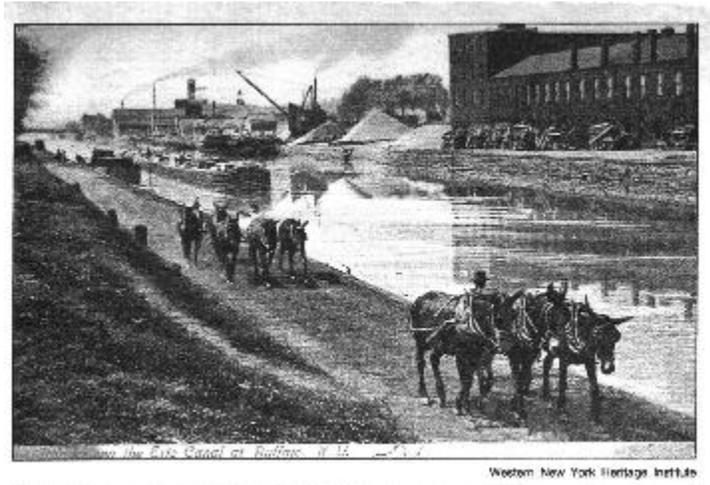


## The Erie Barge Canal

Early growth of the Town of Tonawanda was largely due to the construction of the Erie Canal, completed in 1825. Gaily painted "packet" boats brought migratory hosts from Albany, the Mohawk Valley and Europe. They afforded a pleasant journey to travelers who whiled away their time atop deck by day, and slept in comfortable cabins at night. In this way, people from "down state" brought news, money, fashions, and political deals for the men. The Holland Land Purchase was soon subdivided, towns sprang up, forests were cleared, and curling smoke from log cabins made an ideal frontier life.



The photo above, a Litho-chrome postcard published in the early 1900s by the Buffalo News Company, features a scene along the Erie Canal looking north.

View more [Erie Barge Canal Photos](#).

Many villages grew in areas near the canal to serve farmers. Farms developed as commercial producers after the canal lowered the costs of receiving supplies and sending goods to market. The Old Erie Canal was busy with 200-ton freight barges laboriously drawn by mule team. It was abandoned when the State of New York approved the Barge Canal, designed for steam tug drawn barges of 100-ton capacity.

### Early Residents

(This is the 22nd in a series of articles dealing with the early residents of the Town of Tonawanda. Material for the articles was gathered from the historical society and town historian John W. Percy's book, "Tonawanda, the Way it Was.")

Tonawanda Creek was the only natural waterway used for any distance on the old Erie Canal.

However, when the canal was enlarged in 1918, three shortcuts had to be made along its course to eliminate bends that were too sharp for canal boats to negotiate. Each of the cuts formed an island in the canal, one of which is still part of Ellicott Creek Park today. Two others can still be seen farther toward Pendleton. A towpath for the mules and horses used to pull the canal boats was built along the south side of the Tonawanda Creek portion of the canal.

Both Buffalo and Black Rock had been vying with each other desperately for designation as the western terminus of the Erie Canal. Both villages had constructed harbors for ships sailing the upper Great Lakes and used every political maneuver to secure the favored position as terminus.

Eventually, the commissioners decided to favor Buffalo, yet Black Rock's harbor also was provided with access to the canal. Both Buffalo and Black Rock citizens worked at constructing their portions of the waterway. The connecting link from the Tonawanda Creek portion to Black Rock was designed to roughly parallel the Niagara River and to maintain the one inch per mile gradient toward Lockport. A guard lock was built at Black Rock to protect the canal when winds pushed the water level up at the western end of Lake Erie.

Boats normally passed directly through this lock unless a storm had raised the lake level. Another similar guard lock was built two miles beyond Pendleton to protect the step locks at Lockport and the upper long level to Rochester from flood water of Tonawanda Creek during the spring runoff. It also enabled the canal to be drained from that point eastward each winter for maintenance work on the locks and canal banks.

