

Genesee Valley Views

Save Genesee Valley Canal?

By GEORGE QUESTA

The old Genesee Valley Canal of more than a century ago continues to fascinate people.

To refresh your memory, the Canal was built in the middle and late 1800s to connect Rochester with Olean, ran 123 miles, took 20 years to construct, cost \$6,725,000, contained more than 100 locks, reached the Olean vicinity in 1856, stimulated Genesee River valley settlement — and was abandoned in 1878, when the speedier railroads were laid.

Thoughts about the Genesee Valley Canal were revived just last month, when the new Cuba Historical Society viewed slide pictures of the remains of the canal by Mr. and Mrs. J. Hayward Madden of Livonia, including construction in the Cuba-Black Creek areas.

Cuba comes into the picture, because Cuba Lake was originally impounded as a reservoir for the canal.

MOST recently, a former Oleander now living in California, who remembered family stories about the canal, visited a well-known part of the canal's route near Oakland in Livingston County.

He is Clifford F. Marshall, who worked for the former Socony Vaccum Oil company in Olean, and took up residence in San Diego, Calif., in the 1940s as a retired federal Civil Service employe.

Now in Olean on a vacation trip, he recalls that his great-aunt, Clara Crozier, had journeyed to the Southern Tier from New England, traveling at least part of the way by canal boat. His impression is that such stories spread the word that the canal was a kind of "gateway to Olean" and area.

ON A Sunday drive recently, Mr. Marshall saw the remains of Genesee Valley Canal locks below Oakland.

The column recalls that about four years ago, Dr. Frieda Gillette of Houghton College had given a talk on the canal before the Thelma Rogers Genealogical and Historical Society in Wellsville in which she pointed out that "quite well preserved" remains of the canal include locks at the Livingston County community of Oakland, near Nunda.

That's what Mr. Marshall saw, and he says the masonry of the locks appears still to be "in good repair," at least good enough so that the viewer can tell roughly what it was. A "deep cut" is also recognizable, he adds.

All of which leads him to ask, Why not preserve the Oakland locks, as a historical and tourist attraction project, incorporating them into an entranceway to Letchworth State Park?

DOCKS and warehouses for the canal boats, he says, also were located near Oakland.

Speaking of the canal and Cuba Lake, another area lake, although nowhere

near as large, had to do with the historic waterway — Rockville Lake, hidden away off Rt. 305, the Cuba-to-Belfast road.

One Rockville Laker says the watery gem actually was a "feeder" for the canal.

Another says the pathway to her dwelling at the lake is over what used to be lock number 89 of the old canal. "Old planking" and "stone walls" of which locks in that area were constructed — engineering marvels at the time — reportedly can still be seen in the Rockville area, but the column suspects you'd have to have someone along who knew what to look for and where to find it.

Getting back to Dr. Gillette's canal talk, she had reported that in a swampy area south of the old Pennsylvania Railroad depot on the outskirts of Belfast, there was said to be the remnants of an old canal boat sunk beneath the surface of the swamp. Adventurous lookers, who have an idea of what to look for and where, can find it by probing with sticks, the story goes.

THRIVING taverns and stores sprang up in almost every locking place along the way, and at least two have been remodeled as present-day residences near Houghton and Fillmore.

The Erie Canal, opening a watery thruway from New York City to Buffalo in 1825, provided the lead over its neighbors that made New York the Empire State; and, in the same way, the construction of the Genesee Valley Canal, and its busy if brief lifetime, literally boomed the economy of the Genesee Valley.

The bustling villages and settlements along the route, before its abandonment in 1878, testified to the commerce it stimulated. Many towns owned their very existence to the canal and its construction.

The canal, which aimed to channel the prosperity of the Hudson and Mohawk valleys, enriched by the Erie Canal, into the timber stands, rich farm lands and unsettled areas along the Genesee and Allegheny rivers, cut through the Allegheny County towns of Hume, Caneadea, Belfast, New Hudson and Cuba.

THE WATERS of the Genesee and the Allegheny were joined at Millgrove, near Portville, in 1861. River navigation past Olean and a 20-mile rail line were to have opened the coal and timber of Northwestern Pennsylvania to canal traffic, but the last links were never forged.

The last section of the route, which would have joined the system to the Allegheny River at Olean, was never completed. Only a few miles intervened, since the terminal of the canal was about in the present location of Bradner Stadium.

