

DENNIS

By Dr. James A. Houser

Jim Ellis, CSI treasurer, recently found the following description of life and death on the canal. It was a part of the book *How to Be a Beautiful Woman* written by Indianapolis doctor and author James A. Houser. As a young boy in the 1850s-60s Houser experienced life on the Miami and Erie Canal that ran from Cincinnati to Toledo, Ohio. This was at a time when canals were one of the chief modes of transportation.

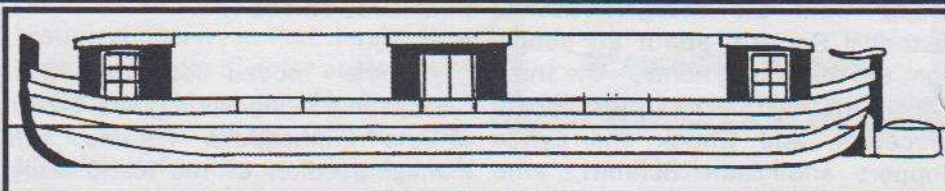
It (the Miami and Erie Canal) was known throughout its 200 miles of length as the "raging canal." Even yet I can hear the old song that was heard from the deck of the moving boat in every village along the canal banks. The chorus I will give you:

*"And the horse he gave a stumble,
And the rider gave a squall,
And went to the bottom
Of the raging Canawl."*

Being like most boys, at an early age, 13, I had a great ambition to seek my fortune. The "Raging canal" being the surest way of getting a living, and surest to afford a means of getting away from home, I found myself a "clothes-pin" on the towpath, as the mule drivers were called. We were so called because we were supposed to stick on the mule's back like a clothes-pin on a line. So with three mules at one end of a long rope and the boat at the other, interstate commerce went on.

These canal boats, as you are aware, were not only arranged to carry wheat or corn, lumber, salt and all merchandise but also to carry people, horses and mules as well.

In the middle of the boat there was a stable where three small horses or two large ones were kept. At either end of the boat there were cabins. In the front, there was a bow cabin, and at the rear, the stern cabin. The captain, and often his family lived in the front end of the



Captain's Cabin

Stable

Crew's Cabin Tiller

Drawing of canal freight boat: Baudendistel, R. Paul. *The Whitewater Canal Boat Log: Notebook No. 1.*
Editors Bob & Carolyn Schmidt. Metamora, IN. August 1995.

boat. The crew, as the laborers were called, in the rear.

The crew of the boat consisted of seven persons, a captain, a cook, two steersmen, two drivers and a bowsman. This crew was a day and night boat, but when it was only a day boat there were two persons less.

May I tell you, too, that a boat that ran both day and night would have two teams, usually of three mules in each team, while a day boat had but one team. The teams were driven tandem, one mule before the other. The hours for working were called "tricks"; that is, a steersman and a driver would commence work at seven in the morning and quit at 1 o'clock in the afternoon. The next steersman and driver would commence a 1 and quit at 7 o'clock in the evening. Whereupon, the first steersman and driver would again commence work and work until 1 o'clock at night, and then give place to the others, and so on.

The boat stopped only long enough to take on a fresh team, which was done by letting down the "bridge plank" fastened to the boat by chains. Over this the mules passed out to the tow-path, and the other mules came back to go down a little short, heavy stepladder, made out of a heavy plank, into the stable on the boat.

Then the bridge plank was raised and the bowsman, who was boss on all occasions when the captain was not present, and whose

time of serving was all the time, would cry out "All right, drive." He received in turn the answer, "Aye, aye." Then the ship would crack and the tow-line would be stretched to almost a level, and slowly the boat, with its freight or commerce, would plow the turbid canal.

The canal was divided into what we call "levels," at either end of which were the "locks." This, as you perceive, was necessary to prevent ripples, of "riffles." It was the duty of the bowsman to get these locks ready by filling them, taking the boat in, closing the great gates, and hoisting the "wickets" to let the water in or out, as was necessary in going up or down stream.

