

A BRIEF COMMENTARY ON THE CENTRAL CANAL

Indiana's Central Canal was conceived as the largest portion of the vast Internal Improvements Bill which was signed into law by Governor Noah Noble on January 27, 1836. The Bill carried a \$10 million price tag and its largest single project, among canals, railroads, vehicular roads and improvement of the Wabash River, was the Central Canal whose 296 mile pathway consumed \$3.5 million of the total. The Central Canal was the longest of the canals planned to be built in Indiana. Of the eight different projects contemplated by the Bill, the Central Canal was outlined as follows:

"Central Canal, commencing at the most suitable point on the Wabash & Erie Canal between Fort Wayne and Logansport, (At that time it was thought that the Wabash & Erie Canal would only have to be constructed to Logansport where the Wabash River would be navigable.) running thence to Muncietown, thence to Indianapolis, thence down the valley of the west fork of White River to its junction with the east fork of said river, and thence by the most practicable route to Evansville on the Ohio river: Provided however, The said Board of Internal Improvement may, if it shall be found most practicable and conducive to the interests of the State, select the lower or Pipe creek route in the line north from Indianapolis, then and in that case a Feeder shall be made to commence at Muncietown and communicate with said Central Canal at some convenient point on the same, which feeder shall be of equal size and capacity with the main, canal, and made equally convenient for the purposes of navigation and be constructed simultaneously with the said main canal, and in all other respects provided for in like manner with the same.

For the construction of which Central Canal and navigable Feeder, the sum of three million five hundred thousand dollars is hereby appropriated."

The genesis of canals in the expanding northwest was a direct result of the 1825 success of the Erie Canal which connected the upper Hudson River and the Niagara River north of Buffalo and on to Lake Erie. Thus the Great Lakes were for the first time connected to eastern ports and the Atlantic Ocean by water. "Canal fever" soon became rampant in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Illinois and Indiana. If a Northwest Territory state could gain access to the Great Lakes, these would be water transportation to and from the eastern markets. Constituents in those states thought that canals could provide the solution to the problem of isolation which was holding up the development of land-locked areas. Railroads were in infancy and not generally recognized as a viable means of transportation. Vehicular roads were wholly inadequate. Rivers and streams had been used by the predecessors of early pioneers, the Native Americans, as chief means of transportation. But, as stated by Benjamin Franklin, "Rivers are ungovernable things...Canals are quiet and very manageable." So, it was only natural that the favored means of transportation were canals.

As early as 1827, Indiana began to long for a system of canals. During that year the legislature appointed a three-member Board of Canal Commissioners to investigate the feasibility of a canal system for the state. And, during the same year, the Congress provided a land grant for the purpose of financing the construction of the Wabash & Erie Canal. The Wabash & Erie originally was intended by the Congressional Act to be constructed from a navigational point on the Maumee River in Ohio, across the summit at Fort Wayne, IN, to a navigational point on the

Wabash River. Later it was determined that the canal would be dug to the mouth of the Tippecanoe River, just upstream on the Wabash River from Lafayette. (The 468 mile canal, known as the Wabash & Erie in the 1850s and thereafter, was actually a combination of four canals: The Miami & Erie in Ohio; the original Wabash & Erie from Junction, Ohio, extended to Terre Haute, Indiana; the Cross Cut Canal from Terre Haute to Worthington [Point Commerce]; and, the Central Canal from Worthington to Evansville. The aggregate of these canals became the longest canal built in the world but for a Chinese canal which exceeded its length.)

On February 6, 1835, an Act was passed by the Legislature directing the Canal Commissioners to employ engineers to locate the line of the proposed Central Canal which was done by Jesse Lynch Williams in the summer of 1835. Then, after the approval of the mammoth Internal Improvement Act in 1836, construction began on the Central Canal. During 1836-37 forty-five miles were put under contract. The Central Canal was thought to be the most important of the improvements to be constructed pursuant to the Act because it would transverse the landlocked center of the state and connect Indiana's capitol to the world. Unfortunately, construction of many projects approved in the Act were commenced simultaneously. Due to lack of fund, no one project received 100% financial support. Each project was started to satisfy political interests in various areas and of those areas' politicians who could claim they won a benefit for their constituents. Likewise, along the Central Canal, construction took place in many different areas. Of course, the Indianapolis portion would show the capitol city and the members of state government that their "wise decision: was reaching fruition.

