

Reminiscences Of An Allen County Resident

Not all information about the Wabash & Erie Canal can be found in documents, daily journals, or newspapers of the time. We must rely on the recollections of early county residents to put the pieces together. The following account was published by the Allen County/Fort Wayne Public Library in 1960 from an original paper published by the Allen County/Fort Wayne Historical Society. Although Comparet skips around the canal a lot starting at Junction, OH, he gives the name of canal boats and owners. He names the businesses located along the canal. And he well describes the canal and locks from Fort Wayne through Antwerp, Defiance, to Napoleon, the area the Canal Society of Indiana will be covering on its "Canalabration" tour April 5-7.

Charles M. Comparet - Nov. 13, 1928 - In the early days of the Wabash and Erie Canal there were packets on this canal which hauled passengers and freight. These packets were drawn by horses and mules and they were changed every ten miles when a fresh team would be put on. The boats had to go through seven locks (from Junction, OH to Defiance, OH) and then locked down into the Maumee River. There the horses were taken around to the tow path again and the tow line was hitched again to the horses and the boats were towed to Napoleon, Ohio. From there they were taken down the river to Perrysville, Ohio, and a small tug would tie to the boat and take it down to Toledo. That was the end of the packet line. (The boats were taken down the six Maumee Side-cut locks for 1.5 miles to the Maumee River and another mile to Perrysburg.)

At the junction of the Wabash and Erie Canal at Junction City, Ohio, a packet line (a line boat) was run to Cincinnati; from Fort Wayne south they ran as far as Evansville, they run (ran) back, turn(ed) around and go (went) on to Toledo again.

Four of these boats were named the "Hugh McCulloch," the "D. F. Comparet," the "Henry Paul," and the "George Little." After the packet days — and this was after the Wabash railroad come into Fort Wayne — the canal boats used for hauling grain were made at Fort Wayne and Defiance. There were twenty-seven boats running from here to Toledo, from here to

Logansport, then south to Evansville. It was a great curiosity to see in an early day the crowds of people that gathered along the canal. A crew on the canal boat consisted of a captain, a bowsman, two steersmen, two drivers and a cook; sometimes a man cook and sometimes a woman cook. These boats were made with cabins in the front to sleep in, and the captain's room, two big midships to load the grain into, and in the middle of the boat a stable where they kept the mules. These boats were so constructed that they had sleeping quarters in the back part where they also ate.

In some places the canal was very narrow, and in case of a boat going west and a boat going east, the captain would holler out, "tow path hard," or "heel path hard" and the boat would steer over so they could pass by. In these early days men made big efforts to get jobs on the canal. A captain was considered like a railroad man — conductors on passenger trains — are considered today, as being fine jobs. There were always plenty of men looking for jobs in the spring on this canal. There were some very fine men as captains: Captain Tim Donovan, ran the "Stout;" George Little on the "Captain Columbia." The Comparet brothers ran the "Gordon Green," and Hugh Haggerty ran the "Fort Wayne." There were many others.

From six to eight miles apart was a lock and the boats would have to be locked through into the next level. At each one of these locks was a little grocery store and a lock

tender; one man in the day time and one man at night. The dry dock at Fort Wayne was located near the site of Lindenwood Cemetery.

The "Atlantic" was built in Fort Wayne and the "King Brothers" in Defiance. After the canal was abandoned, these two boats were sold to some Chicago people, and were taken over the lake from Toledo to Chicago. They had a very hard trip. Tim Donovan was captain of the "King Brothers" and Hugh Haggerty the "Atlantic."

The Ormiston (Orbison) Basin was opposite the Randall Hotel.(Fort Wayne) The George Little Basin adjoining the Randall Hotel on the north. The boats would wind on at the basins, and take on their load of grain, flour, pork and whiskey. Crossing the canal at this point was a swinging bridge (Harrison at Columbia); and a bridge was located at nearly every block.

The building at the basin along Harrison Street, on the north side, was occupied by the post office, and by the James Robinson shoe store.

There were the warehouses and grain mills along the canal on the north side principally: The Tresselt mill was at Clinton Street; The Orff Mill was the first on the west side of the city, located at Main and the canal opposite the aqueduct. The canal took the water through the aqueduct and the boats went through also to get on down. It crossed the St. Mary's River at Orff's Mill. Ranke

and Blossard had a saw mill on the north side of the canal across from Broadway. There was a saw mill and a tannery on the north side—Fry's Tannery. Then Mr. Farrand had a tannery. An iron foundry—Bower and Story—is now the Fort Wayne Iron Works. A little farther down was Chauvey's Wagon Works. Farther down the Tresselt Mills, then the Woolen Mill—French-Hanna & Co. Then came the Gas Works and after that the Baker Saw Mill owned by Henry Baker. This was all on the north side of the street.

