

Illinois-Mississippi Canal
an Oral History

John Hedrich, Interviewee
Of Tiskilwa, Illinois

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Narrator's Name: JOHN H. HEDRICH
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Interviewer's Name: RAY CARRINGTON
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Q: The interview here is going to be on the Illinois-Mississippi Canal better known as the Hennepin Canal. John, what's some of the views for like how did it help Tiskilwa when it was built?

A: Well, it brought a lot of people in here to do the work and it made a market for a lot of feed for their horses, for their men, it gave a lot of work to a local fellow, farm boy would take his father's team and work on the canal. So it made quite a thing for Tiskilwa. They still talk about, or not still, but years ago they still talked about when the canal went through. It was a big deal for Tiskilwa. It really was. You want to know a little bit about how it started out?

Q: How it was built, yes.

A: They talked about it for a long time, the politicians, back and forth and along in 1893 there was a Depression and that seemed to spark it, that made public work, to get the canal going. The War Department built it and they built it with the excuse that they had a treaty with Canada and they couldn't keep gunboats on the Great Lakes and so they built this canal with the excuse that they could move them from the Mississippi River quickly over to Lake Michigan in case of war with Canada. Now as I remember, that was the excuse, maybe that's just a joke maybe, but you can take it for what it's good for. But the Corps of Engineers built it. They did a fine job. I had a friend who was going to the University of Illinois Engineering School years afterwards and it was still used as an example of a fine engineering job. In some ways they experimented with things, because they tried different locks, they tried -- well there's

A: a bridge up there, a hoist bridge across one of the locks, it's just made for the farmer to go across that lock and then he raises it for other traffic. I see it was dedicated to some particular major who had designed it. So that was in the forefront, it was a rather glamorous sort of a project, and people talked about it years afterwards. Of course the idea is that you build a canal, it's a step, it's a series of water steps up over an obstacle and back down. In this case, you've got these pools and they go from the high point down to each river. Now to get the water into this high point they brought the feeder canal down from Rock Falls or Sterling, in that area, and they bring this water down here, they dump it in the canal, part of it goes east to the Illinois River and part of it goes west to the Mississippi. So that's the layout and main idea of the canal. One of the men that was here was a Major Long and he was one of the top engineers. He lived here in town and they had the office, as far as I know in a certain place, it wouldn't make any difference really, but they had this house and they had quite a lot of government officers, or clerks you know, to pay and keep track of everything, and engineers office, so there was a bustle and hustle in Tiskilwa. Then you had work camps, they were tents and you see you had to shelter the horses -- everything was done practically with horses and men. So a contractor would have this work camp, and I suppose camps for the men to live too that were from away. This contractor, he'd take one part of the canal and contract that, and work on that, he wasn't worried about the rest of it. So a lot of the canal -- it was all built at -- tried to build it fairly much at one time. I think it started in 1893 and I think 1897 -- you can see some of the dates on the structures, the bridges and aqueducts. But I'm just not accurate exactly on those dates, but pretty close. So they, as I say, they had these different camps

A: and they were rough and tough naturally, there were roustabouts, fellows came in and they were rough and quite active. See you did this with teams, all except a little bit of steam work. These teams, you hitch them on to a shovel-like, it would be a great large shovel, and you dragged that into this dirt until it was filled up and then you scooted it along until you came to where you wanted to drop it and then you dropped it, it turned over and rested on skids and you came around again. So you were making a continual circle to take this dirt from where you wanted, from where you wanted to move it to, to where you dropped it. It was hot, hard on horses, they worked hard there. Men did, I think now I'm not sure, but seems to me they got \$2.50 a day for a man and a team of horses. Now that I could be wrong because when you think back those things seem fabulous. The concrete work, they didn't know about pouring concrete like we pour it, sloppy, they mixed it up thick and they tamped it, they got right down there and tamped it with steel tampers. They had to make a tremendous strong forms so that your tamping didn't force them out, and they did, they were real thick and they didn't put reinforcement in that concrete, they didn't know about that. Still their work stands, it looks perfectly straight and they did a fine kind of a job, but terribly slow compared to the way that we would mix concrete and handle it. They did have steam engines, and I think they used them some on concrete mixers. Their concrete mixer was a tube that was set at an angle and then rolled over, they didn't know about baffles, and then some of it was mixed on boards, just by men with shovels, just turned it back and forth and mixing it. They had a narrow gauge railroad, sometimes you see as you walk along it -- little railroad ties there, spikes, and they were in that

