

STEREO FOLKWAYS RECORDS FTS 32318

# GRAND CANAL BALLADS HISTORY OF THE ERIE CANAL

WILLIAM HULLFISH  
GOLDEN EAGLE STRING BAND



PHOTO BY JIM DUSEN

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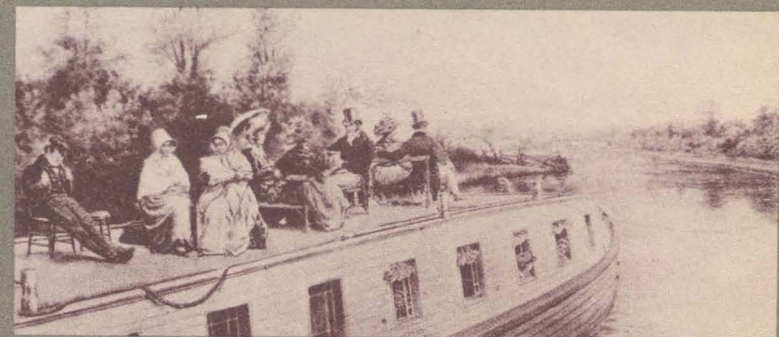
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Band 2. Paddy on the Canal. Vocal: Daniel Flanigan  
Band 3. Dark-eyed Canaller. Vocal: Bill Hullfish.  
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Band 7. Meeting on the Waters of the Hudson and Erie. Vocal: Kathleen Anne Kubarycz.

**SIDE II**

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Band 7. Low Bridge, Everybody Down. Vocal: John Rose.



PACKET BOAT. PHOTO: STATE UNIVERSITY COLLEGE, BROCKPORT, NEW YORK

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**GRAND CANAL BALLADS**  
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**WILLIAM HULLFISH**  
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DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

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# History of the Erie Canal

Notes compiled by Jean Papalia

The impact of an event on civilization endures in the folklore, legends, and music it inspires. The Erie Canal is considered a great, if not the greatest, event in 19th century New York. The canal is a landmark in New York State history. Considered a revolution in transportation, the canal opened and linked New York City harbor to the materials of Western New York, fostered westward migration of people, and created new jobs--from diggers to barge captains. Folklore, especially music, is evidence of the impact of the Erie Canal. Songs about the canal, both authentic ones performed by canallers and ones inspired later, tell the stories, traditions, and characters who lived, worked, and rode on the great Erie Canal.

On April 17, 1816, lawmakers of New York and Governor DeWitt Clinton passed legislation providing for improvement of the internal navigation of New York State. The idea of a trans-state canal was a possibility brought up years ago to the federal government, where it was soundly written off as an engineering impossibility. At the strong urging of Governor Clinton, who was an avid supporter of the canal, the New York Assembly passed the canal bill on April 15, 1817. The canal proved to be the largest and costliest public project yet undertaken in the United States. Lacking federal support, the revenue for the canal was raised through the sale of public bonds.

On July 4, 1817, the first ground was broken for the canal in Rome, New York, by Judge John Richardson. Rome, which was the median of the planned canal route, was chosen both for practical and political reasons. Governor Clinton and Chief Engineer Benjamin Wright realized that the level stretch of land near Rome would be the least complicated to complete, and it was felt that a completed section, even if it was a small one, would bring interest and credibility to the canal.

Construction contracts were awarded to landowners, mostly farmers, with property on or near the canal. They, in turn, were paid by the state at a rate of \$3,000 per mile of completed canal. Landowners would hire out their own labor force to do the digging.

The Erie Canal was dug by hand, using shovels, picks, and often tools devised by the diggers. Through solid rock found at the western end of the canal route, diggers forged ahead using dynamite powder to blast through a seven-mile stretch of stubborn earth. As one Irish work song went:

Bend way down,  
Dig that dirt,  
M' feet is sore and m' back does hurt.  
M' bones is creakin' and m' throat is dry,  
Seems t' me,  
I'm like t' die!  
.  
.  
.  
.  
.  
I'm Jack O'Leary  
I ben workin' on the Erie.  
The mightiest o' them all!!

This physical labor was further complicated by mud, mosquitoes, disease, poor tools, and poor drainage. Irishmen, creators of the canal, contributed not only through labor, but they brought over the Irish folk tunes which are so prevalent in canal songs.

A perplexing difficulty canal engineers needed to overcome was the fact that Lake Erie's waters were nearly 600 feet higher than the Hudson River. Canal boats could only navigate on level waters. The solution was a system of 83 locks between the Hudson and the Erie. The locks were each 90 feet long, 15 feet wide, and of the 83 locks on the Erie Canal, 27 were within the first 15 miles west of Albany! The famous Lockport-Five, a lock system located in Western New York, was an early tourist attraction. The five double locks (double meaning one for eastbound crafts and one for westbound crafts) each provided a 12 foot lift, for a total of 60 feet in elevation.

The canal took eight years to complete at a cost of over \$7,144,000. What skeptics had called "Clinton's Ditch" became a reality; a 363-mile lone waterway connecting Albany to Buffalo.

The long-awaited opening of the canal took place on October 26, 1825, in Buffalo, New York. With great pomp and formality, DeWitt Clinton and dignitaries boarded the barge, Seneca Chief. The procession of boats was bound for New York City. Behind Seneca Chief was Young Lion of the West with a cargo of four raccoons; one fawn, one fox, two eagles, and two wolves. The next craft was Noah's Ark, carrying two Seneca Indian boys who were guarding the only passenger--a black bear. No records show the reason for taking the animals; perhaps to serve as entertainment for spectators at the ceremony.