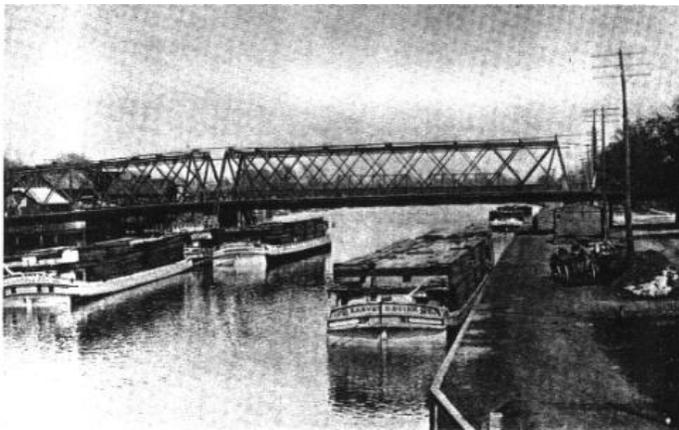
When the canal from Tonawanda to Black Rock was constructed in 1824, workers were brought in from the east. Irish immigrants had been hired in large number, anxious for the high wages offered in a nation short of labor. Eighty cents a day and regular whiskey rations kept the men at their task until the canal was completed.

Individual contractors agreed to dig the separate portions of the canal and they did the actual hiring of men to do the work. For a contracted price for his section of the canal, the contractor was expected to pay his labor, provide quarters to sleep up to 40 men, feed them, provide daily rations of whiskey and supply the necessary horses, scrapers, shovels, wheelbarrows, stump-pullers, and other equipment necessary to build that portion of the canal.

The 80 cents a day wage was nearly double the wage paid to unskilled labor in America at that time. Due to difficult times in Europe, most immigrants and native Americans worked long hours, as much as 14 hours a day in the long days of June and July, and even the scant comfort of a hard board bunk probably felt good at night.

The two-tiered bunks had no mattresses; if a worker wanted bedding, he brought his own. There was no glass or screening in the windows and along the swampy Niagara flats the mosquitoes and other insects were attracted to the bunkhouses in swarms. Hearty meals kept the men stoked for work during the day.

## Photos



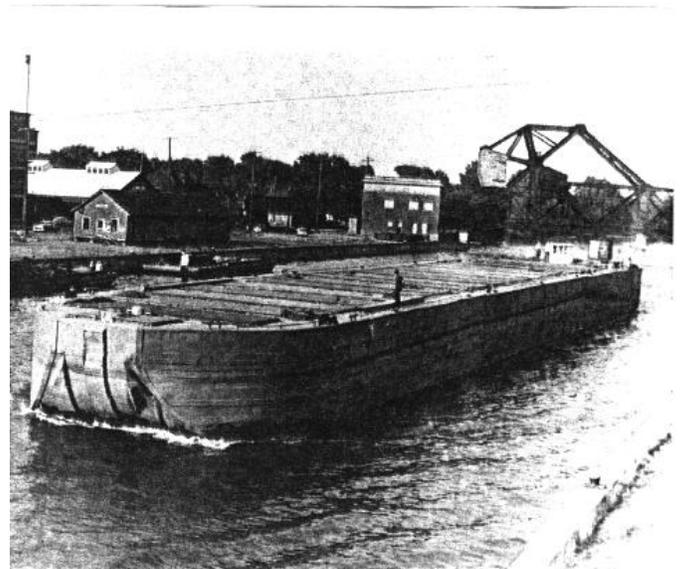
Loaded lumber boats, May 12, 1905, Tonawanda, New York, ready to start down the canal, then scheduled to open in a few days. Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society



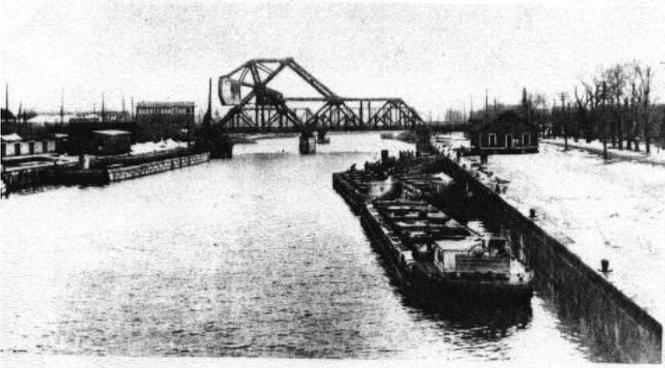
Tonawanda Canal Terminal. Barge Canal craft delayed due to heavy ice floes in Niagara River. Shown here: Three steel canal boats, two wooden steamers, one wooden tug, and several stavebowed wooden barges used in the early years. Photo circa May, 1926