A: little narrow aguge railroad and that was run by steam. As I said before, some of the dates you can see them on the structures as you go under a bridge, it will maybe say Portland 1895 or such. Then they built some real large structures, aqueducts. See where the canal came to the creek you had to take the canal over the creek and they did it at Lock 12, they did it down I think at Lock 4 or 5. Well, what you built was a large concrete trough to carry that canal over and they were some size and they were put on pilings and until 12 washed out it was in good shape. So it showed there that they did do good engineering and they did good work. As I said the activities in communities was in a business way and socially, and everything else, it was quite a thing for Tiskilwa. I don't know exactly the year they put the water in finally, but right away it was not a commercial success. They though there would be elevators along the canal, that it would just open up the country. But it didn't do it. By the time they got it built it was too small. The boats were bigger than the canal was, they couldn't make any speed. I could never understand it but a boatman told me if you go down this canal and you almost fill from one edge to the other, there's no way for the water to get around you and behind you, you're pushing water instead of cutting through it. That was one of the things about it -- you can find out the total number of locks, I don't know. The canal was I think supposed to be six feet and I think they generally kept six feet of water in it. Now the locktenders homes -- all the buildings were built well for their time. Even when I was a boy a locktender's house was better than average in Taikilwa. They were built modern and the very latest for their time. And the overseers had better houses, of course. Of course, what I always remember was as a kid they wouldn't let us fish

A: in the locks. Fisherman had all kinds of tricks to try to fish in the locks. It wasn't that you'd catch more fish, but they didn't want fisherman in there dropping cans and things because that would jam their lock. Then a couple of times to show you there was fish in it, they seined the canal, they got tremendous large carp and other fish out of that, out of the canal. They, now the locktender was -- had a pretty nice job, he had a good home, got his coal at cost, and they made their own ice out of the canal. Of course that was another use I'd forgot, that people along -- along the canal they had ice houses and they made ice and sold it to people in the village during the summer. But your locktender he had about six days of work and he had to cover for the other locktender when his day was off. You perhaps know about how a lock works -- the way they do. Of course, later, I mean in my time, they had telephone, I don't know if they did at first -- why they'd call the locktender and say I've got a boat here and it's coming up and they'd call each one -- then he'd open up the lock and he'd be all ready for them. They kept that in good condition. The War Department inspected it, they had the money to do it, they kept it in good condition. Of course then, after they finally just abandoned it in a sense and they turned it over to the state. Of course, now there's other people can tell you more details because there's Mr. Sapp up here at Wyanet who was about the last foreman on that canal and most everybody in town could tell you about what I told you. Is there anything I can add that you'd like to know?

Q: Do you think the canal will take and make a national monument out of it?

A: I just don't know how that would be. Now of course it's a state park for recreation. Maybe sometime.

Q: How did they get those concrete aqueducts over the creek?

A: Oh, well I suppose they dammed up the creek and put it to one side and then built their big piers to hold their concrete see, and their forms and everything. Then put the water through that and then worked the other side. I think that -- because they're long, no flood could ever have plugged them I don't think. So that way they could work half of it and then change the water back that way, I think. Is there anything -- does that explain it?

Q: What did the farmers think about when they decided to build the canal?