Bringing up the rear on the maiden voyage was Commadore Perry, Superior, and Buffalo, all filled with various dignitaries. To signal the opening of the canal, a cannon was fired and cannons placed every five miles responded. The cannon relay reached New York City in 81 minutes. A reply from New York City to Buffalo came in 80 minutes. This may have been the fastest trans-state communication of that time. On November



3rd, the convoy reached Sandy Hook, New York, at the mouth of New York City harbor. In a ceremony there, Dr. Samuel Latham Mitchell, the nation's foremost geographer, spoke in honor of the "wedding of the waters." He proceeded to pour kegs of Lake Erie water into the harbor. As a symbolic meaning to the world, waters from the Nile, Ganges, Mississippi, Thames, Rhine, Danube, Indus, Seine, Columbia, Orinoco, La Plata, and other rivers were also mixed in.

Dubbed the "Eighth Wonder of the World," the canal immediately changed New York State's transportation system. A ton of wheat, for example, travelling by wagon cost \$100 and took six weeks. A ton of wheat travelling via the Erie Canal cost \$7.50 and took only eight days from Albany to Buffalo.

Passengers could ride comfortably from New York to Buffalo for a mere \$18, which included all food and drink along the way. The comfort of canal travelling was often questioned after a night of sleeping on a berth which measured five-and-a-half feet long and 18 inches wide! A trip on the Erie and a night on a berth inspired George Pullman to develop the Pullman car which was later used in railroad transportation.

Mules pulled packet boats at a steady four miles per hour, providing a trip from Albany to Buffalo in approximately eight days. Why mules and not horses? As canallers pointed out, when a mule took ill, it either recovered or died in four hours, thus eliminating any need for a veterinarian.

As pioneers pushed west via the canal, the population of small villages burst into bustling cities. The first decade of the Erie Canal saw Rochester, Buffalo, Syracuse, and Utica grow over 300%. Port towns such as Lockport, Brockport, Spencerport, and others sprang up in necessity.

The canal produced new jobs and new life styles. By 1845, the canal had become the largest employer in New York State. It took a crew of over 25,000 men and boys to operate the canal--whether they be steersmen, captains, tool collectors, lock keepers, towpath walkers (who walked the towpaths looking for leaks and washouts), or team drivers. Young boys, for a meager 50¢ a day, guided the mules along the towpath. James Garfield, later President of the United States, worked as a young boy on the Erie Canal.

Folks came from all over the world to ride on the engineering marvel, including British actor Tyrone Power, writers Charles Dickens and Nathaniel Hawthorne, and poet William Cullen Bryant. Young lovers dreamed of romantic honeymoon trips to Niagara Falls by way of the canal.

Financially, the canal was incredibly successful. Through toll collections for the first nine years, \$8,500,000 was generated to pay off the canal's construction and interest cost. Despite the fact that the canal operated only during the warmer months, roughly 222.3 days per year, the total profit from the canal from 1825 to 1882 was \$42 million. By July 1, 1836, all

debts incurred through the construction and upkeep of the canal were paid, and on 1883 New York State law made all canal travel toll-free.

The canal was enlarged in 1835 to accommodate the flow of traffic, and all locks were made double like those in Lockport. But the heyday of canal transportation was limited. The railroads, which sprang up soon after the canal, were eventually too much competition for the canal. The once grand Erie Canal is now part of the New York State Barge Canal System, and is used primarily by pleasure crafts for recreation. The salty, brawling canallers are gone, but this record is a glimpse of the music they sang about the Grand Canal.

## Songs of the Erie Canal

### SIDE A BAND 1: Oh! Dat Low Bridge

Oh! Dat Low Bridge, with music by Dave Braham, and lyrics by Edward Harrigan, was used in Harrigan's 1880's vaudeville comedy The Grip. This canal inspiration is an example of how the Erie Canal influenced part of the musical drama culture.

1. It's many miles to Buffalo.  
Oh, dat low bridge.  
Balky mule he travel slow.  
Oh, dat low bridge.  
There's gravel on the towpath,  
There's hornets in the sand,  
Oh, pity poor canallers that's far away from land.

#### Chorus:

Then look out dat low bridge. (Look out dat low bridge)  
Look out dat low bridge. (Look out dat low bridge)  
The Captain, cook and all the crew,  
Oh duck your head way down.  
The fastest boat in all the fleet,  
Two Sister's come to town.

2. Dars many locks to shut you in,  
Oh dat low bridge.  
Ev'ry worm must learn to swim,  
Oh dat low bridge.  
We're loaded down with barley,  
and lumber from the West.  
Oh, ev'ry poor canaller,  
now do your level best.

#### Chorus



3. We're froze up in the winter time,  
Oh dat low bridge.  
Summer how the sun do shine,  
Oh dat low bridge.  
In rain or stormy weather,  
De Captain's on the poop.  
And we all huddle together,  
like chickens in de coop.

Chorus

4. Thars groceries in de cabin dar,  
Oh dat low bridge.  
Never leaks, she's full of tar,  
Oh dat low bridge.  
Dars freckles on de children,  
dars glanders on de mule.  
Mosquitoes by de million,  
dat keep the golden rule.