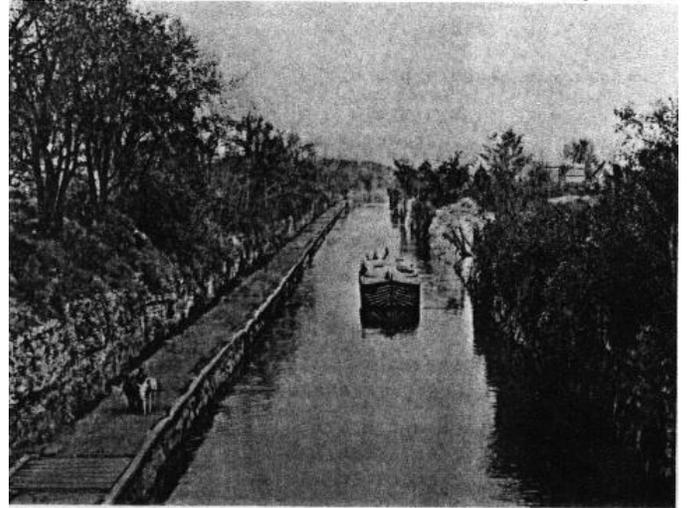
Construction of the Bascule Bridge over the Barge Canal at Tonawanda, 1920



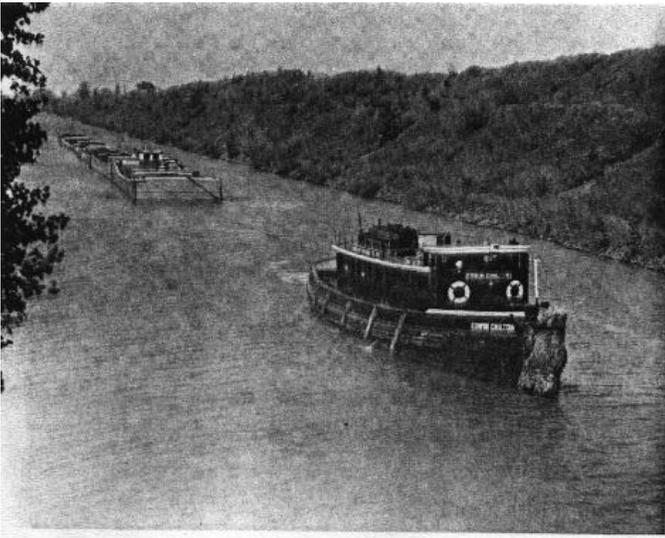
A steel three-section, bolted-together, self-propelled empty grain barge passing thru the Tonawandas. Two of them owned by the Cagill Grain Co. were once in use on the Barge Canal. Courtesy of Historical Society of the Tonawandas



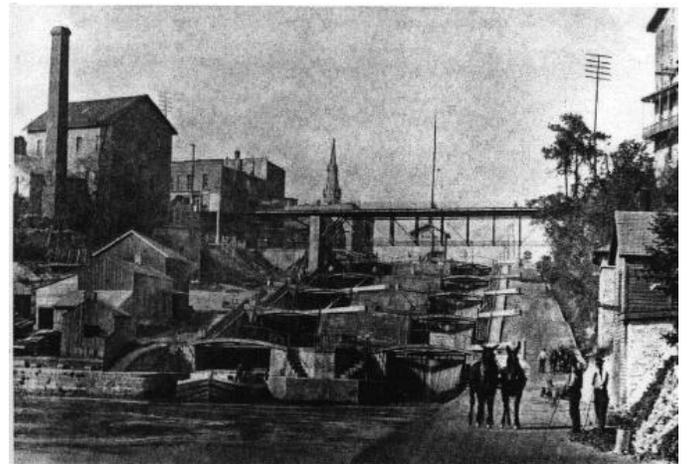
A steel steam towboat and three steel barges designed to fill a Barge Canal lock. The boats were built as a WWI emergency fleet. Due to a railroad car shortage they were instead used to haul grain to eastern seaboard for Europe. Buffalo & Erie Cty H.S.



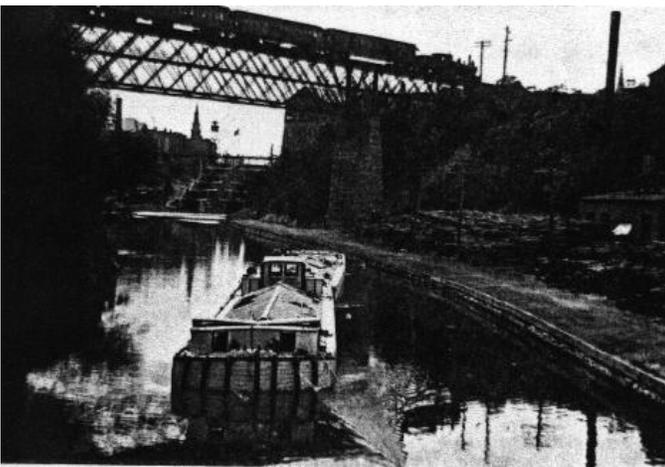
A single canal boat and team moving westward through the Lockport rock cut. The planks on the towpath just ahead of the team on the left cover an animal escape hole.



