

Recalling the Illinois-Michigan Canal
an Oral History

Arthur Gerding, Interviewee
Of Ottawa, Illinois

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Narrator's Name: ARTHUR GERDING
Tape Number: 1
Date of Interview: APRIL 11, 1976
Place of Interview: OTTAWA, ILLINOIS
Interviewer's Name: PAT GERDING
For: STARVED ROCK LIBRARY SYSTEM ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Q: . . .Arthur Gerding in his home on April 11, 1976. The interviewer is Pat Gerding. Mr. Gerding will give us his recollections of the origin and history of the Illinois-Michigan Canal. Can you tell me where the canal started?

A: It started at Lockport, and it's a continuation of the Sanitary and Ship Canal from Chicago.

Q: Okay.

A: The toll house in Ottawa -- all the tolls of all the canals -- the Columbus Street on the south bank of the canal. They had a dock there from LaSalle to Columbus Streets to which boats tied up and went in and paid their toll.

Q: Did they have bridges going across the canal south to north across the streets, LaSalle, Columbus. . .

A: They had bridges from Marseilles at Lock 10 and Lock 11, west of Ottawa about a mile and a half, they had a bridge over the canal about a mile east of Ottawa, what was known as the White Bridge. Then on Columbus Street they had a bridge, LaSalle Street had a bridge and Chestnut Street had a bridge, and there was a bridge at the limits of Ottawa west that they called the White Bridge. Then the Burlington Railroad had a bridge at Chestnut Street where the line crossed the canal.

Q: Tell me how these bridges worked.

A: The bridges were set on piers in the middle of the canal. Then on that pier there was a gear, I would judge from my remembrance of it that they were about six feet in diameter, and they had a shaft running

A: from the pinion of that gear up to the floor of the bridge and they had a plate that covered that shaft. That shaft, at the end, at the level of the bridge, was square. Then they had a long, they had an extension on that was about three feet long and it was hollow square at the bottom, and at the top there was a pole across it and it must have been ten feet long. They would set this in this where the plate was and then the man -- oh lots of times as kids we'd get on the pole and they'd unlock the end of the bridge and then they would keep going around and around till they got the bridge stationed east and west.

Q: Then the boats could go through?

A: The boats could pass.

Q: Then they'd swing it back. . .

A: They'd turn it back and there was a lock on that one end of the bridge that kept it from moving.

Q: Well tell us about -- did they just have one feeder canal leading. . .

A: Yes, there was a feeder canal from the Fox River and it run by what was known as the Lyman Mound and come down around north of Norris Drive and then about Canal Street it emptied into the canal.

Q: At Canal Street?

A: Yes. They had bridges across that, and the Rock Island had a double bridge across that. How they got it, I never myself ever was at the mouth of the feeder, to see how they really got the water from the Fox River into the feeder.

Q: That was fed from the Fox River into the feeder canal?

A: Yes, come from the Fox River into the feeder canal.

Q: The boats would come from the canal -- down the feeder canal?

A: No, the feeder canal was only to furnish water when they didn't get enough out of the Chicago -- and it only furnished enough water for west of us.

Q: Oh, that was to feed the water into the canal?

A: Into the canal, yes.

Q: What about the part that came down through town that brought the ships. . .

A: That was known as the lateral canal, but as most people knew it in them days was the sidecut. That come off on what is known as Canal Street. And they had a limestone wall on each side and there was a foot bridge over the top and the boats could go underneath it and go into Lock 10. Then it would be lowered into the sidecut, the sidecut level was lower than the canal, Illinois-Michigan Canal, so they had to lower the boat to get it into the sidecut. The sidecut run, what is now known as Woodward Parking Lot. Then it made a right angle turn, went east and went under LaSalle Street.

Q: Under LaSalle Street?

A: Under LaSalle Street. It was a wooden bridge, no railing, and went side of what now is the Fire Station.

Q: What was there at that time?

A: At that time there was a flour mill where the Fire Station now stands.

Q: And these boats would bring their products into town. . .

A: Into the canal, but they could not go any farther than LaSalle Street.

Q: Then how did they get back to the canal?

A: They -- well they would either turn the boat around. Most of them boats -- them were barges, they wasn't powered, they was drawn by horses. Either that or they were poled.

Q: Oh, they just turned their team of horses to the other. . .

A: To the other end and pull them. . .

Q: Pull them right back out again.

A: On the sidecut there was a bridge at Lafayette Street, Jefferson Street, Madison Street and Main Street. And the Q, it's the Burlington, had a railroad bridge crossing it at Jackson Street. And at the Lock there was a high foot bridge the the locktender could go from one side of the lock to the other to open the gates.

Q: Then Washington Street did not have a. . .

A: Washington Street or Superior Street did not have a wagon bridge.

Q: So you just couldn't cross at that point?

A: Yes. Along the sidecut, the lateral canal, Gay's Carriage Factory had their wood stored and would get the wood by barge, unload it into their lot. Then at the end of it, Sanders Brothers built, on the canal and they had some lumber brought by barge. Then on the, at the south end of it, on the south side was a starch factory. That was west of LaSalle Street on the south side. After the lateral canal passed LaSalle Street they had gates on the south side of it and they'd open them gates and the light company had a plant there and they would furnish electricity for the streetcar system and city lights. Yes, they had the whole outfit. The flour mill had a gate that they could turn their waterwheel for the grinding of the flour. The canal then emptied at the east end at Columbus Street, it emptied into the Fox River, where the Boat Club now is. East of LaSalle Street the canal narrowed down to I would judge about twenty feet wide.