Chorus

#### SIDE A BAND 2: Paddy on the Canal

Paddy on the Canal was a song in tribute to the Irish immigrants who worked on the canal. After the Irish potato famine, many natives migrated to the United States where they earned good wages by doing backbreaking labor. Although this tune does not make specific reference to the Erie Canal, it is assumed it was a song well known up and down Erie's waters. The actual melody can be traced to an Irish folk tune.

The Irish immigrants were known to drink ample supplies of whiskey while working. As one story goes, the people of Buffalo thought the digging process of the canal was much too slow. The next day, workers found barrels of whiskey set at strategic spots along the canal route. That day, said an observer, "There was the fastest diggin' and drinkin' the canal has ever seen!"<sup>2</sup>

1. When I landed in sweet Philadelphia,  
The weather was warm and was clear.  
I did not stay long in that city,  
As you shall quickly hear.  
I did not stay long in that city,  
For it happened to be in the fall.  
I never reefed a sail in my rigging,  
Till I anchored out on the canal.

Chorus

So fare you well, father and mother,  
Likewise to old Ireland, too,  
So fare you well, sister and brother,  
So kindly I'll bid you adieu.

2. When I came to this wonderful empire,  
It filled me with the greatest surprise,  
To see such a great undertaking,  
On the like I never opened my eyes.  
To see a full thousand brave fellows,  
At work among mountains so tall.  
To dig through the valley so level,  
Through rocks for to cut a canal.

Chorus

3. I entered with them for a season,  
My monthly pay for a draw,  
And being of very good humor,  
I often sang "Erin go bragh."  
Our provision it was very plenty,  
To complain we'd no reason at all.  
I had money in every pocket,  
While working upon the canal.

Chorus

4. When at night we all rest from our labor,  
Sure but our rent is all paid,  
We laid down our pick and our shovel,  
Likewise our axe and our spade.  
We all set a joking together,  
There was nothing our minds to enthrall,  
If happiness be in this wide world,  
I am sure it is on the canal.

#### SIDE A BAND 3: Dark-eyed Canaller

This haunting and romantic song is an adaptation of the sea-song Dark-eyed Sailor. As the words to this tune tell, canallers were often gone to "sea" for long periods, while lovers waited patiently for their return.

It was a comely young lady fair, was walking out to take the air.  
She met a canaller upon the way, so I paid attention,  
so I paid attention, to hear what they did say.

"Fair maid," said he, "while you roam alone, the night is  
come and the day's far gone." She drew a dagger, then did cry,  
"For my dark-eyed canaller, for my dark-eyed canaller, though  
he may live or die."

"My every hope is based on him, true love will wait, true  
love will win." She said, while tears from her eyes did fall,  
" 'tis my dark-eyed canaller, 'tis my dark-eyed canaller,  
approving my downfall."

Cried William, "Drive him from your mind, many as good a  
canaller as him you'll find, love turned aside and cold did grow,  
like a winter's morning, like a winter's morning,  
when the hills are clad with snow."



"His coal-black eyes and curly hair, his flattering tongue my heart ensnared, genteel was he, no rake like you, to advise a maiden, to advise a maiden, to slight this jacket blue."

"It is six long years since he left our boat, a gold ring he took and gently broke, he left this token--here's half, you see, and the other he's keeping, and the other he's keeping, to remind him oft of me."

When William did this ring unfold, she seemed too struck with joy and woe, "You're welcome William, I've land and gold, for my dark-eyed canaller, for my dark-eyed canaller, so manly, true, and bold."

Come, ladies--yes, listen, oh, come and see, and a warning take, oh, take from me. Always be true while love's away, For a cloudy morning, for a cloudy morning, oft brings a pleasant day.

#### SIDE A BAND 4: I'm Afloat on the Erie Canal

This ballad was written especially to fit a new, popular tune. I'm Afloat: A Sailing Song appeared in print for the first time in the Utica Daily Gazette on April 17, 1845. The melody was based on a tune that appeared with great popularity in England and America in the late 1840's, where it was quickly adapted to the satirical version of I'm Afloat on the Erie Canal. Professor Thomas O'Donnell rediscovered the song almost 100 years later. The original song appeared in 1843 as I'm Afloat: A Sailing Song with music by Henry Russell (a resident of Rochester where he was an organ player for a church), and words by Eliza Cook. When the song was published as an Erie Canal takeoff, the authors were listed as "Henry Russell and Eliza Muggins, late Cook." Of course, the play-on-words developed a legend that Eliza Muggins was once a cook on the canal, rather than realizing it was her maiden name.<sup>3</sup>

The reference to "Gov'nor Clinton's big ditch" was the term skeptics gave the canal.

I'm afloat! I'm afloat! on the Erie Canawl, it's wave is my home, and my scow beats them all--Off! Up with your hats! Give three cheers, now three more. I'm afloat! I'm afloat! After four months on shore.

The night is pitch dark, and the rain has let loose, Who's afraid, while our scow swims on like a goose, What to her is the swash of Gov'nor Clinton's big ditch? She has braved it six years under Captain Saul Fitch.

The prim painted packets right past us my souse, they may rub, they may bunt, but they can't stave our bows. With darkness around us, and bridges full low, o'er the raging canawl right onward we go.

Ho! On deck here my boys. Stand by your poles. There's a raft right ahead. Heaven save our poor souls. Hard down with your helm'. Make loose that line fast. Hurra boys. Hurra boys, the crisis is past.

Chorus

I fear not the breakers, I heed not the wave, I've the towpath to steer by, and a boat-hook to save; and ne'er as a lubberly landsman I'll quail, when the Captain gives orders to "take in all sail."