Originally the Central Canal was divided into two divisions, northern and southern; later, into three, northern, Indianapolis, and southern. Of the three, the northern ran from the junction with the Wabash & Erie to Broad Ripple, the Indianapolis from Broad Ripple to Port Royal (now Waverly, in Morgan County), and the southern from Port Royal to Evansville.

Although contracts were let for all districts in all divisions, there was limited digging in the northern division. The ruins of the Canal can be found in Madison County from Alexandria to Anderson and the Muncie feeder from Daleville (in Delaware County) to Anderson.

In the southern division, only about 20 miles were dug in Vanderburgh and Warrick Counties during the first period of digging (1836-1839). Eventually the Central Canal was completed in 1853, from Evansville to Point Commerce (Worthington) as a part of what became known as the Wabash & Erie Canal.

It was the Indianapolis Division which received the most attention. Actually the entire length, from Broad Ripple to Port Royal, some 24 miles, was dug. That portion in Marion County is almost the only portion that can be found and none is watered elsewhere. On June 27, 1839, water was first let into the Canal at the feeder in Broad Ripple. This source filled the Canal as far south as Pleasant Run, a creek which empties into White River in southern Center Township. In about 1873, the lower portion, from Market Street to Pleasant Run was sold; and after a sewer was laid in the bed of the Canal, a railroad was built over it.

Private ownership of the Canal had existed since 1850 when the legislature ordered it sold because revenues failed to meet expenses. After title had vested in several owners including the Indiana Central Canal Manufacturing, Hydraulic & Water Works CO. (1851) and the Indiana Central Canal Co. (1863), the Canal in 1871, was deeded to the Water Works Company which failed 10-years later and was acquired by the current Indianapolis Water Company.

From 1871 the water companies used the Canal to provide water power for turbines which pumped water from wells to Indianapolis consumers. It was not until 1904 that the Indianapolis Water Company began to use water from the Canal as a source for purification and distribution to consumers. At that time the White River Purification Plant was constructed and water from the Canal was used both for drinking as well as for aquatic purposes. The point of obtaining water for purification was just south of Fall Creek after the canal had passed through an aqueduct over Fall Creek. The rest of the flow of the canal proceeded toward the center of Indianapolis and continued to be used by the Water Company as water power to its pumps at the West Washington Street pumping station.

The use of the Canal remained consistent during the next half century. Then, in the late 1960s, part of the Canal was forced underground because an interstate road system was constructed through its bed. In 1969 the Indianapolis Water Company discontinued using the Canal for a source of water power at its pumping station on West Washington Street and thereafter made the "downtown" portion (south of 16th Street) available for sale.

In 1976 the Water Company deeded this portion of the Canal to the City of Indianapolis, and in 1985 the Canal was drained south of Interstate 65. This portion of the Canal was then lowered and rebuilt using concrete for its banks, bottom towpath and berm. It was filled from a skyscraper's geothermal heating and cooling system using ground rather than surface water. The concourse no longer appears as did the old canal though it traces its track.

Gone is the stone lock at Washington Street and the two wooden locks near Kansas and Senate Avenue (old Mississippi Street). Gone are the two boat basins on the northeast and southeast corners of West Washington and Missouri and the side cuts, one covering the two block section between Washington and Maryland over to Capitol Avenue (old Tennessee Street) and the other running westward along Wabash Street and making a loop north as a mill race and ending in a water basin south of Washington Street.

What remains of the watered Central Canal is the original portion from its guard lock above the White River Dam at Broad Ripple for about 6 1/2 miles to the latitude of about 19th Street where it is dammed, preventing flow into the interstate culvert and into the portion which is dry and on to where it meets with the concrete portion at about St. Clair Street. (The concrete portion is currently being extended. When completed it will extend through the dry portion stopping near the Interstate.) The old watered portion includes a significant aqueduct over Fall Creek consisting of four 60 foot arches built as the successive fifth aqueduct in 1904-5.

This portion of the Central Canal is the only watered portion of Indiana's ancient canals which display significant segments of canal towpaths. (The Whitewater Canal in southeastern Indiana

has a segment which is watered for several miles but its towpath is covered by a railroad.) The towpath appears close to what is originally from the north end of Canal Boulevard, at Ripple Road (about the same latitude as 55th Street, some 1.6 miles to Broadway near Broad Ripple Village. (Today part of the Indianapolis Greenway follows the old towpath except where it crosses to the berm bank between College Ave. and Illinois St. leaving the towpath in its natural state. The towpath was covered with asphalt between Carrollton and College and then the parking deck once obliterated it from Carrollton to Guilford. It is stone from Guilford to Westfield Boulevard. Downstream from Illinois to 30th St. it is stone, but it has been widened to accommodate Water Company maintenance trucks. It still looks natural except for the straight sides.) This stretch of Canal, with the exception of bridges and streets which have been erected over and adjoining the Canal, remains close to that which was originally dug in Indiana.