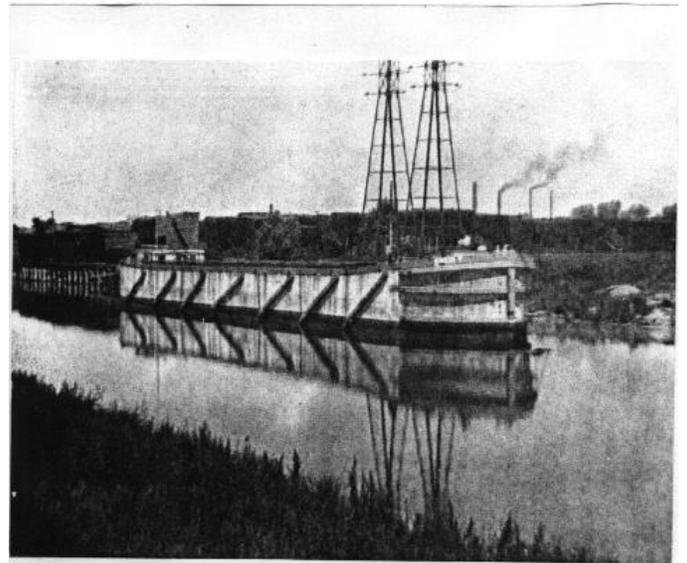
A diesel tug and a row of loaded barges head for Buffalo. This section of the Barge Canal is the deep land cut between Pendleton and the rock cut above Lockport. Photo circa 1940



Canal boat being swelled out of lower downbound lock at Lockport, N.Y. Photo circa 1890s



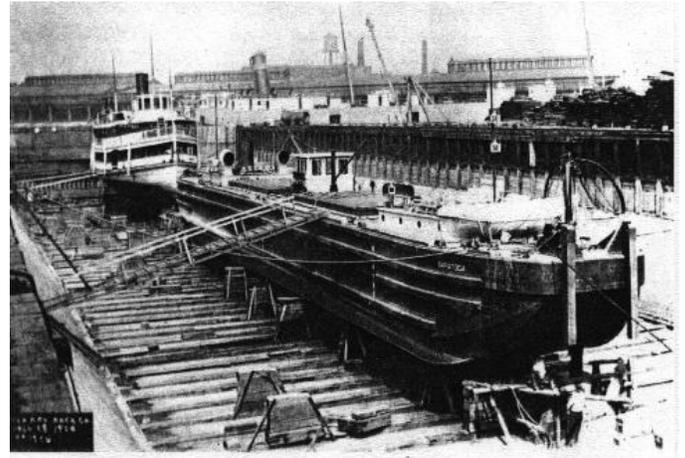
A pair of eastbound grain boats leaving Lockport, N.Y. The sectional wheelhouse must be taken down when the boats pass thru the empty canal. Photo circa early 1900s



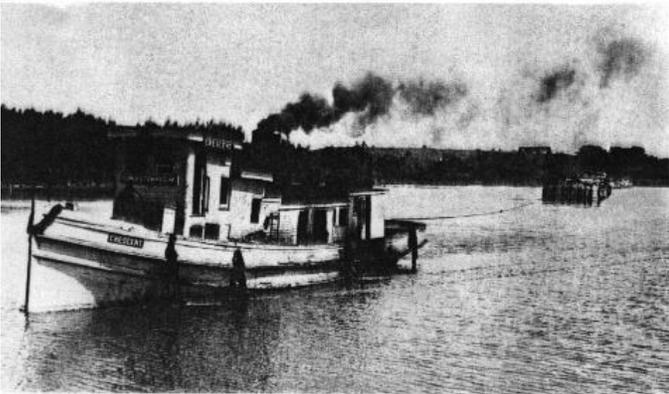
New concrete barge U.S. 107 tied up at Ellicott Creek Boatyard, Tonawanda, NY, midsummer 1919. Scaffold hanging from port bow indicates the boat was there for repairs.