Come, boy! Whip the mare. Keep her head to the wind and I warrant we'll soon leave the snails all behind--Up! Up! With your caps. Now give cheers three times three. I'm afloat! I'm afloat! The Canawler is free. We're afloat! We're afloat! and the Cook's getting tea.

#### SIDE A BAND 5: Ballad of the Erie Canal

This canal song borrows its melody from Stephen Foster's Old Black Joe.

Once I was a brakeman on the E-r-i-e Canal;  
I fell in love with the cook, a cross-eyed gal named Sal,  
She shook me for the driver, a red-head son of a gun  
and left me here as you may see--a poor old bum.

Chorus:

I'm going, I'm going, for I know my time had come!  
And to the workhouse I must go, a poor old bum.

As a free lunch destroyer, I'm a terror on the route,  
I can wrestle with the sausage or a plate of sauerkraut,  
And when I get a plate of beans, oh, don't I make them hum.  
They're such a solid comfort to a poor old bum.

Chorus:

I'm going, I'm going, for I know my time has come.  
And to the workhouse I must go, a poor old bum.

#### SIDE A BAND 6: Boating on a Bull-head

There were many types of boats used on Erie's waters, such as the ball-head boat. This boat was known for its rounded prow. The original name, ball-head, was later corrupted into bull-head. Boating on a Bull-head, done to the tune of Rosin the Beau, is a humorous portrayal of travel on these boats. One of the drawbacks of the bull-head boat, as the song points out, is that they had very large cabins which left little deck to be used by the crew and passengers. Thus, canallers would have to work on the cabin roof, and had to drop flat for a low bridge. Failing to see a bridge made one susceptible of being knocked or thrown off the boat.



Oh canawlers, take my warning: Never steer a Bull-head boat  
or they'll find you some fair mornin' in the E-ri-e afloat.

When a boat tied in the basin at the wood-dock for the night,  
and I lost no time to hasten 'round the bridge to ask a bite.

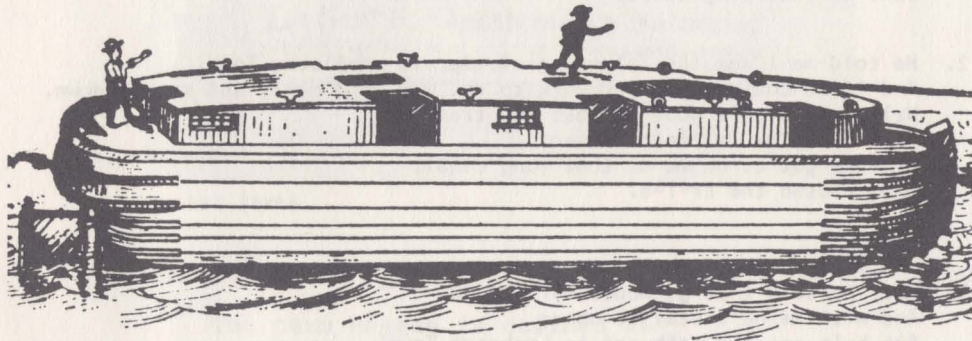
They filled me up with beans and shote, and lighted me a cob.  
They asked me if I could steer a boat and offered me a job.

The next mornin' I was boosted to the  
stern-cabin's roof; with the tiller  
there I roosted and watched the  
driver hoof.

Now the boat she was a Bull-head,  
decked up to the cabin's top;  
many canawlers now are dead  
who had no place to drop.

The bridge was only a heave away  
when I saw it round the bend.  
To the Cap a word I didn't say  
while turning end over end.

On canawlers, take my warning: Never steer a Bull-head boat  
or they'll find you some fair mornin' in the E-ri-e afloat.



bullhead boat

#### SIDE A BAND 7: Meeting of the Waters of the Hudson and Erie

The Meeting of the Waters was sung at the dedication of the canal in Sandy Hook, New York, in 1825. The original words were written by S. Woodworth, but the tune was derived from Thomas Moore's 1807 melody, which was an adaptation of the

Irish folk song Old Head of Dennis. The words were published as The Meeting of the Waters of the Hudson and Erie in 1825.<sup>4</sup>

Let the day be forever remembered with pride,  
That beheld the proud Hudson to Erie allied.  
Oh, the last sand of time from his glass shall descend,  
E're a union so fruitful of glory shall end,  
E're a union so fruitful of glory shall end.

Yet, it is not that wealth now enriches the scene,  
Where the treasures of art, and of nature, convene:  
'tis not that this union our coffers may fill--  
Oh, no--it is something more exquisite still,  
Oh, no--it is something more exquisite still.

'Tis that genius has triumphed--and science prevailed,  
Tho' prejudice flouted and envy assailed.  
It is, that the vassels of Europe may see,  
The progress of mind, in the land of the free,  
The progress of mind, in the land of the free.

All hail! to a project so vast and sublime!  
A bond, that can never be severed by time.  
Now unite us still closer--all jealousies cease,  
And our hearts, like our waters, are mingled in peace,  
And our hearts, like our waters, are mingled in peace.

#### SIDE B BAND 1: The Er-i-e

The Er-i-e is a frolicking song undoubtedly influenced by the "raging canal" mania. Many versions of this song appear, sometimes under the name of The Danger Ballad. The first verse of that ballad is:

I pulled out of Albany  
On the good ship Danger,  
To take a trip with the Erie boys,  
I seemed most like a stranger.

