construction reached Cuba in ^{the spring} 1851 it was found that the Erie was just completing their line and a great strife arose between the construction gangs of the rail road and the canal. After a pay day arguments arose ending in fist fights and a legend says that one man was buried in the dirt of the embankments without the benefit of an undertaker. Great celebrations were held all along the line of the canal upon its completion for the inhabitants thought they now had a connection with the outside world.

Horses and mules drew the boats and a brick building yet stands in Cuba which housed these horses and mules as they laid over there for the night. This building is now used as a sales room for motor boats which had not even been thought of at the time of the canal. Boats were owned and run by every one who thought they could make a dollar at it. There was no schedule of time of their arrival or departure but it took about a week to travel the hundred mile length of the canal. Now the auto and truck make the distance in two or three hours. The locks were built for boats drawing not more than three feet of water so their loads would be considered pretty small in the^s age. Loading wharfs and warehouses were built every two or miles the entire length of the canal.

3 The canal was one hundred fifteen miles long from Millgrove on the Allegany to Rochester. The summit level was 978 feet higher elevation than the Erie canal at Rochester and 86 feet higher than the Allegany at Olean. There were 97 locks north of the summit level at Cuba and nine south, at least that was the original plans but in the process of building the numbers were increased a few. Saw mills were erected along the line of the canal and the lands were cleared and the lumber, one of the most prominent items of freight carried was shipped both north and south. No salt at that time had been discovered west of Syracuse and it was one of the principal items carried westward even into the Ohio valley. Grain and other farm crops helped to make up the cargo. Many a family from the east loaded their household goods onto a boat, transferred to a raft on the Allegany and went down the river to found new homes in western Penn and the Ohio valley. There were smaller and lighter boats which were called packet boats, which carried mail, passengers, and lighter items of freight. After the closing of the canal a former boat owner wrote a booklet of his experiences on the canal. I have never been able to find but one of these books and have been unable to purchase that one. In it is a picture of one of these packet boats. On the front end sat a boy evidently urging the horses to take a gait a little faster than a walk. At the rear end stood the boat owner ready to use the rudder if necessary or to tie the boat up at a landing. Three lady passengers sat in straight back chairs of that period on the deck. and around them played two or three children. Their attire interested me. Large hats sat squarely on their heads. Dresses touched the deck so that not even a glimpse of their shoes could be seen. Sleeves were arm length and dresses buttoned closely at the throat. And ~~each of~~ to complete the picture each one of them carried a parasol to protect their faces from the summer sun. They had never heard

of the so called benefits derived from getting ones back tanned, burned and blistered from taking a sun bath. A few months ago a man died in Cuba some eighty five years old. He had been employed as clerk and Station agent by the Erie for sixty years or more and retired when past eighty. He often wrote items of history for the local ~~paper~~ paper. When he was a young man the canal was still in operation and he told me many interesting recollections. He said that in the winter the young people used the canal for skating and as there was no current the ice was always very smooth and glary. In the summer evenings the young men who owned a row boat ~~or~~ or could borrow one would take their best girl on a ride perhaps a mile up or down the canal and it did not cost a cent for there were no road houses to stop at. Quite a change from a tank full of gas, a hundred mile auto ride, a dinner and dance of the present. In order to get a proper perspective of the canal it is necessary to take a view of the ~~country~~ country it traversed when construction began one hundred and four years ago last spring. No telephone or telegraph lines had even been dreamed of. No rail roads or improved highways. Merely crude dirt roads, almost impassible some parts of the ~~year~~ year. The only connection with the outside world was an occasional stage coach. ~~Land~~ Only a small part of the land was cleared and lumbering was the principal industry. No wonder that a canal open six or seven months of a year was hailed as a wonderful step in the progress of civilization. For twenty five years it served its purpose.

If one wanders along this old canal over which boats of three foot draft traveled for twenty five years and see how narrow are the old stone locks one wonders how it could have been thought that it could carry the commerce of what is now an empire. But it must be remembered that it took much less to supply the needs of the people when this canal was in

operation than it does now.

When the ice thawed in the spring the boatmen moved their families into their boat and there they lived until the ice again closed the canal in the fall.

The women " kept house " , cooked and baked, washed and ironed, bore ~~babies~~ babies and raised them, and the men urged the lead mule to a faster gait constantly striving to get the boat through the next lock in the quickest time.

When the canal construction was started it was not supposed that it would ever have any competition but two years before it was completed the Erie R. R. was built and in operation from New York to Dunkirk.

Not only could the Rail Road get the freight through to the seaboard much quicker than by the canal but the rail road could run through the entire year while the canal was frozen in nearly six months of the year so that the rail road got the larger part of the business. For this reason the tolls on the canal ~~just about~~ hardly paid the operating expenses and the ever increasing expense of the repairs and upkeep had to be met by the legislature making an annual appropriation. These appropriations became harder to obtain as an increasing number thought that the day of the canal was past and in September of 1879 the canal was abandoned.

The canal was an important factor in the development of the country and deserves large notice in the written history of southwestern New York.

Two years after the canal was abandoned the right of way from Olean to Rochester was sold to a newly formed Genesee R. R. Co. for twelve thousand dollars, who built a road on the tow path of the canal. To obtain a better grade or a straighter line they deviated somewhat from the canal ~~in places~~ places. This rail road is now part of the Pennsylvania system.

16/ You might ask what has become of the canal. It is right where it always was. A few places where improved highways crossed it, it has been filled and graded but for the most part it can readily be seen, the old bed filling up with brush and other vegetation.

~~In 1940~~ Some of the stone locks are in practically perfect condition, while others have partially fallen in and some have been partially been removed to be used as foundation stones for some bridge or building.

In 1940 two or three markers, furnished by the state, were erected by the Rochester and kindred Historical Societies under the leadership of Arthur Parker, and it is understood that additional markers will erected later.

From an investment of eight million of dollars to a sale of twelve thousand dollars looks like a very heavy loss but it was no doubt a wise and proper investment to make, when an empire had to be opened up and established.

When the right of way was sold to the rail road company for twelve thousand dollars the only property they reserved was the Cuba Reservoir or Lake which ^{the state} ~~they~~ still own. They own a few rods of land all around the lake and they lease a small building lot at an annual rental, to those who will build a cottage. Every lot bordering on the lake has now been leased and there are nearly four hundred cottages on its borders. There are some very high cost cottages and all are creditable. The rental fees are high enough so that the operating cost is more than met by the receipts and it is said that it is the only state park in the state that pays operating expenses. It is under the management of the Allegany Park Commission.

No more will the blast of the boatmans horn which he blew

as he approached a lock echo among the hills of western New York but the story of its building and operation sounds like a romance.

There was much labor expended in the eighteen years of the building of this canal. In the twenty ~~ten~~^{five} years of its operation it played an important part in the development of a large section. No history of western New York would be complete without proper mention of its history.

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