

“LOW BRIDGE!” ON THE CHENANGO CANAL by Diane Van Slyke

“Low bridge! Everybody down! Low bridge, for we’re comin’ to a town!” That phrase is an excerpt from the famous song about the Erie Canal that applied to the Chenango Canal as well. The Chenango Canal, which opened in Oct. of 1836, was billed as the “best-built canal in the state!” It created a 97-mile waterway from Binghamton, NY in the southern tier, to a major port on the Erie Canal in Utica, NY. Numerous aqueducts and culverts, (and 116 locks), were built by hand from stone mined from either the Oriskany Falls or Norwich quarries. Over 200 bridges, built to allow the roads to span the water, had just enough clearance for the tops of the boats to pass under. The packet boats, proudly bearing names like**“The Madison of Solsville” (with Captain Bishop) or **“Fair Play” (with Captain Van Slyck), were manned by a minimum crew of 3: a driver, bowsman and steersman. The passengers were seated in chairs on the top deck. When the boat neared a town, the crew would sound “Low bridge!” and everybody would go to the lower deck to avoid being swept overboard by a bridge!

* Nuel Stever, at the age of 76 in 1927, spoke of his colorful memories living on a Chenango Canal packet boat: “When I was five, I began driving canal boat teams on the towpath pulling the boats. Such work was common to boys of that age. I can remember driving a team hour after hour up the towpath for 20 miles when I was five. When I was tired, I’d rest part of my weight on the towrope; it seemed to rest me. My father was at the helm. But when I became 10, I took my turn at the helm and a younger brother drove the teams. Whole families lived on the canal boats. I was the oldest of 21 children...

...We’d go to Oswego to load lumber for Bartlett’s Mill in Binghamton. Hamilton was the highest point and where the canal froze up first in the fall. Often in the fall as many as 82 boats loaded with lumber would be tied up. When the freeze was just beginning, Bartlett would bring up several teams, hitch them to a bunch of stumps and drag through the canal to break the ice so boats could get lumber to his mill.

Canalling was a varied business. For instance, we’d take a lot of firkins and get them filled along the way with butter for the merchants.

We’d boat grain up to the big stills at Hamilton, Pecksport, Bouckville and Solsville and bring back loads of whiskey which the merchants sold or shipped away. We only did the boating. Whiskey then sold for 25 cents a gallon.

It was a busy canal in those days. Three years before the canal closed -- about 55 years ago (from 1927) – 120 boats carried coal.”

**It is said that Phillip Armour, the beef millionaire, first worked as a mule driver on the Chenango Canal. Apple cider champagne and then cider vinegar were shipped from Mott’s, located at what is now the Bouckville Mill. The Chenango also transported 1000 Civil War Soldiers of the 114th Regiment, from Norwich to Utica in 10 packet boats. Each town they passed through met them with much fanfare and patriotic flag-waving. A painting of that moment is reflected in a watercolor hanging in the Chenango Museum in Norwich today.

Other classes of boats that frequented the Chenango canal were scows, lakers and bullheads (freight barges), which were the most common boats seen. The bullhead was so named because of its blunt and rounded bow. It was about 14 feet wide and 75 feet long and was sometimes loaded so full it dragged along the bottom of the canal! Each barge had two cabins; one at the bow to stable the animals who

pulled the boat (usually horses or mules), and one at the stern to serve as living quarters for the captain and crew.

Much competition kept the freight rates low. Before the canal, it took 9-13 days to ship goods by wagon from Binghamton to Albany for a cost of \$1.25 per 100 pounds. A canal boat made the trip in less than four days and cost \$.25 a 100 pounds. Records also show an example of a fare on a packet line that ran between Norwich and Binghamton. Fare was \$1.50 per person, departing at 6 am, arriving sometime between 6 – 8 pm!

Before the Chenango Canal was built, Madison County (and much of the southern tier) was still frontier land. People lived as pioneers lived, doing without much of the prosperity and goods enjoyed by the rest of the “Empire State”, (so-named because of the success of the Erie Canal in connecting east-to-west.) People clamored for a canal corridor so that they too could heat with coal shipped from Pennsylvania, and ship back goods made from Central New York! During the brutal winters, people used to close off many rooms in their houses and heated only with wood. After the Chenango, trade increased between New York City, Albany and the southern tier, allowing merchants to be able to stock more perishable items since shipping was more dependable and to offer heavier items for sale (like “ready-made” furniture and coal-burning stoves) since shipping was more affordable!

**All sorts of related businesses flourished including taverns, inns, boat repair centers and farmers who now had a method of transportation to sell milk to butter and cheese factories. Some mills, however, ceased production, such as Madison’s Solsville Mills whose water supply (Oriskany Creek) was diverted to the canal.

Beer flowed freely down the canal (sometimes literally!) since the increased transportation helped develop the hop industry in the Bouckville area. Many summer days were so hot that the casks of beer would pop their corks in the heat of the sun. They ended up solving that problem by transporting them in the cooler night.

**In the summer months, the canal was also used for swimming, boating and fishing. In the winter when the canal froze over, ice skating and even horse racing were favorite pastimes.

Times have changed and so has the Chenango. After it closed, the water became stagnate and many areas were filled in and used for streets. The only place left with moving water is an area between Woodman’s Pond, near the now extinct Pecksport and the aqueduct on Canal Road, just after Bouckville (interestingly, the “summit” of the whole canal system). Currently, the community in this area is working to establish a trail along the original towpath, collect the historical facts for public display and establish what is left of the Chenango Canal as a Madison County park. After all the rich history and colorful events that took place on the canal, we cherish the past and pledge to preserve it for the future.

- *From “Limestone Locks and Overgrowth” by Michele A. McFee
- **Excerpts from “The Chenango Canal”, published by the Limestone Ridge Historical Society.