Oramel, in its day the queen of the canal towns, is a drowsy hamlet today. But the canal gave the spark of life to Fillmore, which now is the liveliest of the Northern Allegany villages. And Houghton, which has the distinction of being one of the few college towns in America where neither tobacco or alcoholics are sold, was in Genesee Valley Canal days called Jockey Street because of the horse races there.

A sparkling little lake in the hills that bears the name of the nearby village of Cuba is a child of the canal. It is a man-made lake, once known as the second largest artificial lake in the world. It was built to feed the Genesee Valley Canal when it was found that the lockage through the southern hills used a tremendous amount of water. The lake is still there, lined with Summer cottages and a popular resort for the neighborhood.

The Rapids, the area around the junction of Brooks and Plymouth Aves., is now a part of the 19th Ward of Rochester. In the heyday of the Valley Canal it was a rough place. There were many fights and a murder or two in its grog shops. At the Rapids lived Ben Streeter, the "Rochester Canal Bully," who once fought a one-hour, one-round battle in the Reynolds Arcade with the "Bully of Buffalo" and licked him.

But all that is folklore now and the Genesee Valley Canal is history. There remain the pretty like canal-born lake in the green hills, the "Deep Cut" that sweating men scooped out by hand, the dismal hole in the hillside at Portageville and here and there the sturdy old locks of stone, like those hidden under the brush at Dumpling Hill.

SECTION

Want Ads

Fraternal

ROCHESTER, N. Y., SUNDAY, JUNE 24, 1951

ESTABLISHED IN 1842.

NEW YORK
—AND—
GENESEE VALLEY CANAL LINE
LAKE BOATS.

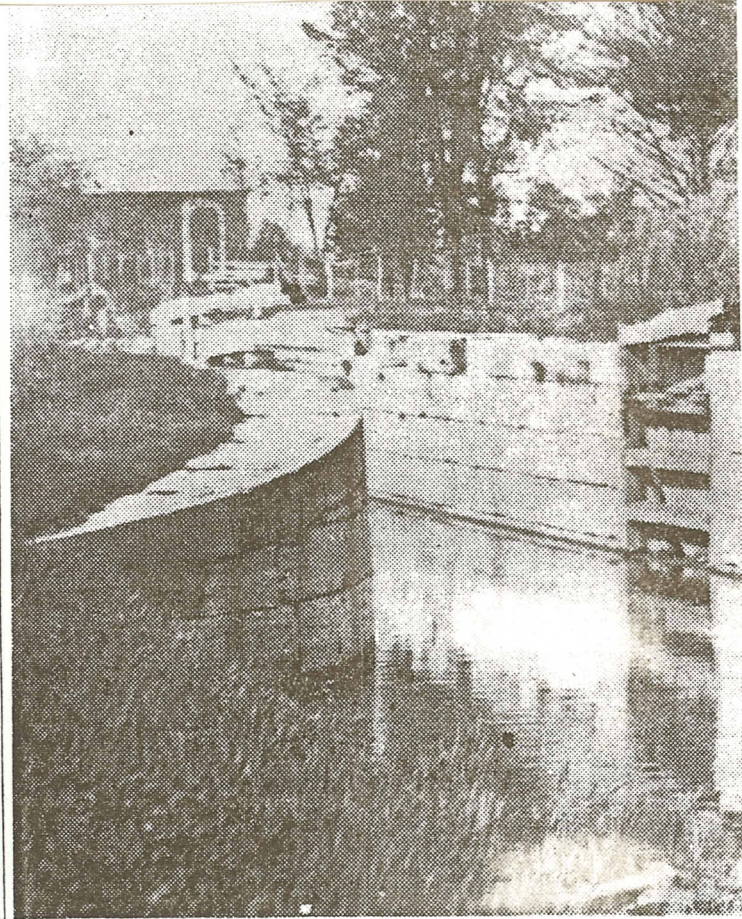
1860. CARGOES INSURED. 1860.

Merchandise, &c., forwarded daily from New York to Clyde, Lyons, Pahrara, Rochester, Scottsville, Canawanzus, Caylerville, Mount Morris, Dansville; also to Nunda, Portage, Belfast, Cuba, Olean, and intermediate places.

