

Illinois-Mississippi Canal: its construction
an Oral History

Dorothy Ill, Interviewee
Of Wyanet, Illinois

Interview Date: June 27, 1975

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Narrator's Name: DOROTHY ILL
Tape Number: 1
Date of Interview: JUNE 27, 1975
Place of Interview: WYANET, ILLINOIS
Interviewer's Name: MERLE ROUTH
For: STARVED ROCK LIBRARY SYSTEM ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Q: My name is Merle Routh and I'm visiting this June 27, 1975 with Dorothy Ill who lives at Waynet, Illinois. Dorothy, I wanted to visit with you today about and talk about the Illinois-Mississippi Canal because I know you have such a vast history and memory of its construction and all about it, having been married to what was he?

A: A locktender.

Q: A locktender. But I'd like to know a little bit about you. Dorothy, I'd like to know when you were born, and where, and what your parents' names was, and then you just tell me what you want to about the canal in your life.

A: Well I was--my name was Dorothy Worstall Ill. I was born in Bureau, Illinois on March 6, 1899. My mother's name was Louella Thursten Worstall and my father's name was Heston Worstall. Seems like the canal has always been a part of my life for I lived while it was being constructed, I lived just two doors from Lock 2, when I was just a young shipper-snapper.

Q: Now is that at Bureau?

A: Yes, that's at Bureau, south of Bureau. Ofcourse Lock 1 was about a mile east, I would call it east although I get my directions a little bit mixed up, and the man who tended lock at Lock 1 lived in a houseboat. There never was a house constructed there.

Q: Okay, you tell us what--about the canal.

A: Well as Richard Millhouse Nixon would say, I'd like to make this perfectly clear--most of this information, dates, and figures were obtained from the records kept at the U. S. Government Office at Lock 19, and assumed to be authentic. However, if sometime in the future,

A: discrepancies do occur as to dates and so forth, we may recall some of the history we studied in school, then in later years were disputed. So I will take some consolation in that thought. As you know, the Illinois-Mississippi Canal, commonly known as the old Hennepin Canal, was constructed for the purpose of providing cheaper and quicker transportation for shipping grain, steel, and coal, by connecting the Illinois River at Bureau, Illinois with the Mississippi River at Rock Island. The idea of such a waterway was first conceived as early as 1866. After several years of planning and surveying the project was approved by the Secretary of War in 1891. And the actual work started in 1892.

Q: I remember hearing that on the television the other night.

A: Yes, I got just in on the tail end of that. It is referred to as the old Hennepin Canal due to the fact that surveying started at the lowest point on the Illinois River near Hennepin. This point was called the Great Bend. Now it is said that in 1871 a man with great enthusiasm for this project walked from Bureau Junction to Rock Falls to observe the lay of the land. There was several routes considered before the final route was adopted. One route would have gone through Walnut, which was then known as Brewersville. The route finally chosen ran near the towns of Bureau, Tiskilwa, Waynet, Shiffield, Mineral, Annawan, Atkinson, Geneseo, Green River, Colona, and Milan, with its feeder at the Rock River. Now every available house in these towns were occuppied with the workers on the canal, and business was sure booming in these small towns.

Q: And that goes back to what, 18. . .

A: That was in 1871 when the work was beginning.

Q: When it was started?

A: No, not in 1871, 1892.

Q: Oh yes.

A: Now the entire length of this canal was 104 miles, with 34 locks, with a 196 foot raise from Lock 1 near Bureau to Lock 21, west of Waynet. It's width is 80 feet at the water's surface and 52 feet at the bottom, seven foot deep and the locks were 170 feet long and 35 feet wide and about fifteen feet deep. The government had purchased the right-of-way from farmers and after the canal was finished then the right-of-way fenced, the remainder of the land was given back to the landowners. There was 39 dwelling houses erected for the locktenders and overseers. Now the house at Lock 19, south of Waynet, was built at the cost of \$1,680.70. . .

Q: What do you suppose it would cost now?

A: . . . which was quite a sum for those days.

Q: It would cost a lot because those houses were nice.

A: Yes, oh yes, they were built, they were really built. The office building that stood at Lock 19 cost \$637.24.

Q: Now is that the lock right south of Waynet?

A: Yes, that's just right down here south of Waynet. An appropriation of \$468,808 was to be the entire cost of this right-of-way. But due to the rising cost of land and additional expenses for heavier railroad bridges, another \$500,000 was appropriated in 1904. The entire canal was built with horse drawn equipment and man power, providing employment for scores of men whose wages were \$2.00 a day or \$2.50 with a team. This sounds like I'm reading it.

Q: You can't hardly believe that can you?

A: No, you just can't.

Q: Two dollars a day.

A: Two dollars a day.

Q: It wouldn't buy your dinner today.

A: I understand that many of these horses were kept in what years ago had been the old match factory, south, in the south edge of Waynet. I think that would be down there where Alice Edmonds, in that neighborhood somewhere. It used to be, there was an old match factory. That was used to house those horses. The canal was opened for business in the summer of 1907. The first government boat to be locked through was the "Marion."

Q: I remember them saying 1907 on the television program.

A: That was such an important event that schools were closed in many townships so the children might witness the historical event. Many children had the privilege of riding from one lock to another and what a thrill that was. I had the privilege of riding from Lock 2 to Lock 3, which was about possibly three quarters of a mile, (laughter) I'd say. But it was a thrill. Commercial ice house was built too on the west bank, north of the hard road bridge, west of Wyanet, which furnished ice for the townspeople who was fortunate enough to possess the old zinc lined wooded ice box, with a drip pan underneath. And you better watch the drip pan. And they would often run out of ice before the old ice man had gotten around to replenish the ice. When the ice got to between twelve or eighteen inches thick a crew of men were, workers were ~~employed~~ employed to mark and saw this ice into blocks which was then packed in sawdust. There was also ice houses every few miles for the canal employees use.

