

Picnic on a Slow Boat Through a Vanishing Canal

FROM ANN A. TROY

THERE was once a time, before this blasé era, when the height of excitement for a Nutley family was having a picnic on the Morris Canal, hiring a barge hauled by a span of mules at a speed of anything up to four miles an hour. The canal, whose dried-up bed served as a repository of abandoned automobiles and later provided the course of the state's new Garden State Parkway, was once not only Nutley's picnic grounds but its swimming hole, ice-skating arena and courting or sparking place as well. In fact it served, usually, for almost everything except the purpose for which it was built - to haul coal from Pennsylvania.

It is only 30 years or so since the Morris Canal went out of existence on its 100th birthday, one more victim of progress. Most of Nutley, except the teenagers, remember the canal for its swimming or skating; a few remember it for its picnic and its courting possibilities, but only a very few remember it as a working canal.

Since Nutley had no industries, the canal, which nipped at only one corner of town, had no practical purpose. Its building brought the town no vices; its demise brought tears only to the teen-agers who lost their swimming and skating. Until the state engineers recently decided to use its bed as a trace for the new parkway, the Morris Canal was a forgotten relic.

Miss Ann Troy, in compiling a town history for the Nutley Historical Society, spent considerable time before she was able to piece together the story of the canal. She found hundreds of Nutley couples who admitted, but not for publication, that they had courted along the canal, generally getting there in a surrey with a fringe on top. But nowhere in town records is there any mention of the 100-year-old canal ever serving the community any useful purpose.

"Nutley was a town of only a hundred houses when the canal was cut through, and this entire corner of New Jersey was rustic and pastoral," Miss Troy recites in her history of the Morris Canal. "The canal flowed quietly through orchards and green fields where it touched a corner of Nutley - or Franklin as it was then called - along East Passaic Avenue."

The canal owed its beginning to the coal mines of Pennsylvania. As coal gradually replaced wood and charcoal, turnpikes and canals were built as easy means of transportation. There was great rivalry to get the new coal trade, and the Morris and the Delaware and Raritan Canals were quickly laid out in New Jersey.

George P. McCulloch, of Morristown, conceived the idea of the Morris Canal for industrial purposes. Little did he foresee an era when the canal would be a handy amusement place for the population. Little did he dream that some day

automobiles would race a mile a minute down its dried bed in orderly traffic.

It was while he was on a fishing trip to Lake Hopatcong that McCulloch conceived the idea of an inland waterway to link the Delaware River with the port of New York, Miss Troy records in her history. In the summer of 1822 local papers such as the Morristown Palladium, the Newark Sentinel of Freedom and the Newton Sussex Register published articles proposing such a canal, by one "Agretis," supposed to have been McCulloch himself.

Interest aroused by those articles resulted in an open meeting on August 21, 1822, in Drake's Tavern, Morristown. There, many prominent New Jersey citizens agreed that the proposed waterway could be useful in hauling anthracite to the sea, and could, at the same time, serve to revive the defunct iron industry of northern New Jersey.

The Paterson Chronicle of early 1823 relates unsuccessful efforts to interest both the War Department and the State of New Jersey in building and operating the canal. Finally, the state legislature, in December, 1824, chartered a company known as the Morris Canal and Banking Company, and it was allowed to sell \$1,000,000 worth of stock for building the canal. The contemporary press reports that "multitudes were seen pouring into Hayden's Tavern, in Morristown, on the day that shares were sold at \$10 each."

By 1833, after many problems in the construction of locks and planes were overcome, narrow boats, known as "flickers," began the haul of coal which other barges had brought from mines down the Delaware River.

The early canal proved to be too small for the heavy traffic that swiftly developed, and in 1847 and again in 1860 the canal had to be enlarged and the locks and planes widened. The planes were a novelty not usually found in American canals. Wherever the canal encountered a natural obstacle too great to be surmounted by ordinary locks, planes were used. A plane consisted of a wooden trough of the same width and depth as the canal. It was built across the hump to be passed. The canal boats were lifted by a pulley-and-chain arrangement out of the canal up and into the wooden trough, then pulled across the hump and lowered at the other end back into the canal.

The Civil War brought an unprecedented demand for coal and iron and the Morris Canal reached its peak of prosperity in the Secession years. However, in the interval between 1833 and 1861 a terrible rival was born - the iron horse. Railroads pushed their tentacles across New Jersey.

In 1861, the Morris and Essex Railroad spread across New Jersey from the seaboard to Phillipsburg, and in eight hours hauled coal the distance it took the canal boats five days to travel. Within thirty years the railroads killed the canals as carriers of the rich coal cargoes. The Lehigh Valley Railroad bought up the Morris Canal and took all the coal for its own trains, leaving to the canal only unprofitable secondary loads.

In 1923, patient efforts to have the State of New Jersey take over the canal succeeded, but it was doomed as a common carrier although more popular than ever as a playground. The Morris Canal reached its 100th birthday and its ending at the same time. In 1929, 100 years after the big ditch was dug by hand, the canal boats were hauled on the bank, the famous planes and locks were dismantled and the water drained out of the canal. Seedlings and weeds sprouted in the rich canal bottom and soon its trace was lost in greenery. The old wooden bridges were replaced by concrete, but the State kept title to the valuable strip of land which had been the towpaths and the canal.

The canal died a slow death in its last years. During the "Gay 'Nineties" and early in the 1900s local "canallers" plied their trade from town to town. Cargoes were small and far between, so in fair summer weather, Miss Troy records, the "canallers" transported picnic parties on day trips. On those parties, which many people in Nutley still remember as very enjoyable occasions, a span of mules would plod along at a slow walk. The picnickers sat on the roof of the narrow vessel's cabin, and enjoyed the rustic scenery. Urchins, hoping for a cookie or glass of lemonade from the picnic baskets, ambled alongside on the towpaths. They had no difficulty in keeping up with the poking slow canal boat. At the dams or planes there would be a halt long enough for the picnickers to go swimming. The wooden bridges served as convenient diving boards. There were catfish for those with patience and a line to trail from the boat.

The canal attracted many of the artists whose studios were in The Enclosure. It was on a towpath that Reverend William Stewart, pastor of the Franklin Reformed Church from 1890 to 1911, sought relaxation in painting while his friend Frederick Spinning captured history with his camera.

In later years the canal was a favorite waterway with canoeists who were able to paddle uninterruptedly from Nutley to Little Falls. That was also a preferred skating path in the winter when, of course, the ice prevented the canal boats from moving.

In all the memories of the old canal, it was the tempo which pleased, as well as the rusticity, the flowered orchards and lush green pastures through which the slow waters flowed. Unlike the Passaic River, which was then virtually an open sewer, the Morris Canal was sweet-scented, and its towpaths led through open fields toward the beckoning hills.



Canal boat, Morris Canal at Nutley, about 1896.