

A Day on the Old Erie Canal



All aboard for the Belles and Beaux of Holy Family as they launch their first excursion of the season.

PHOTOS BY SUSAN MCKINNEY
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At one time a mixture of manure and hay was used to patch the boats' bottoms. And each boat was an individual; there were no plans on how to build an Erie Canal boat.

Captain Peter Willes spun a narrative of days on the old Erie Canal after his passengers had settled themselves for a 13.8 mile trip up and down the water transportation system in this area. Forty-nine members of Holy Family's senior citizens group, Belles and Beaux, received a smattering of facts and folklore that have blended to become the history of the canal.

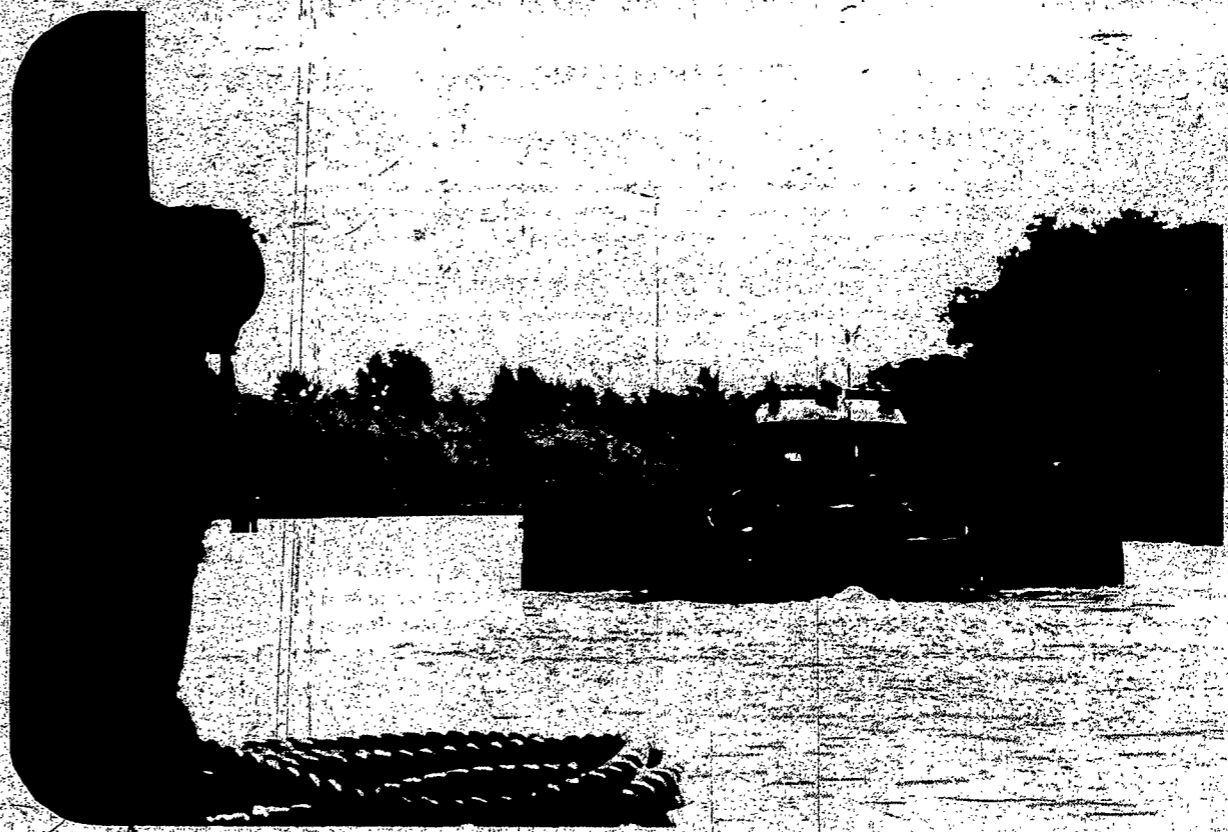
The group's first excursion of the year began with their traditional rendering of "Hail, Hail the Gang's All Here," as their bus carried them to Perinton Park for a brown bag lunch. "This gang always has a wonderful time," said Marian Fahrne, who joined

the group after her husband died.

The oldest member is 84 and was among the passengers that boarded Packet 1, tied up in Fairport. The boat is operated by the Mid Lakes Navigation Tours located on Skaneateles Lake. It flies a flag containing 15 stars and 15 stripes, a replica of the flag design used when the canal opened.

It was the third trip that day up the stretch between Fairport and Pittsford for Willes and his "crew," Debby DeNardi, an unemployed teacher. Her experience on deck includes a stint with folksinger Pete Seeger on his sloop, the Clearwater.

A wave from the bridge tender and the captain's assurance that the bridge "hasn't fallen in 28 years," begins the journey. Willes points out that Fairport's Main Street Lift Bridge is unique in that it is the only bridge along the canal that closes two roads when it is raised to allow ships to pass under. The bridge, built at an



A view from the Packet 1 shows a barge laden with lumber.

angle to both the water and the street, was written up in "Believe It or Not."

Differences between the old Erie and the Barge Canal were explained by the captain, who has been sailing commercially for seven years. The Erie Canal, completed in 1825, was the wrong size, he said. It was a huge ditch; that is, it did not go into rivers or lakes. It ran from Albany to Buffalo, was 40 feet wide, four feet deep and had 83 locks.

When it became evident that a larger canal was needed, the Erie was enlarged to 44 feet wide, 12 feet 6 3/4 inches deep. The four separate canals of Seneca-Cayuga, Champlain, Oswego and Erie were joined completely by 1918 to form the Barge Canal

System, also known as the Grand Canal.

In Irondequoit, the canal walls are reinforced with vertical or slanted concrete walls to prevent breaks. Securing his long blond hair with a sweat band (he lost his hat on lock no. 27), Willes told of a canal break in 1887. A "canawler's" wife and child were swept through the break but landed safely in a nearby tree.

Winding along one side of the canal is the tow path where mules once plodded, pulling the barges. It is deserted now except for occasional strollers and young campers.

Huge steel faced the small boat as it prepared to enter the lock. Once inside, the boat is hooked

to one side of the lock because the turbulence from the rushing water would toss the boat from side to side. Containing 200 million gallons, the lock will raise the boat up 25 feet. When the water pressure is again equal on both sides, the doors will open and the boat can proceed.

Friendly lock keepers waved to the members of the Belles and Beaux. During the winter, lock keepers repair equipment. A lock is rebuilt every ten years, according to Willes.

The three-hour trip nears completion and people whose land touches the canal pause to wave to the passengers on their way home. Back on the bus, the excursion ends as it began. Even the bus driver joins in the hearty singing.

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