The absurd characters and amusing events traced in this tune provide an entertaining look at canal life.

1. We were forty-nine miles from Albany,  
Forget it I never shall.  
What a terrible storm we had that night,  
On the Er-i-e Canal.

Chorus:

Oh! The Er-i-e was arisen  
and the gin was a-gettin' low,  
and I scarcely think we'll get a drink,  
'till we get to Buffalo-o-o  
'till we get to Buffalo.



2. Our cook her name was big foot Sal,  
She wore a bright red dress,  
We hoisted her upon the mast,  
As a signal of distress.

Chorus

3. We were loaded down with barley,  
We were chocked full up with rye,  
And the Captain he looked down at me,  
With his gol-durn wicked eye.

Chorus

4. Lay me on the horse-bridge,  
With my feet up towards the bow,  
And let it be a Lockport Laker,  
Or a Tonawanda scow.
5. Our Nell has got the blind staggers,  
And Maude has got the heaves,  
Black Tom has thrown off his off-shoe,  
And our driver's got the weaves.
6. As we got into Buffalo,  
It was but four o'clock.  
The very first man we chance to meet,  
Was Gilson on the dock.
7. Well, the Captain he got married,  
The cook, she went to jail,  
And I'm the only son-of-a-sea cook,  
That's left to tell the tale.

#### SIDE B BAND 2: A Trip on the Erie

Canallers loved to exaggerate, and a good many of the humorous songs centered around the poor cook. The cook was a favorite source of jest, and this song is no exception. This version of A Trip on the Erie was collected by folk singer Frank Warner, with accompanying verses credited to "Yankee" John Galusha of Minerva, New York.<sup>5</sup>

1. You can talk of your picnics and trips to the lake,  
But a trip on the Erie you bet takes the cake,  
With the beef steaks as tough as a fighting dog's neck,  
And the flies playing tag with the cook on the deck.

Chorus:

So, haul in your towlines and take in your slack,  
Take a reef in your britches and straighten your back,  
Mind what I tell you and don't you forget,  
To tap the mules gently when the cook's on the deck.

2. The cook she's a daisy she's dead gone on me,  
With her firey red hair and she's twice twenty-three.  
She's cross-eyed and freckled, a dumpling and a pet,  
And we use her for a headlight at night on the deck.

Chorus

#### SIDE B BAND 3: That Long Canal - Jean Ritchie c. 1964, 1971 Geordie Music Publishing Co. (used with permission)

This tune was inspired by the memory of the canal. Jean Ritchie, a southern Appalachian folk singer originally from Kentucky, wrote That Long Canal in 1964 after moving to Port Washington, New York. This is the first recording of this song.

1. Come listen to my story, girls, for ev'ry word is true;  
And please don't smile and turn your backs, for it may be concerning you.  
I was born and raised in the State of New York, in the town of Albany,  
And my heart was gay 'till that fateful day, they opened the Erie.

Chorus:

And oh, that day, that lonesome day, forget it I never shall;  
For he's gone, he's gone, my love is gone,  
Gone on that long canal.

2. He told me I was the fairest girl, in all of Albany Town,  
And if he could get other work to do, why we'd marry and settle down.  
Well, my love is good at most any trade,  
So his choice is plain to see;  
If it's got to be me or that long canal,  
He's chosen the Er-i-e.

Chorus

3. Yes, he said that we would married be,  
And with me he'd stay at home;  
But he's got a sweetheart in Lockport Town,  
Also Syracuse and Rome.  
Young girls, don't heed a canaller's lies  
Though love undying he'll vow;  
For it's with the dawn you will find him gone,  
Gone on that long canal.

Chorus



# ROCHESTER AND ALBANY.

**Red Bird Line of Packets,**  
In connection with Rail Road from Niagara  
Falls to Lockport.

1843.



1843.

**12 hours ahead of the Lake Ontario Route!**

The Cars leave the Falls every day at 2 o'clock, P. M. for  
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N. B.--These two new Packets are 100 feet long, and are built  
on an entire new plan, with

**Ladies' & Gentlemen's Saloons,**

and with Ventilators in the decks, and for room and accommoda-  
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September, 1843.

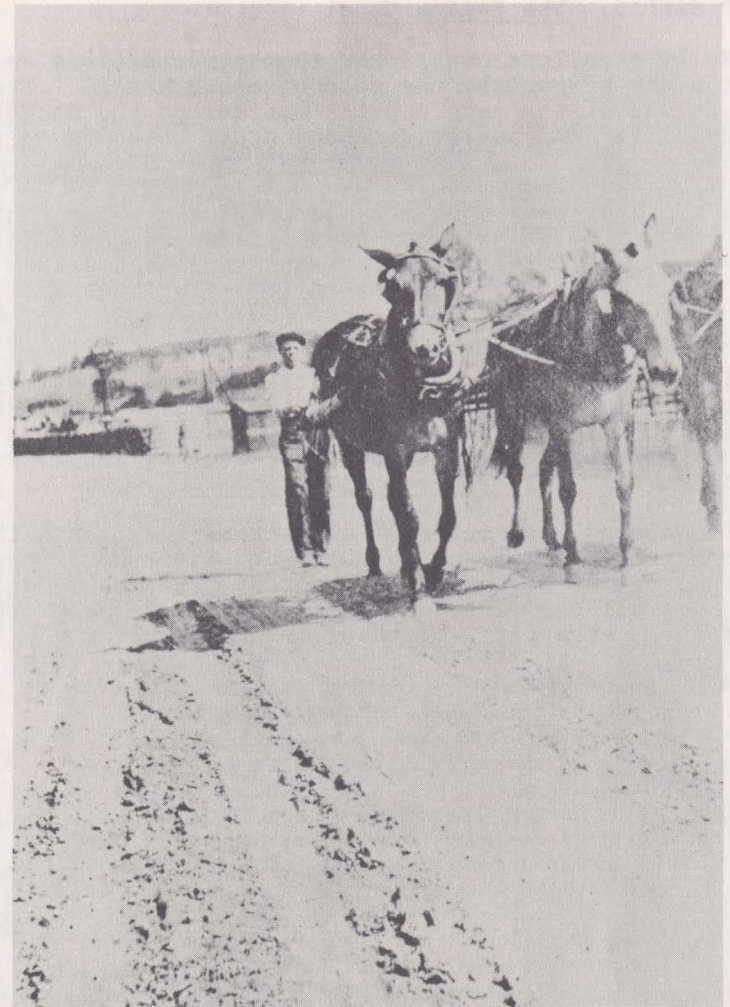
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packet fares