Q: Did you remember, Dorothy, who operated that?

A: I think Hanson, the first I remembered. And I can't recall his first name. And then I believe later John Alters. . .

Q: I have memories. . .

A: . . .I think.

Q: I have memories of all that.

A: But I think it was Hanson, but I just can't recall his first name. I think he had one in Princeton, too.

Q: Yes, I remember where it was at.

A: The chief engineer during this construction of the canal was Charles M. Waters who resided in Waynet and was under Major Wheeler. Now Charles Waters was a son-in-law of Mrs. Frisbee that used to run the fruit market in Waynet. Now the lift bridge at Lock 21, about a mile west of Waynet, was erected by the Pittsburgh Steel Company, and constructed so as to be raised by weights and a winch to allow taller boats to enter the lock. Many times causing farmers a delay in getting loads of grain or hay across, when the bridge would be lifted.

Q: Is that the bridge out on Route 6?

A: Yes, right out west of town, Lock 21. I understand there's only three such bridges left in the whole United States.

Q: Is that so?

A: From what I understand, yes. The canal had it's own ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ telephone system, each locktender informed the next as to the type and size of boat to be locked through. Due to the length of time required in constructing the canal, it was obsolete before it was finished, as barges were being built larger to carry more grain and coal and steel. Many beautiful small cruisers traveled this route also. The old Hennepin Canal has always been a popular fishing place of sportsmen

A: and many in the area will remember the many pleasant hours swimming and canoeing and so forth.

Q: I remember that out at the dry dock.

A: Yes, out at the dry dock or they used to come from Princeton.

_____ Hudson used to bring his panel truck just loaded with people to come out to swim, you know. And it was quite a place. The dry dock was where they pulled boats out of the water to repair, but they had a . . .

Q: Now that was out west of Wyanet?

A: That was west of Wyanet. We used to call it the old boat yard, but it was the dry dock. In July of 1951 the canal was by the Corps of Engineers, it was closed to commercial navigation. And Senator Evertt Dirksen of Illinois was an active--had an active part in laying the groundwork to turn the canal over to the state, which was accomplished in 1961 [1958] through the Omnibus River and Harbor Act. The state agreed to accept the canal for recreational purposes providing the Federal Government would allow between eight and ten million dollars in rehabilitation. But the state and the government did come to terms in, I think, 1968, and in 1970 workers started to restore the right-of-way. Today it affords many beautiful parkways for camping and fishing.

Q: And there's lots of plans for more construction in the future, isn't there?

A: Yes.

Q: I think we've neglected to say anything about your being married to a . . .

A: Well I was married to a locktender in--we were married in 1920. And we moved to Waynet in 1923, we moved to Lock 21.

Q: And that was Clarence Ill?

A: Where my husband was locktender. Yes, that was Clarence Ill.

So as I say the old canal's been really a part of my life for a good many years, until he retired in 1951.

Q: Dorothy, this has been--you've told me a lot of things I didn't know, a lot of it I did, I still remember a lot about the ice house and so on and so forth. And it's been so interesting to visit with you, this morning.

A: There's been an awful lot of large fish, I remember Charlie Turner caught a 42 pound catfish at one time.

Q: Really!

A: It was just something out of this world.

Q: You didn't say anything about the aqueduct and I think that's an interesting thing.

A: Oh, the aqueduct, yes, between Lock 18 and Lock 19.

Q: That's where the canal overflows into the Bureau Creek?

A: That's right. A lot of kids remember that, used to go swimming in and wading and fishing.

Q: I did, I did. A lot of kids fell off it.

A: Yes, that's right.

Q: And swimming was a lot of fun but we did lose quite a few people by death.

A: The canal has claimed quite a few dead. You remember Russell Higman?

Q: Yes.

A: He was drowned, I believe, in 1918, right down here by the Q Bridge [Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad]. That would have been between Lock 18 and Lock 19. And there's a lot of sad memories too.

Q: Well we hope it's going to be--make a nice recreational place in

Q: the future and I'm sure that it will. Thank you so much. . .

A: It holds many memories for some of the people in this vicinity and who are now delighted that it's being restored and beautified so that it can be put to some use.

Q: Thank you. . .

A: And I might mention too that several years ago they used to baptize the--I believe it was, was it the _____ Baptist Church--used to bring their. . .

Q: I don't remember the church, but I remember the baptisms.

A: . . .used to come to the dry dock when the Rev. Lothrell was there. And they used to about once a month, they'd have a baptism up there.

Q: Thank you so much, Dorothy.

A: Okay, you're welcome. I hope I. . .

Q: You. . .

A: . . .helped in some little way.

Q: I'm sure you have.

END OF SIDE ONE

END OF TAPE

INTERVIEWER'S NOTES AND WORD LIST

Instructions to the Interviewer:

To assist the transcriptionist, please identify:

1. Passages which may be difficult to understand because of outside noise, other people in the room, problems with the tape recorder, etc.
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Please list words or phrases which might be difficult to understand, all proper names, and unfamiliar terms. If there is more than one tape, note where the second and succeeding ones begin.

TAPE NO. 1 Dorothy ILL - Canal

Aqueduct is ^{errors} between Lock 17 + 18
not 18 + 19

Lift bridge is not on RR 6
it is at Lock 21

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