

Sal Will Be There When You Walk Thru History! (Part I)

By Linda Morzillo, Liz Walsh and Terry McFarland

We've "got a mule and her name is Sal" and she will be the official mascot of the 2019 AVA Convention in Albany, New York! The Empire State Capital Volkssporters and the Niagara Frontier Volkssport Club wish to remind conventioners of an important chapter in the history of both New York State and the United States. That important chapter was the opening of the Erie Canal and fortunately for us, parts of it still exist today in written history, places to view and in song.

Thomas S. Allen wrote the song known by various names: "Low Bridge, Everybody Down," "Fifteen Years on the Erie Canal," "Fifteen Miles on the Erie Canal," "Erie Canal Song," and "Mule Named Sal," in 1905. That was eighty years after the canal opened and by that time much of the mule traffic had been replaced by steam power. Some of the song has been changed over the years (sixteen years - sixteen miles); nevertheless, the Erie Canal was truly instrumental in the acquisition of New York's nickname, "The Empire State."

Now a part of the New York State Canal System, the original Erie Canal was 363 miles long. It was the second longest canal in the world at that time (the Grand Canal in China was longer and still holds that distinction today). With the opening of the Erie Canal, the Hudson River, the important waterway between New York City and Albany, became connected to Lake Erie at Buffalo. Thus, the Great Lakes became part of one continuous waterway from the Midwest to the Atlantic Ocean. Before the canal opened, all transportation along this corridor required portages between waterways and the use of pack animals.

The canal was first proposed in the late 18th Century. It wasn't until 1807 that the idea was reintroduced; opponents called it "Clinton's Folly" and "Clinton's Ditch" after New York Governor DeWitt Clinton. Opponents finally relented and the legislature voted to spend the funds by 1817. On July 4, 1817, construction began on the ditch, the aqueducts and 35 numbered locks plus the last lock in Buffalo, known as the Federal Black Rock Lock. The route "from Albany to Buffalo," incorporated the Mohawk River and various other waterways in the region. When traveling from Albany to Buffalo, the elevation rises about 565 feet, necessitating a safe way for barges to gain and lose

elevation as needed. The aqueducts were needed to carry the canal and towpath over obstacles such as rivers, roads or ravines.

On October 26, 1825, opening day, Governor Clinton boarded the *Seneca Chief* in Buffalo for the historic trip to New York City. To communicate the event, many cannons within hearing distance of each other were placed along entire route. As Governor Clinton left Buffalo, the first cannon was fired, giving the signal for the next to fire. It took 81 minutes for the signal to reach New York City, the fastest communication ever at that time. When Governor Clinton arrived in New York City, a barrel of water from Lake Erie was dumped into the Atlantic Ocean.

The implications were that in those pre-railroad days, there now was a more cost-effective way to ship both goods and people between the Midwest and the Atlantic Ocean with its many ports. Settlers traveled west by canal into western New York, Ohio, Michigan, Illinois and Wisconsin while both farm goods and raw materials were transported east at a fraction of the previous cost. Some present-day cities such as Utica, Rome (“We’ll make Rome ‘bout six o’clock”), Syracuse, Rochester and Buffalo began as boomtowns for mule barges.

(Stay tuned!! Look for a description of our planned Erie Canal walks in the next issue of *The American Wanderer*!)

Meanwhile, there are dozens of books, articles and video recordings available to learn more about the Erie Canal. Besides your public library, a good source for titles for you to enjoy is:

eriecanal.org/books.html