Also, it was his duty to snub the boat. That is, as it passed into the locks there were 2 large, smoothly-dressed, wooden posts, one at either end of the lock. A heavy rope, larger than your arm, attached to the bow of the boat, the bowsman would coil about this snubbing post. He would then let it slip and draw tight, and bring the boat to a dead stand before it struck the end of the lock.

Occasionally, when the bowsman was drunk, as was often the case, the boat might be permitted to go too heavy against the locked gates, going down stream. The lock, then being full, the heartily loaded boat of 2,000 bushels of wheat, or some other freight, would crash through the gates bursting them, and the great flood of water 20 feet in depth, flow out, and the boat go down to destruction amid the foam

and wild screams of the profane cook. May it be said the cook usually did more swearing than all the rest of the crew.

An accident of this kind was called a shipwreck on the canal, and sometimes a little fortune was wrecked with it.

I would not have you think all boatmen were so wicked though, children, simply because the cook would swear. On the canal were often found the most pious and upright people, as well as some erratic fools known as wild, desperate sinners.

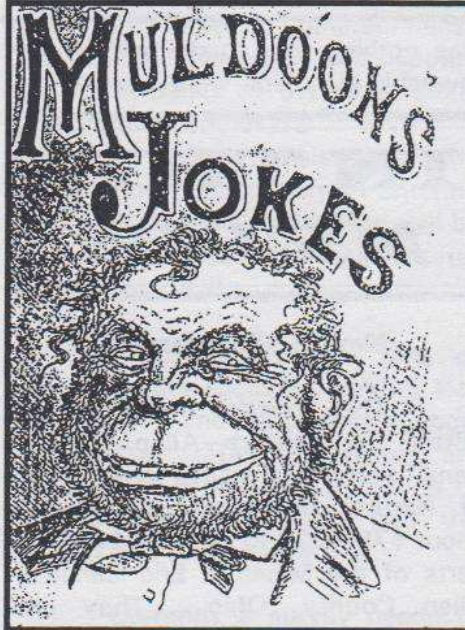
Usually on the boat the crew would divide into partners, generally those who worked together, as a driver and a steersman more frequently than two drivers, as the former worked during the same hours.

It took many a weary day to haul a load of freight from Cincinnati to Toledo, or from Toledo to Cincinnati. Sometimes two whole weeks would be necessary to drag our boat through.

My partner on the boat was the bowsman, a big, heavy-set, very strong, queer-looking, redheaded Irishman, whose home was in Cincinnati. He had very curly red hair and a beard of the same cardinal hue, with a mustache that seemed continuously undecided whether it should curl up or roll back on his lip, like a red flannel rag, or straighten out towards the corners of his mouth, with a show of elegance.

He had a red face and a red neck and a red nose. His ears were red. He had short, wide, thick, dumpy hands, and they were red, too. He was the reddest man and the queerest looking man, and in some ways, the strangest freak I have ever found on either side of the ocean.

But, with all, in his big red



The Irish were often characterized with apelike features as was done on the cover of this joke book.

bosom, throbbed one of the kindest hearts that ever warmed the cheek of mankind. His name was Dennis.

Dennis was a Catholic and I a Protestant, and we oftentimes alone would hold our religious services together. Dennis would say his beads and I would say my prayers. This quaint son of Erin would sometimes say to me, "Jem, if yez mother had born me, and me mother had born yez, yez would be sayin' these bades and I would be sayin' me prayers," and often would up with the philosophy that "After all, begore, it is just as we are born anyhow."

While Dennis was naturally gentle and good, he relished a real "scrap." We seldom got in and out of port at Cincinnati or Toledo without seeing my Irish partner thumping some fellow for insulting him or making fun of his queer appearance.

The first time we arrived at Toledo together, a big ruffian from the Wabash Canal struck me on my bare foot with a whip. He scarcely had time to enjoy my pain before Dennis had struck him such a

stunning blow in the face with his fist and dealt the ruffian's partner a like compliment for showing resistance, that they both tumbled almost simultaneously together into the water, off the dock.