SIDE B BAND 4: Canawler, Canawler--Hoggee on the Towpath

The term Hoggee is defined as  
"canalese" for a towpath driver,  
usually boys between the ages of  
14-18. Hoggees were paid around  
50¢ a day and were responsible for  
leading the mule teams.<sup>6</sup> These  
young boys literally walked for  
their wages. Often, hoggees were  
victims of children's cat-calls as  
they passed by canal towns.

Hoggee on the towpath, five cents a day,  
Picking up horseballs to eat along the way.



hoggee on the towpath

Hoggee on the towpath, doesn't know what to say,  
Walks behind a mule's behind all the live long day.

Canawlers, as boat men liked to call themselves, is re-  
ported to have come from the Irish pronunciation.

Canawler, Canawler, you'll never get rich,  
You work on Sunday and you die in the ditch.

Canawler, Canawler, you son-of-a-bitch,  
You'll die on the towpath. You'll be buried in the ditch.



SIDE B BAND 5: The Raging Canal

Early canallers considered themselves sailors and were none too shy to portray the role of brave seamen. The Raging Canal is one of the most popular satires of the dangerous, nautical life, and influenced many other takeoffs on this theme.

The roots of this song are not precisely known, but this ludicrous satire about storm-swept crafts was Erie folklore by 1844. C. G. Christman, a New York publishing firm, produced the song in 1884 and billed it as "written and sung by that most celebrated comic singer, P. Morris.

The cover of the sheet music is an ironic portrayal of a wild storm slinging ships through the canal's four feet of water! The original melody is Caroline of Edinboro. Many versions of this song have appeared, such as the 23 verse selection in the Negro Forget-Me-Not Songster.

This amusing tale tells of characters and events that happen on a trip from Albany to Buffalo. The fourth verse, with its line, "We'll be in old Schenectady right bang against the dock," was all too true. Captains would race each other to be the first at a port--often crashing right through the dock!

Come listen to my story ye landsmen one and all,  
I'll sing to you the dangers of that raging canal.  
For I'm one of many who expects a watery grave,  
For I've been at the mercy of the wind and of the wave.

I left Albany harbor 'bout break of day,  
And if I rightly remember 'twas the second day of May.  
We trusted to our driver, altho' he was but small,  
For he knew all the windings of the raging canal.

It seemed as if the Devil had his work in hand that night,  
For all our oil was gone, and our lamps they gave no light.  
The clouds began to gather, and the rain began to fall,  
And I wished myself off of the raging canal.

The Captain told the driver to hurry with all speed--  
And his orders were obeyed, for he soon cracked up his lead.  
With the fastest kind of driving, we allowed by twelve o'clock,  
We'd be in old Schenectady, right bang against the dock.

But sad was the fate of our poor devout bark,  
For the rain kept growing faster, and the night it grew dark.  
The horses gave a stumble, and the driver gave a squall,  
And they tumbled head over heels into the raging canal.

The Captain cried out with a voice so clear and sound,  
"Cut them horses loose, by boys, or else we'll all drowned."  
The driver swam to shore, although he was but small,  
While the horses sank to rise no more in the raging canal.

The cook, she rung her hands, and then she came up on the deck,  
Saying, "Alas, what will become of us, our vessel is a wreck."  
The steersman knocked her over, for he was a man of sense,  
And the helmsman jumped ashore, and lashed her to a fence.

The Captain trembled for his money, likewise his wife,  
But to muster courage up, he whittled with his knife.  
He said to us with a faltering voice, while tears began to fall,  
"Prepare to meet your death this night, on the raging canal."

The sky was all asunder, the lightening it did flash,  
The thunder rattled up above, just like eternal smash;  
The clouds were all upset, and the rigging it did fall,  
And we scudded under bare poles on that raging canal.

We took the old cook's petticoat, for want of a better dress,  
And rigged it out upon a pole, as a signal of distress;  
We pledged ourselves hand to hand, aboard the boat to bide.  
And not to quit the deck while a plank hung from her side.

At length that horrid night cut dirt from the sky,  
The storm it did abate, and a boat came passing by,  
She soon espied our signal, while each on his knees did fall,  
Thankful we escaped a grave on the raging canal.