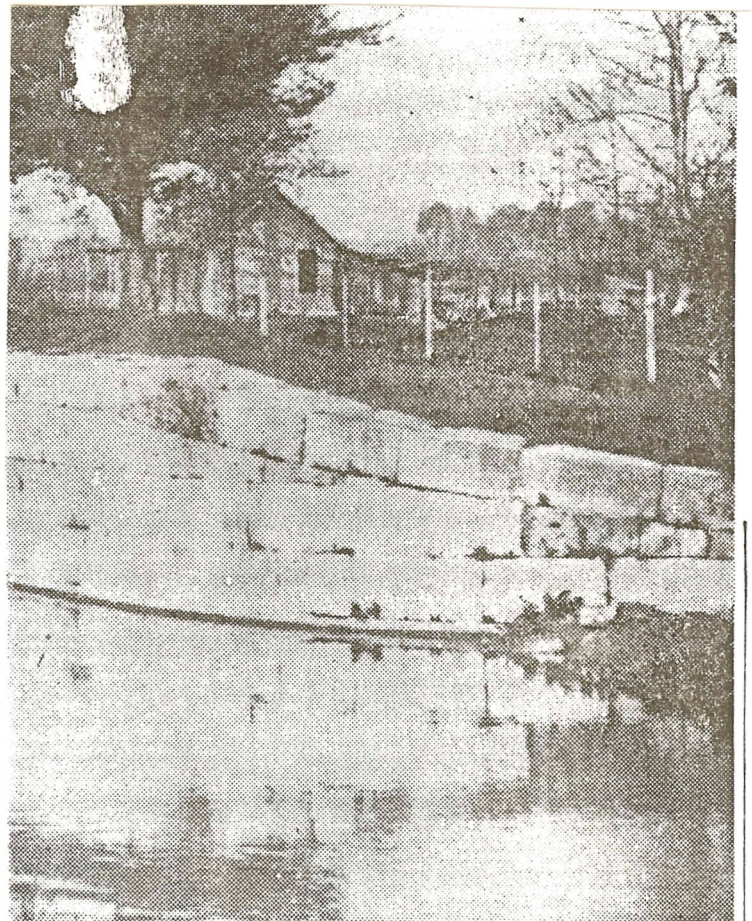
WITHOUT RE-SHIPPING.

M. F. JAMES, Agent, 105 Broad Street, New York.

CARGOES INSURED reads this 1860 advertising card of the New York and Genesee Valley Canal Line. This was lent by Mrs. Sally Patchin of Wayland. Canal finally was completed from Rochester to Olean in 1856, closed in 1878.



NOW JUST AN OLD DITCH — This picture, taken about 1900, shows lock of the abandoned Genesee Valley Canal near Dumpling Hill as it looked then, already out of use more than



20 years. This part of canal was completed by 1840. Picture was lent to Arch Merrill by Gerald Kindelin, 275 Norwood Ave., who as a boy lived in house overlooking lock.

5-30-92

History traces 'routes' of local waterway

Genesee Valley Canal had been designed to connect Rochester and New Orleans

(First in a four-part series)
By JENNIFER REISCH

□ The Times Herald

BELFAST — Competition from railroads, too little water, floods, delayed construction and even crabs contributed to the demise of the Genesee Valley Canal, which ran between Olean and Rochester in the late 19th century.

THE CANAL WAS originally intended to join Rochester and New Orleans via the Allegheny, Ohio and Mississippi rivers.

In fact, in its lifetime the canal gained access only to the upper portion of the Allegheny River which went to Couderdport and Port Allegany in Pennsylvania, not New Orleans, said Henry Baxter, director of the New York State Canal Society.

The canal was 106 miles long from Rochester to Olean, had 106 locks and a summit of 1,489 feet above sea level, the highest of any United States canal. An 11-mile branch with five locks extended to Dansville from Shakers and a seven-mile extension went to Millgrove to connect with the Allegheny River.

CONSTRUCTION BEGAN in 1837 and continued until 1842 when the Stop Work Law halted construction. Work resumed in 1847, but at a slow pace. Travel began on portions of the canal as they were completed.