My red-headed protector then grabbed me quickly by the hand and started at a pace like a quarter horse in the last heat, hurrying me down the alley over cobble stones, broken bottles, and tin cans, with encouragement at every leap. "Hurry, Jem, we will get away before the bloody polacemen come."

Sure enough we did. I need not tell you that this made me greatly love Dennis as well as greatly admire his courage. I became a hero worshipper, and he was my hero.

During these days, through that part of Ohio known as the "sections," there were many "big woods" as we called those great tracts of timber. They were bountifully supplied with wolves, deer, and an occasional sprinkling of bears. Many a time at night, while sticking to the back of a mule, I have heard the wolves howling in the adjacent timber. I would keep up a vigorous cracking of my whip to make them maintain a safe distance, that is, safe for me.

On these occasions, and especially if the night were rainy and the wolves correspondingly worse, I would hear the heavy footfalls of Dennis's brogans pounding the tow-path. And, the gloomy air would be light from an Irish tune that he always whistled when his mouth was not otherwise employed.

He would come beside the small mule I was riding, put his great arm about me, pull me off and give me a spank with his big, red hand. He'd say, "Jem, yes go back, jump in the boat and curl up in me warum bed." Then straightening himself up would strike his breast with his fist until it would sound like a barrel, and

say, "A divil the howlen wolf is this spaleen afraid of."

One night near St. Mary's, Dennis was "pulling the straw." Indeed, he had been for several hours before, and I, as usual, was talking temperance to him. He, as he had many times before, promised me when he returned to "Cincinnati" he was going to marry his sweetheart, Mary, and would never take another drop.

I said "Dennis, you may not get to Cincinnati." He pulled me down upon his knee and said, "Ye little divil, ye, if yez will lave me be tonight I will niver pull the straw iny more."

The next morning as the boat left lock No. 3 in the Sections, the water in the level being low, we hung upon a bar, and Dennis was sent back to the lock to open the wicket, raise a swell and carry us off the bar.

I was in the stable getting my team ready to go upon the "trick" when the steersman, pounding upon the deck of the boat in a frantic manner, said, "Jim, Jim, hurry out and go back to the lock. I am afraid Dennis is in the water, he is drunk this morning.

I understood it all. A presentiment was plain. I hurried out. The boat, being some distance from the tow-path, I jumped into the water and saw through as quickly as a little boy would. I hurried to the lock where I saw Dennis's hand floating, and knew beneath, under 20 feet of water was my Irish partner and protector.

It was in the gray dawn of a foggy morning on the gloomy canal.

After due effort, Dennis's body was removed and taken to St. Mary's where an inquest was held. The coroner's verdict was that Dennis was drunk and drowned. That was all there was of it. As there

was nothing else to do but let the township bury him, we departed.

IN THE NEWS

May 21 - Spencerville, OH

The Toledo Blade article "State To Restore Allen County Canal" said that the Ohio Department of Natural Resources will spend about \$750,000 to clean and restore parts of the Miami & Erie Canal in Allen County, Ohio. They are stabilizing the canal bank and dredging the canal between the locks. The locks will only be cleaned. There is no money for restoration of them.

Ohio has attempted to get communities to take part in the restoration. The section between Fort Laramie in Shelby County and Delphos was to be done by Spencerville, a town with a population of 2,200. However, Spencerville officials said that the proposed \$150,000 to do the silt removal and stabilization of the banks was not enough.

The towpath along the canal, which linked Toledo with Cincinnati, is part of the Buckeye Trail system and part belongs to the North Country Trail. Hopefully, the canal may one day have a foot and bike path that connects Toledo with Dayton.

Dick Kudner, CSI member, Perrysburg, OH

July 1 - Toledo, OH

"City Of Frogs: Artistic Amphibians Take Toledo By Storm" was the title of an article in the Toledo Blade. "Its Reigning Frogs" is a project to raise funds for local charities and to raise the image for the region. This latest fad of creating fiberglass animals, having companies or groups sponsor them, have artists