Looking north from Ferry Street bridge, Buffalo, NY. The wall or land strip to left separating Black Rock Harbor from the canal was removed in 1905 to make room for the Barge Canal. Photo circa 1890s. Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society



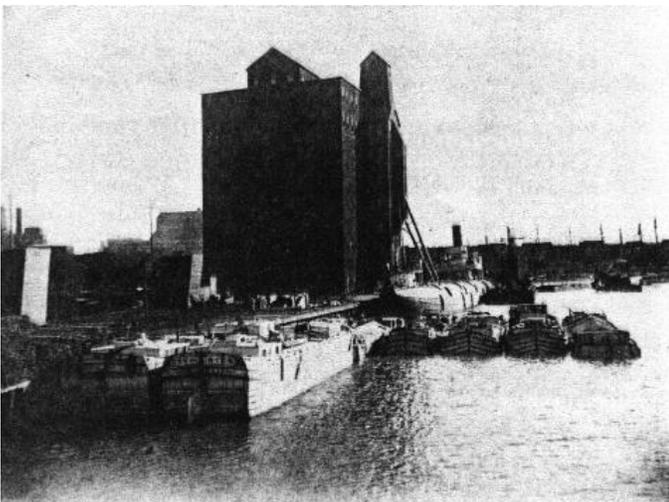
The Buffalo Drydock, July 1920, was a graving dock that filled with water by gravity and was emptied by large electric pumps. Shown are the steamer Saratoga, and the excursion steamer Ossian Bedell. Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society



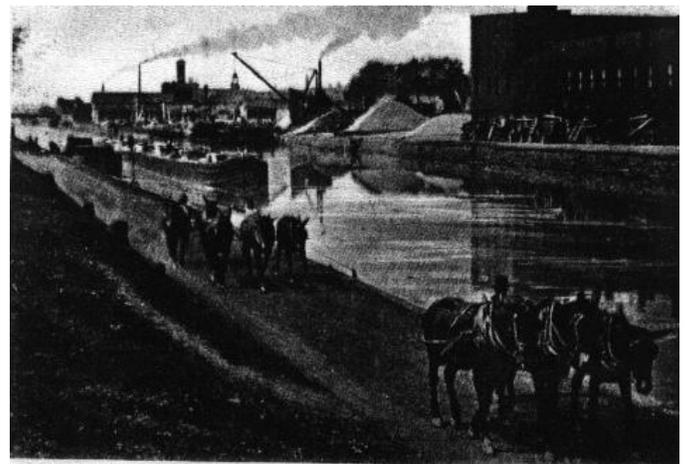
The tug Crescent with a loaded Barge Canal tow on a long hawser. This tug and the Lotta L. Cowles were former Lake Erie fish tugs, converted to Barge Canal towboats by the Cowles Towing Co. Photo circa 1920s. Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society



A pair of loaded Erie Canal boats passing the Erie County Penitentiary between Pennsylvania and Hudson Streets, Buffalo, NY. Photo circa early 1900s. Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society



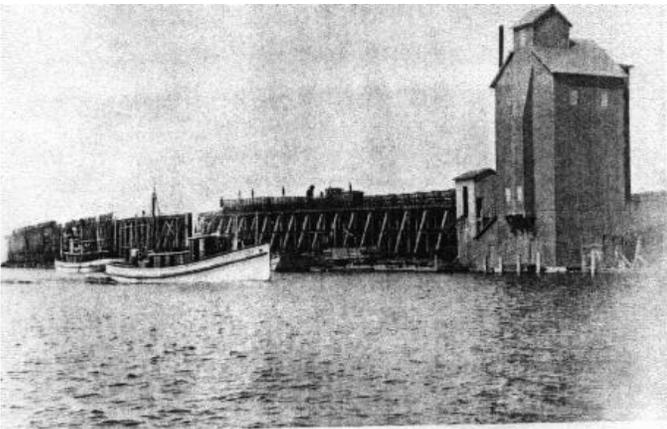
View of Erie Basin between Genesee and Court Streets, Buffalo, NY, showing a number of canal grain boats light and loaded. Photo circa 1896. Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society