The canal was completed in 1856, but always had major operational problems including

cesses and deficiencies of water and structural defects. The canal also had problems with creeks depositing sediment into it, which made the canal shallower. Instead of bottoming out the canal — that is, clearing out the canal to return it to its original dimensions — they would sometimes instead raise the water level until the canal nearly overflowed its banks. The canal also developed leaks because of animal life, including muskrats and crabs.

A feasibility study was done on an extension from Belfast to Wellsville. The cost was estimated at \$678,105. The proposal was rejected.

Lumber was main product shipped on the canal. Some iron ware, salt, and coal also traveled along the canal.

Genesee Valley Canal had revenues of \$860,165, and operating costs of \$2,814,809. Therefore the canal realized operating losses of \$1,954,644. Cost of construction had been \$6,737,431.

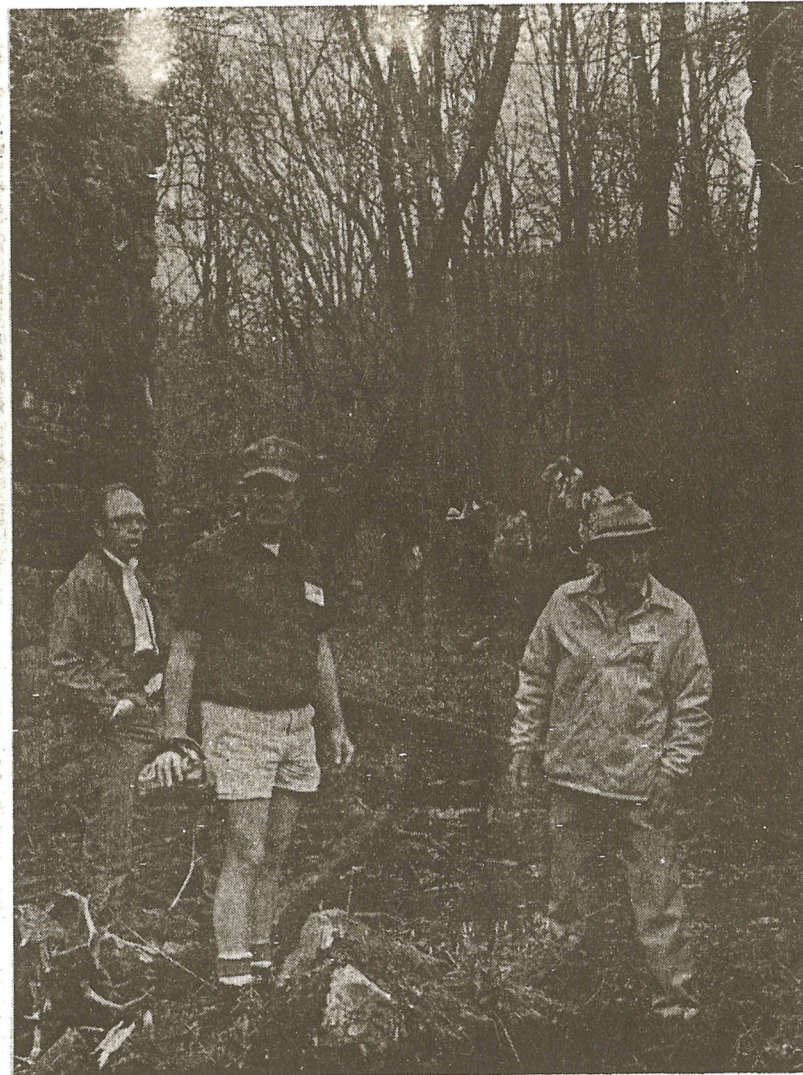
MR. BAXTER attributes failure of the canal to many different reasons:

■ The missed Mississippi connection.

■ Delay in construction. The canal should have been done in 1842, which would have allowed it to develop commercial ties.

■ Railroad competition. The New York and Erie Railroad ran between Olean and Cuba five years before the canal did.

■ Lack of water. Navigation was sometimes closed at sum-



Jennifer Reisch/Times Herald

A gate once stood between these two stone walls to let water into the Ischua Creek feeder of the Genesee Valley Canal. Craig Braack of Almond (left), plus an unidentified member of the New York State Canal Society, stand with Tom Grasso (right), president of the society.

and 60 days in 1863. Water was brought in from lakes as far as 20-30 miles away to get enough water at the summit.

damaged structures and washed out towpaths.

Next, how fossils are used to trace the route of the Genesee