

Memoirs of Jennie E. Brown Rader 1890-1904

A portion of the memoirs of Jennie Rader were found by your editor in the Huntington City Township Library in Huntington, IN, and are reprinted here. Jennie was born in Roanoke, IN as Jennie Brown. She later married a man named Rader. She died in New York City in June of 1946.

My first fifteen years paralleled the completion and closing of the Wabash-Erie Canal. I was two years old when the first steam canal boat* left Huntington ten miles South of Roanoke on September 25, 1862. An article in a Toledo, Ohio, newspaper re-printed in the Indiana Herald a few days later, tells us - "that the Canal propeller 'Buffalo' arrived here yesterday from Huntington with a full load of wheat and flour. The 'B' is a new boat now on its first trip and is represented as fulfilling in every respect the anticipation of her builder and owner, Captain Morgan. She left Huntington Thursday morning and arrived here at 5 and a half P.M. yesterday making the run of 129 miles in 72 hours, from which should be deducted five hours detention at Fort Wayne and one hour at Providence (OH). The engineer of the boat informs us that one cord of wood is amply sufficient for a 24-hour run, demonstrating that as far as economy is concerned, that has been fully secured by the introduction of steam as a motive power on our Canal." I like to think I saw the 'Buffalo' as it passed through Roanoke.

From the time I was four or five and until my early teens I lived on the banks of the Canal. Many of my earliest recollections center about the Canal with its canoes, wheat boats and the house boat of Captain Vandocker. The captain's small

daughter was his cook and housekeeper. Many tales were spun about their home life on the Upper Basin. Wheat boats were drawn by mules who were beaten by the swearing mule drivers, flourishing their long black snake whips as they guided the mules along the towpath. This is quite a contrast in comparison with the electric mules of today used on the Panama Canal. The Canal did not continue long enough for progress to demand many changes. An article in a Toledo newspaper of the period records its methods of accomplishment. Three to six horses in tandem were driven along the side of the Canal and fastened to the boat by a long tow rope perhaps 200 feet in length. This required shift of horses and drivers. All types of shipping was carried on. There were, for instance, the store boats. Mother took me to see one where everything for sale was made of glass. We bought a pitcher and a high stemmed cake plate. I was thrilled and excited! It was a great adventure! I had seen many of these boats and held them in awe, but, I had never been on one. From that moment I became even more fascinated with life on the canal.

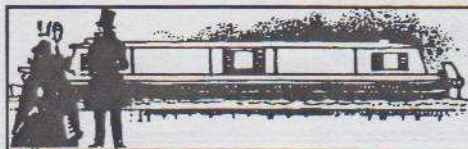
Reading of Canal operations of those early years, one can only marvel at the many difficulties overcome. As winter came on, all northern canals had navigation trouble. Ice would stop a boat but most of them kept moving until November or December. They were forced to remain, caught in the ice, until early Spring. This often caused great hardships.

A year after the Wabash-Erie Canal was completed in 1836 (to Huntington), packet service on that route was probably the fastest in the country. Canal boats ran regularly from Toledo, Ohio to Lafayette,

Indiana in two days and eight hours at the rate of nearly 104 miles per day. In order to maintain fast passenger service it was necessary to change horses every eight or ten miles. Since the Canal was a public highway there were many kinds of boats on it. Anyone able to pay the tolls could build canal boats and operate them. But later carrying business was done mostly by professional boatmen. Floating saloons and boats of entertainment were popular. Indiana newspapers advertised floating palaces in which a circus performed as it plied the Wabash-Erie Canal. Each boat was a source of pride to the captain and his crew. Boats were often enlivened by bright colors on their exteriors. The Wabash-Erie had one popular packet named "The Silver Bill." It was drawn by gray mules said to have worn silver mounted harness with tinkling bells. Some outfits had bright brass or nickel mounting. Bangles were distinguishing features.

If today we could see one of these boats, seventy or eight feet long, only eleven feet wide, with primitive concessions to comfort and sanitation, one would marvel at the exaggerated ideas of magnificence so well described. It was said that a man of medium height had difficulty walking to and fro in the cabins. It was the brightly painted exteriors which provided the glamour.

The "Indiana" for example, had a red and black under body, white upper cabin, green shutters. Its twenty four side windows had red curtains. Boats of that day carried many queer cargoes. Often one would carry two or three hundred barrels of ashes, in great demand for manufacturing lye, potash, soap and other products. Immense cargoes of fire wood were hauled for little coal was used until well into the nineteenth century. These packets ran on no scheduled time but started when there was a full load of passengers who arrived when they could conveniently.



THE HO

I was on the Canal as soon as I was old enough to learn to skate but when the Canal was open it was great fun to spin the logs when they drifted down into the Basin at my back door. My recollection is that I became quite an expert. Six to ten logs were linked together to make a single raft. They were built in sections just the size to go through the locks. Rafts would float down the Wabash River or creek to the Canal and then would be towed through by mules. A crew of four or five men handled such a raft. They slept in a rough board shelter built on one side of the section. There were rules against "parking" in the Canal or within one.....(the rest of the pages were missing)

**Although attempts were made to power canal boats with steam, the fact that their higher speeds washed out the canal banks kept them from replacing the horses and mules.*