Q: This is what's now Lincoln Place?

A: Yes, this is what is now Lincoln Place. Then it run right side of the building that now is the Fire Station and it run east there and there was gates to run the water for the flour mill and also gate to run two generators in the power company that furnished lights, for the streetcars, and the city. And it went east from there and narrowed down more till it got to the east end of it and there was two gates in the end of this, in the end of it. And there was spillways on each side for about 50 feet and when the water would be too much, get too high, it would overflow into these spillways. And if they wanted to drain the canal they would be able to keep Lock 10 closed and the gates at the American Hardware, they closed them, opened the two gates at the end of the canal, let it run into the Fox River.

Q: How did they get -- did they have a bridge across the Fox River then like they do today?

A: Where it is today?

Q: Yes.

A: Yes.

Q: They had one at that time?

A: Oh, there was one on Main Street always.

Q: Always one at Main Street?

A: Always one on Main Street.

Q: But nothing across the Illinois Canal -- or the Illinois River?

A: No.

Q: They used a ferry?

A: Well no, there was always a bridge across the Illinois River at LaSalle Street. There was two -- there was a wooden bridge built there at LaSalle Street and then they tore that down around 1908 or 1909 and put in a steel

A: bridge across there. Then they took that down when they put Hillard Bridge in.

Q: And that'w when they used the ferry?

A: When they tore the wooden one down and put up the steel one up, they used the ferry. PAUSE . . .known as Twin Bluffs Road, at the County Farm. It's a road across the canal belonged to the Twin Bluff Factory and west of the bridge, going across there about three or four hundred feet was _____, they had a spillway and it emptied into what we knew as County House Creek. It emptied in there across the road, the County House Road, and emptied into the Illinois River. In the days of _____ my Dad -- they lived along the wide waters on the north side and west of Moriarity Hill -- they used to take their wagon and they used to go to the County House Creek and they would get a box, single box, grain box, full of fish out of that creek and they could get them winter or summer. . .

Q: Anytime?

A: Anytime. They had all kinds of fish, even to eels.

Q: They'd sell them or eat them?

A: No, they would give them away and eat them and sell them. The canal run west through Ottawa beyond what is now Boyce Drive, or was Bridge Street, where the bridge crossed it, and run west to Lock 11. And right at Lock 11, before it entered the Lock, there was a waste gate on the north bank of the canal. Now that waste gate was continually left open a certain amount to keep the level of the canal west of it, between Eleven and Twelve, and Lock 12 was at Twin Bluffs. They would always keep the level of the canal, or if they wanted to drain the canal they would open the gate on the County House Creek and open the other waste gates but

A: never open the lock gates, the drainage was all through the waste gates.

Q: Then did this go into what is known as the wide waters?

A: Just west at Moriarity Hill there was a bridge across there and west of there I would say, well across from Buffalo Rock, there was a wide waters and the wide waters was built so that they could take the barges down there and turn them around.

Q: I didn't know that!

A: The canal itself was about 60 to 80 feet wide and the south half of it was the channel, which I would say had about five foot of water. The north half of it, would have maybe two or three feet of water.

Q: So it never was very deep?

A: No. It was deep enough -- when I was a kid -- swim in there _____ at White Locks, why it was over my head.

Q: I had visions of it being twenty foot deep or something?

A: Oh no.

Q: It wasn't?

A: Well you could see when you corssed LaSalle Street, there on over west it _____, well half the water was about that much lower than the top of the bank. The aquedect going across the Fox River was originally built of wood and in later years it leaked so much that they tore it out and put steel ducts in there. It goes from the east bank of the Fox River to the west bank, beyond the west bank of the Fox River, and there was a bridge built aside of it at the same height as the top of it for the horses that were used when they were pulling the barges to walk along. And what was known as -- along the south bank -- was known always as the towpath.

A: That's where the horses walked when they were pulling the barges. Now the aqueduct -- on the west end -- there is a roadway underneath it, it's wide enough, it extends over this roadway and in the bottom of it is doors, and they can be opened to drain the canal. I've seen it leak on the west end where the ice in the wintertime would cover the roadway. PAUSE

Down Superior Street. . .

Q: On Superior Street -- they had a wagon bridge?

A: They had a wagon bridge on Superior Street which run on part of the -- it was lower, practically road level, some above, and it crossed the Fox River. It was built partly on the piers of the aqueduct. In the wintertime they had an ice house east of the Burlington tracks on the south bank of the canal. They cut ice in the canal, stored it in this ice house, and it was around 1900 that that ice house burnt. So they went down to the end of Sycamore Street and they put up three houses and they cut ice all the way from the White Bridge west of town to the aqueduct, according to the thickness of the ice. If the ice was thick they wouldn't have to go beyond Chestnut Street east, but if the ice wasn't too thick then they would cut east of Chestnut Street to the aqueduct. And a lot of times the ice, where they had cut and taken out the ice, the ice would freeze again and freeze to a depth that made it profitable for them to cut that and store it.

Q: What did they do about transportation in the winter, coming down the canal, what did they do in winter?

A: There was no transportation in the wintertime.

Q: None in the winter? How did they get supplies into -- for these different. . .

A: The railroad.

Q: The railroads brought it in then?

A: We always had two railroads.

Q: This was just another means of transportation to cover it?

A: Yes.

END OF SIDE ONE

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