It is also interesting that the width of the Central Canal from Broad Ripple to Indianapolis was not constructed to Wabash & Erie specifications, namely, a 40 foot water surface width, 36 foot bottom width, and 4 foot depth. Instead the Broad Ripple to Indianapolis portion of the Central Canal was built with a 60 foot width and 5 feet depth. William Gooding, surveyor for the Canal north of downtown Indianapolis, suggested this change to provide more water power along the Broad Ripple-Indianapolis route without having to increase the speed of the flow. The suggestion was obviously adopted and thus this portion of the Central Canal becomes unique, being the only 60 foot wide remnant of watered canal left in Indiana. (Indiana had another portion of 60-foot wide canal. The Wabash & Erie was constructed with a 60-foot portion between Fort Wayne and the State line with the thought that Ohio would construct its portion similarly. However, Ohio only constructed a 40-foot canal from the State line to Junction where it later joined the Miami &

Erie. From there to Toledo, the canal served both the Wabash & Erie and the Miami & Erie and the canal was 60-foot wide.)

As soon as water was let into the Canal at Broad Ripple on June 27, 1839, its use began. While it was never a financial success, the benefit the Central Canal played was its critical roles in the development of Indianapolis and communities along its path which roles are immeasurable. As soon as the Canal's route was proposed, speculators seized upon the evident opportunities. The City developed to the north and west along the announced route of the Canal even before the digging began. When the water was let in three years later passenger service and freight service, between local merchants, began immediately and water from the Canal was used to obtain power.

Rita W. Harlan in her work *The Central in the City: The Impact of the Central Canal in Indianapolis, 1836-1900*, definitively described the impact the Central Canal had upon primitive Indianapolis. For example, the need for labor caused Indianapolis' population to grow significantly. German and Irish laborers immigrated with the promise of work to be found digging the ditches.

After completion, transportation along the Canal was never connected at either end permitting transportation to other than local commercial areas, but its use as a source of water power was significant. Harlan lists one woolen mill, one cotton mill, a linseed oil mill, two grist mills, two saw mills and two paper mills which immediately began using the Canal's water for power. Over the years the canal supplied water to a large number of businesses. Harland lists thirty-eight

companies which used it as a source of ice during the winter for storage and sale in the summer months, a total of forty-two commercial uses. And, there were others. Boat companies rented recreational craft, the most noteworthy being the one at Fairview Park which is now Holcomb Gardens at Butler University. An enterprising man gave swimming lessons by dunking his students in the Canal from a long pole equipped with a system of straps and pulleys.

While the impact of the Canal may seem insignificant from today's perspective, one must remember that when the Canal was completed in Marion County, the population of Indianapolis was not yet 2,700 people. While this number quickly grew (8,000 in 1850, 18,600 in 1860 and over 48,000 in 1870), the impact of the Canal upon such a small population cannot be diminished. After all, the first railroad did not reach Indianapolis until 1847, eight years after the opening of the Central Canal in Marion County. So, one can easily see how the hope and promise of the Central Canal was of prime importance to the citizens of the City who were concerned about its fledgling commerce. With a limited population, the constituents had reasonable hopes that this new transportation system would be the answer to their needs. Unfortunately the Panic of 1837, inefficiency, and corruption combined to bring the end to the dreams fostered by the Internal Improvements Act. The linkage to the Ohio River and to the east via the Wabash & Erie Canal, the Great Lakes, the Erie Canal and the Hudson River never became possible. But the Central Canal provided an impetus for the development and an unexpected source of commercial water power which fostered the industrial growth of Indiana's Capitol city.

Thus, Indiana's Central Canal stands in combined testimony of the confidence of Indiana's early fathers that a wilderness could be elevated into a productive State; that enterprise, manufacturing and commerce could be obtained; and, that man could build a water channel which ultimately, as an example of how a failed albeit commendable transportation project, would prove itself instrumental in nourishing a small infant capitol city into young adulthood. Today it remains. Its waters run adjacent to its towpath which give solace and recreation to thousands who come to enjoy its beauty; yet its utility continues to provide the life blood -- water -- for its city's needs. It is unique to Indiana both in scope and accuracy as that which was constructed 160 years ago.