A: I think they were happy about it, because as I say, they put the boy on the -- give him a team and -- I talked to a lot of fellows here that lived here afterward that worked on the canal, made work for them. And roustabouts around town, young fellows, they -- I'm sure they're all gone now, but I talked to a lot of fellows that worked on the canal with a team or without one. They apparently like to work for the canalmen.

Q: How come when they built the canal they didn't make it any wider than what it was, or any deeper?

A: Well at that time you see they thought it was all right, but the time they got it built it was outdated. Yes, you're right, they should have, it just happened that it was one of the mistakes they made. I don't know if they ever talked about building it bigger because you see then you'd have to built every lock bigger because that would limit your size of boat and it just -- well everybody said well it was just a mistake and that's all there was to it. Of course people fished in it, used it for boating and pleasure boats went up and down it, and swim in it and as I say made ice in it, so it did have that much use. Is there anything

A: else that I. . .

Q: What was the size of the gunboats that went through it, were they smaller than what they normally would be here in the time that it was built?

A: I suppose that those locks were big enough for those size gunboats that could operate on a river, I mean that was probably one of the times see, it was probably would handle that gunboats because I don't think that the armament was very big on the inland seas and rivers. Just a kind of a formality, I think.

Q: Why did the War Department decide to build the canal north of Tiskilwa here?

A: Oh, you mean why. Well now they had surveyed those routes for a long time, in fact it seemed to me that I heard that there was three different, not entire routes, but where they would go a little bit different, and evidently they based that on this being the most practical and economical after all the other choices. There was other variances, but they weren't finally decided on.

Q: How many locktenders was it for the canal? One for every lock or. . .

A: Yes, I'm sure there was that because there was some of them right close together, and each one of them had a locktender, yes. They didn't -- because up here there's just three of them as far as I know and so there was as many -- and I don't know how many locks there are. I mean I have just forgotten.

Q: Where does the canal start, does it start on the north side of Wyanet over there or does it go all the way to the Mississippi River?

A: Yes, it goes all the way to the Mississippi River. In fact I think it uses part of the Rock River over there as it's canal. I'm not just

A: sure, I've never been farther over into there, but yes it runs from Bureau down here to south of Rock Island where it goes into the river, along toward Milan or someplace in there, yes.

PAUSE

Q: Well, a boy when he was thirteen years old went fishing over there he had a pretty good idea of -- and we went to school with locktenders there -- was made quite a little bit of extra people here in Tiskilwa when you figure your locktenders and their children and the overseers and then we had a fellow down here named Jack Walton, he used to run the barge that had the steam crane on it. They had a barge with a steam crane on it. So -- of course he wouldn't be working here all the time because it wouldn't be worth all that, they. . . Up at Wyanet was the office, the local. There's where the bookkeeper kept the books on the canal and there was, there still is a big warehouse up there. Evidently where they kept their supplies of timber and bolts and all those kinds of things. And this side of Wyanet there was what they called the post house. They made concrete posts for the fence along the canal and they made tall concrete posts for the telephone line there. So they employed quite a few men to do that kind of work.

Q: Did the Depression have a lot to do with the canal when it was being built?

A: You mean the 1893 Depression?

Q: Yes.

A: Well, I think it kind of kicked it off. They want to spend a little money, you see. Whenever economics droop like that then the government tries to do some work, put some men to work, put some money in men's

A: pockets. And I think that's what the 1893 Depression kind of pushed this canal into being a little more.

Q: When was it, was it ever dedicated?

A: Oh yes.

Q: Who dedicated it?

A: Well, that I can't tell you, but one of the first official boats through it of course was a War Department boat, see. Somebody knew that, there was a man in Hennepin and the poor fellow got killed, he was particularly interested in the canal, he knew all of that, he gathered it all, he talked it, it was his hobby. He was -- I saw him just once. Now he had everything like that.

Q: How long was the canal in use after they did have it built and after it was dedicated?

A: Oh, I don't believe it was probably officially shut for transportation, I mean so that you couldn't go through it, I wonder maybe 1950 or something like that, but I just can't tell you.