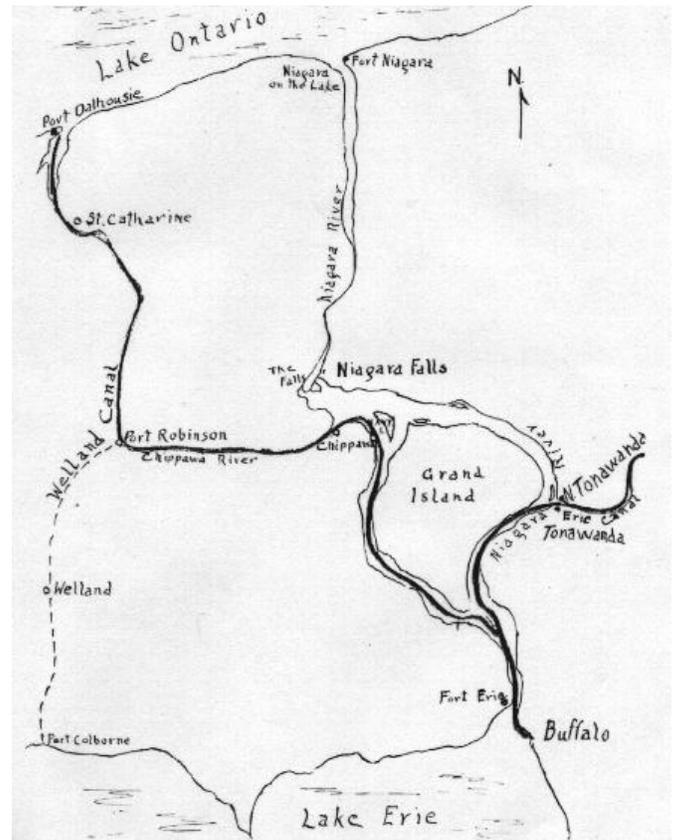
Eight head of mules towing two partly loaded boats between Hudson and Genesee Streets, Buffalo, NY. Photo circa 1912. Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society



A section of the old Erie Canal in Buffalo, filled in (1935) and now a part of the Niagara section of the Thruway. Also shown is a section of the Black Rock Ship Canal and retaining wall. Photo 1932



The harbor of Little Sodus Bay on Lake Ontario, Fairhaven, NY. Photo circa 1875



Map showing the course of a tug and two canal boats from Buffalo to Chippawa, via the Niagara River. Drawing by John W. Percy

## Erie Canal recollections

8-19-83  
T.W. News

By MARIE H. REILLY

I am 96 years old and have seen and remember a great deal about the Erie Canal.

My parents had the Bork Hotel on the north side of the canal which was called North Canal Street in Tonawanda.

Our hotel was sort of headquarters for the canal captains and their wives during the long winter days when navigation was closed.

The women were delighted to come for the afternoon and sew rags for carpets or help my mother make a bed quilt. She would always serve beer or soft drinks and popped corn on the coals of our big living room heater, the stove.

The summer of 1899, I was 12 years old and invited by Capt. and Mrs. Gregway to go with them and their niece, my age, on their boats for a trip to New York City. The boat we lived on was the Richard T. Hayes, named after my father.

The boats, at least two in a tow, carried six mules. The crew consisted of two mule drivers and a wheelsman who steered the boat as the mules pulled it along on the tow path.

The wheelsman took a 12-hour shift with the captain and the mule driver rested. The mules were stabled in the bows of the boats. The crew slept in the stern of one

boat and the captain and his wife lived in the cabin on the other boat.

The crew slept in the aft of the first boat. The captain and his wife lived on the other boat and she cooked for the crew of three men. In those days, it was a 12-hour shift. A driver and the captain did their hours while the wheelsmen and the other driver slept and rested.

As we traveled there were many locks at Lockport, Little Falls and other places. Here on the stops along the tow path were general stores and postal services.

It was fun to get off and shop while the boats were going through the locks. It was a must to supply food for the crew.

At these sub-postoffices, there was always a letter from my father with a two dollar bill in it for spending money.

At Albany, the canal ended as it connected with the Hudson River. The boats, six or eight, would be towed, two-abreast, by a tug to New York. When they reached New York City they discharged their cargoes.

When we reached New York City, our War of 1896 with Spain was over. It probably was the shortest war in history.

Admiral Dewey was returning with our fleet of warships and there



MARIE H. REILLY

was a great Naval parade on the Hudson to celebrate. It was a beautiful inspiring spectacle.

I recall the huge department store of Siegle and Coopers, our trip to Castle Gardens and my day at the Central Park Zoo, the elevated railroad, the awesome Statue of Liberty—all these wonders I saw on a trip on the Erie Canal 83 years ago.

I was reminded of it when my daughter, granddaughter and I watched the "sail-in" Aug. 2 this year at the Canal Fest.

Tonawanda News interview with Marie H. Reilly, Aug. 19, 1983. Ms. Reilly, 96 years old, recalls early years on the Erie Canal.