On the south side was D. F. Comparet's mills and warehouses and the Comparet basin—a big basin. Up a little way from there was the Hedekin House and store and then on down across the street a few stores, Schlatter's Hardware store. On down was Brandriff's Hardware Store. From there on to Harrison Street there was nothing but saloons. Over one hundred saloons were located inside of four blocks.

In the spring of the year they hired the crew and their first duties were to clean up the boat and paint. It took the whole crew to paint it in order to paint it quickly. After the paint was dry they would load the boats with grain and start out on their trip to Toledo. The first lock was called Moot's lock and the next was the Eight-Mile Lock (Gronauer's Lock). The next lock was twelve miles (Saylor's Lock); and the next at Antwerp, Ohio, at the Reservoir (Six Mile Reservoir. This Reservoir had about 3500 acres of land in it with a high dike all around. (This reservoir covered 3600 acres permanently and as much as 14,000 acres when full.) This reservoir was fed from the Canal (which carried St. Joseph River water from Fort Wayne into the reservoir during wet times and stored it to be fed into the canal during dry times) and the water was used to feed the Canal from Antwerp to Defiance, Ohio.

At Defiance there were nine

(7 from Junction to Defiance) locks that let the boats down into the Maumee River. The mules were taken around that hauled the boats about half a mile around to the tow path; there the boats were taken down to Napoleon, Ohio; then went on down from Napoleon to Toledo where the Maumee river emptied into the lake (Erie). The boats were towed in by a tug and landed at the dock of some big warehouse where they were unloaded and their grain consigned to some of these warehouses. Then they would reload for wayby stations and Fort Wayne.

Some days in the early days of the canal, boats would go down to Evansville, making all of the little towns between here and Evansville. In 1864 the southern line was abandoned and boats ran from Huntington to Toledo. It was a very beautiful ride if people like slow travel. I had a grandfather living at the junction of the Wabash and Erie Canal (Junction, Ohio) and he had a big stone quarry and a big elevator. There were two big elevators at the junction of the Wabash and Erie Canal and the Ohio Canal (Miami and Erie Canal). One went east to Toledo and one went south to Cincinnati.

At the stern of these boats (freight boats) where it was steered there was a stairway that went down into the cabin where all of the cooking was done and a couple of bunks where the two drivers slept. At the front part of the boat at the bow end there was another cabin where the captain, cook, and the rest of the crew slept. The bowsman's duty was to open up the locks, wash the deck every morning, and help the drivers to hitch up the mules. Should any of the crew be sick, the bowsman would take their place. No passengers were taken aboard. This was in the early days of the canal before there were any railroads running between here and Toledo.

In going down to Defiance they passed some very heavy woods,

and it was not unusual to see deers (deer) drinking in the canal as the boats went along. Out near the reservoir these was a furnace where they manufactured iron. People from Buffalo had come, bought large tracts of land, and started quite a furnace. The charcoal was made in the woods, and they worked about 200 men in the furnace and woods. They had a couple of boats that hauled the iron in blocks to Toledo, then reloaded and went to Buffalo. This was quite an institution and a great many eastern people would ride from here to Cecil on the canal boats, stay a couple of days and come back. They were men that the iron works belonged to. These boats run (ran) for about ten years, the furnaces lasted 20 years until the wood to make charcoal was burned off, the furnaces abandoned and the land sold. The reservoir has been drained and sold for farm purposes, and makes one of the finest bodies of farm land in the state of Ohio.

When they changed the crews on the boats the bowsman played a horn. Boats were kept very clean and supplied with good food. At every lock there was a grocery store where meats, flour, butter, sugar, coffee could be purchased.

Among the commission merchants were the Comparet brothers who owned two big warehouses and a big six-story mill where they bought all kinds of grain and hides, killed and packed hogs and had one of the finest mills in the state of Indiana. They also had a big basin where the boats would back in and load their grain and flour. This was shipped to Toledo, then taken across the Lakes to New York.

A packet boat carried packets of mail and passengers. They traveled both day and night to get the mail delivered. The passengers were in the center of the boat.