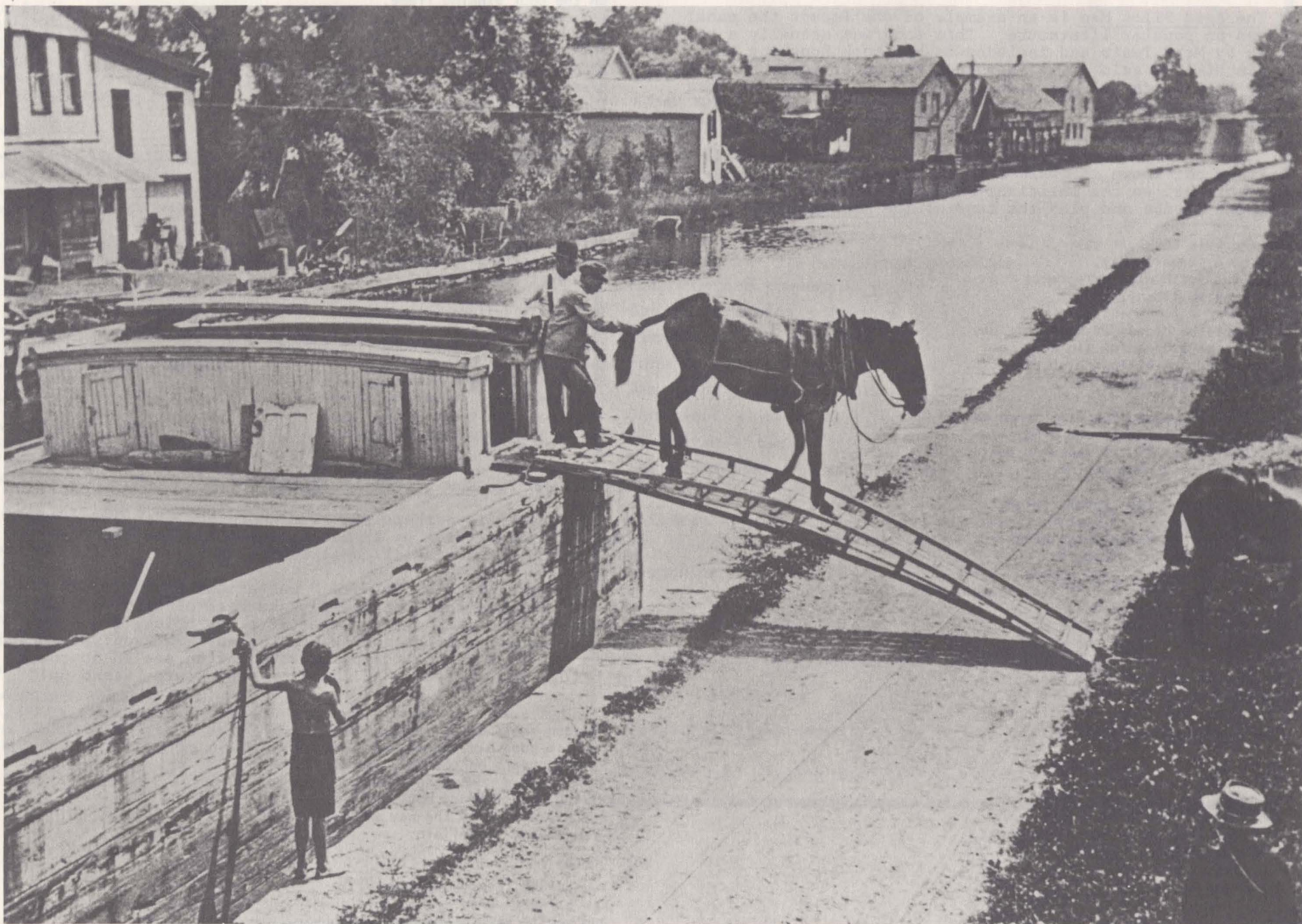
We each of us took a nip, and signed the pledge anew,  
And wonderful, as danger ceased, how up our courage grew;  
The craft in sight bore down on us, and quickly was 'long side,  
And we all jumped aboard, and for Buffalo did ride.

And if I live a thousand years, the horrors of that night,  
Will ever in my memory be, a spot most burning bright;  
There's nothing in this whole wide world can ever raise my gall,  
Except the thoughts of my voyage on that raging canal.



the raging canal





"tailing" a mule



SIDE B BAND 6: The Aged Pilot Man

The Aged Pilot Man is an example of the impact the canal had even on popular literature. This song was actually a poem written by Mark Twain and included in his book Roughing It. As Twain himself said, "The idea (not the chief idea, but the vehicle that bears it) was probably suggested by the old song called 'The Raging Canal,' but I cannot remember now. I do remember, though, that at this time I thought my doggerel was one of the ablest poems of the age."<sup>7</sup>

It is not known if Twain actually intended the poem to be sung or not, so the musicians on this record have chosen to recite the lyrics and play the tune of The Raging Canal.

On the Erie Canal it was,  
All on a summer's day,  
I sailed forth with my parents  
Far away to Albany.

From out the clouds at noon that day  
There came a dreadful storm,  
That piled the billows high about,  
And filled us with alarm.

The boat drove on, the frightened mules  
Tore through the rain and wind,  
And bravely still, in danger's post,  
The whip-boy strode behind.

"Come 'board," the captain cried,  
"Nor tempt so wild a storm";  
But still the raging mules advanced,  
And still the boy strode on.

"So let us strive, while life remains,  
To save all souls on board,  
And then if die at last we must,  
Let...I cannot speak the word!"