Q: Was all barges and boats pulled by a team of horses on it?

A: On no, no, no, they went with their own power. They weren't pulled by -- like your old time canal. Yes, they had either steam, I've seen steam boats go through there and then later on of course there was your motor boats, some of it was pleasure boats and things. But I'm sure that it wasn't closed until after the World War for transportation as far as I remember. You forget sometimes.

Q: Did, when the canal was built did it bring in quite a bit of business and merchandise for the sellers here in Tiskilwa to sell?

A: Oh yes, while they were constructing it, yes. Then as soon as it opened why then it only, as I say, left the resident workmen. There

A: was patrol men too that walked the canal, to watch it for leaks and work like that, yes.

Q: Was there ever a leak developed in the canal?

A: Oh, it's been washed out several times, Bureau Creek would tear into it and maybe a muskrat would get a hole started and it would wash out. But that was what the patrol man was supposed to do, you know.

Q: When, like the floods here before they built the dams above the town here, would flood have any effect on the canal?

A: Not on the canal, Bureau Creek was the one took the toll of the canal, this wouldn't be big enough to do that.

Q: Was there ever major accidents on it, like people drwoning by hitting one of the locks and capsizing their boat or. . .

A: No big ones, but many people have been drowned in the canal. They have, they've fallen into it, they've tried to swim it and didn't have the strength to do it. There have been, but that's just individuals, there was no real catastrophe where any amount of people because I don't suppose there were ever any more than four or five people in the pleasure boats, maybe a few more and your commercial boats they didn't have very big crews on them. PAUSE . . .with pleasure watch them go through here. In the fall there was an old couple and they owned this steam boat and they lived on it and they had a barge and they took grain from Rock Island to Pekin and went back and forth, back and forth. That was big enough for them, they were old folks, they were happy with it. I remember enjoying just seeing those people -- looked to me as though they lived an ideal life, a leisurely -- going from one lock to the other -- back and forth in the canal. And outside that I don't remember too many commercial barges going through there.

Q: What did it cost the boats to go through the canal? Was there any price on it?

A: I don't believe there was a bit, I think it was toll free. I think so, now I wouldn't say.

Q: When people went in and sawed trees down did they -- like now how it's filled full of trees and that from flooding and that, was there any problem like that when it was open?

A: They'd clean right up, yes, they -- the Army, you know how they'd be in the War Department, oh yes, everything was kept up right. Somebody was down there and something was done.

Q: You think they will ever replace the aqueduct up here at 12?

A: No, you see they have taken the water and run it under Bureau Creek and then dumped it into it the other side, and so there won't be any, the piers are gone and there's a roadway across there, but as I say the water is not taken down under the creek and dumped into the canal over the other side.

Q: How come then if they've done it like that, how come there's no water down here on this end?

A: That is a question that would be like -- we'd like to have answered too. I mean, because the canal is nice down here and if we had some water we'd be most thankful for it. But why it isn't, I don't know, there are some gaps down below here, still to be fixed. Would be fine if they did fix them and have some water down there.

Q: So the government and that -- they've put all the money for building the canal, nobody else like, no private funds were. . .

A: No, I don't know. I'm sure it was strictly a War Department deal.

Q: Did they ever have to use it in a hurry for getting their gunboats back and forth?

A: No, no they never -- I'm sure they never had any crisis that they had to use it for that.

Q: How long would it take them, like if a barge left down here at Bureau and wanted to go to Rock Island, how long would it take them?

A: It would be rather slow, you have a lot of locks to go through, and it takes you awhile, although that water boils into those locks real fast, really. It -- so many of those locks it would take you quite awhile.

The canal's always been -- or years back they pastured it, they let out each year -- they rent the side of the lock or side of the canal so far, so long, and people rented that year after year, and by pasturing that it kept it down nice and kept the weeds out of it and was just fine. But of course now since that why it makes a lot different appearance because it begin to grow up in brush now.

Q: Was there any locks at the time, was there any locks that were bad, that they couldn't use? That they had to repair on them in a hurry?

A: Do you mean in normal times?

Q: Yes.

A: Oh yes, we'd see them, they'd have them tore down, they had special carpenters, oh I don't know I assume they did, to handle big timbers and everything, and they'd get a crew down there and they'd drain that lock and they'd be right after it.

Q: Then that would hold up traffic on that then?

A: Yes, yes it would until they got it fixed up. That would do that.

Your overseers had good jobs, they were considered well paid, I mean well for this community.

Q: What did the overseer do?

A: Oh, well you see he'd be the boss, in other words the overseer would go down to the locktender and, "Well, Bill, how you coming? What do you need?" and so on, look the place over and see if there were any complaints. In other words he was a foreman over all those men, construction men and he'd have the responsibility, he'd be the fellow who would have to make the decisions and generally run a gang, I mean when there was jobs to do, why, "Get Pete and Bill ," and so on, "you help me," that would be his gang.

Q: Did they have to keep hiring people, did people quit when it was being built or. . .

A: Oh, I imagine that when they built it there was a turnover, I just imagine so. When it was operated why they had civil service jobs and they kept -- of course they did just hire day labor to help them out on these gangs.

Q: Whose idea was it to build the canal, the government or some other. . .

A: I believe some citizens and probably talked it up with politicians and probably was used for that purpose and promoted and that's the way projects are generally done and that's probably what they did. There was bridge planks to put in, structures to keep painted, there was a lot of maintainence to do to keep it right up in good shape.

Q: Who put the bridges in across it?

A: Contractors of some kind, yes, I mean at the time it was built. Then in my time I can remember them sandblasting them and painting them, I suppose that was done by contract too. I mean, they kept the houses painted, they did, they kept it up good shape. Of course when no more boats went through then did in my time. PAUSE . . .his main job was just being there, he had to be there all the time.

Q: Did boats pass through there at night too?

A: As far as I know they'd go through at night.

Q: How would they bring stuff to the town, would they come on barge, or did they haul them out on some other kind of transportation?

A: You mean commodities?

Q: Yes.

A: As far as I know it was never used that way. I mean, along here I don't know of any landing docks or any provision to -- it just wasn't used. You had the railroad here, it was active, you got good service on it and the canal didn't compete with the railroad.

Q: So the railroad more than likely ran the canal out of business?

A: Yes, it was more efficient, faster and better service. To fix up your loading docks -- and of course in the wintertime there you are, you're froze up, see. So I don't think they really competed, the canal never had a chance against the railroad.

Q: When, like you said during the wintertime, did they just close the canal or just keep trying to break the ice?

A: Yes, they just closed it when it got too heavy. I don't think they ever thought of having ice breakers, I don't think so. The locktender kept the ice away from crushing the lock and that was about all he could do. I never heard about them ever breaking the ice in there. . . .had enough traffic you just kept it open.

Q: Was there just like one company using the canal or were there all different kinds of company boats using it?

A: I imagine there were a good many companies, but by the time that I knew the canal there wasn't much commercial use at all. I mean you just be there day after day before you see a boat go through. When we were

A: fishing why we were always tickled to see one go through. It seemed like it stirred up the fish and then we'd go up to the lock and watch them lock through, and look at the people and look at the boat. It was enough unusual that we liked it.

Q: The road was built out of town here, was it a factor to the canal? How did they get the road over the canal or did the road just run beside the canal?

A: No, it went over, you know there's two bridges up here, one the other side of Beam's and this one. The one on this side was the original bridge and you went up there and over the bridge and went to Princeton. There's a lot of bridges on that canal.

Q: This concludes the interview with John Hedrich about the Illinois-Mississippi Canal. This is Ray Carrington signing off.

END OF TAPE

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