Said Dollinger the pilot man,  
Tow'ring above the crew,  
"Fear not, but trust in Dollinger,  
And he will fetch you through."

So overboard a keg of nails  
And anvils three we threw,  
Likewise four bales of gunny-sacks,  
Two hundred pounds of glue,  
Two stacks of corn, two ditto wheat,  
A box of books, a cow,  
A violin, Lord Byron's works,  
A rip-saw and a sow.

But all the children of misery there  
On the poor sinking frame,  
But one spoke words of hope and faith,  
And I worshiped as they came:  
Said Dollinger the pilot man--  
(O brave heart, strong and true!)--  
"Fear not, but trust in Dollinger,  
For he will fetch you through."

Lo! scarce the words have passed his lips  
The dauntless prophet say'th,  
When every soul about him seeth  
A wonder crown his faith!

For straight a farmer brought a plank--  
(Mysteriously inspired)--  
And laying it unto the ship,  
In silent awe retired.

Then every sufferer stood amazed  
That pilot man before;  
A moment stood. Then wondering turned,  
And speechless walked ashore.  
Said Dollinger the pilot man--  
(O brave heart, strong and true!)--  
"Fear not, but trust in Dollinger,  
For he will fetch you through."

SIDE B BAND 7: Low Bridge, Everybody Down

This song is perhaps the best known and best loved canal song. It was written by Thomas S. Allen and published in 1905, which was a time of canal revivalism.

The warning, "low bridge!" was a common one on the canal. Travellers soon learned to take heed of this warning, lest they be knocked off the boat at a low bridge crossing over the canal. As one joke went, the anti-Jackson supporters during his Presidential campaign would often see an approaching bridge and call out "All Jackson supporters, stand up!"

I've got a mule her name is Sal,  
Fifteen years on the Erie Canal.  
She's a good old worker and a good old pal,  
Fifteen years on the Erie Canal.  
We've hauled some barges in our day,  
Filled with lumber, coal and hay--  
And every inch of the way we know,  
From Albany to Buffalo.

Chorus

Low bridge, everybody down,  
Low bridge, we're coming to a town.  
And you'll always know your neighbor,  
You'll always know your pal,  
If you've ever navigated in the Erie Canal.



We'd better look for a job, Old Gal,  
Fifteen years on the Erie Canal,  
You bet your life I wouldn't part with Sal,  
Fifteen years on the Erie Canal.  
Giddap there, Gal, we've passed that lock,  
We'll make Rome 'fore six o'clock--  
So one more trip and then we'll go,  
Right back home to Buffalo.

#### Chorus

Low bridge, everybody down,  
Low bridge, we're coming to a town.  
Once a man named Mike McGinty tried to put one over Sal,  
Now he's way down at the bottom of the Erie Canal.

Oh! Where would I be if I lost my pal?  
Fifteen years on the Erie Canal,  
I'd like to see a mule as good as Sal,  
Fifteen years on the Erie Canal.  
A friend of mine once got sore,  
Now he's got a broken jaw,  
'Cause Sal let fly with her iron toe,  
And kicked him in to Buffalo.

#### Chorus:

Low bridge, everybody down,  
Low bridge, I've the finest mule in town.  
If you're looking for trouble, better stay away from Sal,  
She's the only fighting donkey on the Erie Canal.

I don't call when I want my Sal,  
Fifteen years on the Erie Canal.  
She trot from the stall like a good old pal,  
Fifteen years on the Erie Canal.  
I eat my meals each day with Sal,  
I eat beef and she eats hay,  
She ain't so slow if you want to know,  
She put the "buff" in Buffalo.

#### Chorus

Low bridge, everybody down,  
Low bridge, I've the finest mule in town.  
Eats a bale of hay for dinner, and on top of that my Sal,  
Tries to drink up all the water in the Erie Canal.

#### PERSONNEL

Larry Chechak - guitar, harmonica, banjo, vocals

Susan Clark - dulcimer, vocals

Stuart Durell - guitar

Daniel Flanigan - guitar, penny whistle, vocals

Stephan Hullfish - string bass, vocals

William Hullfish - banjo, vocals

Kathleen Anne Kubarycz - vocals

Shows Leary - jaw harp, spoons, washboard

Mike Mumford - mandolin, vocals

Laurie Outermans - autoharp, vocals

Lynn Pilaroscia - fiddle

John Price - recitation

Jim Riley - guitar, vocals

John Rose - vocals

Mike Ryan - banjo

Shary Sanduski - mandolin, vocals

Children's Voices: Brent Bassi, Kim Bassi, Christine Fraleigh, and  
Matt Hullfish

Recording Engineers: Lloyd Graf, Billie Michie, Russell Salerno, and  
Fred Wagner

Mix and Mastering: Russell Salerno

Co-producers: William Pottebaum and William Hullfish

Notes: Jean Papalia

Recorded at State University of New York College at Brockport, April-May,  
1981.



# FOOTNOTES

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2. Jabs, Carolyn, "Low Bridge, High Hopes," The Leatherstocking Journal, 2:10, 1979.
3. O'Donnell, Thomas, "I'm Afloat! I'm Afloat!," New York Folklore Quarterly, 13:177-80, 1957.
4. Wyld, Lionel, Low Bridge! Folklore and the Erie Canal, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1962, p. 78.
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6. Wyld, Lionel, "Notes for a Yorker Dictionary," New York Folklore Quarterly, 15:267, 1959.
7. Twain, Mark, Roughing It, Vol. 1, New York: Harper and Row, 1913, p. 85.

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