



101 miles along the Erie Canal

A beginner pedals a path through New York history

By **JOANNE JOHNSON**
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"Low Bridge, Everybody Down"

I've got a mule, and her name is Sal,

Fifteen miles on the Erie canal,

She's a good ol' worker and a good ol' pal,

Fifteen miles on the Erie canal,

We've hauled some barges in our day,

Filled with lumber coal and hay,

And ev'ry inch of the way we know

From Albany to Buffalo OH ...

— *Written by Thomas Allen in 1905*

Fifteen miles I could do. Four hundred though? I hadn't been on a bike for 15 years. I didn't even own a bike. But when my daughter suggested the Erie Canal bike ride last fall, it sounded like fun. Fun in the far distant future, that is, like the next July.

In March, it was time to train, using one of those virtual reality exercise bikes. I'd select a course and follow an imaginary pacer up hills, along bluffs, or through the countryside (with virtual sheep and cows!) until I could do 12 miles in 40 minutes. That was kind of fun, in a sweaty way.

In April, it was time to buy a bike, and they sure had changed since my childhood Schwinn! Road bike, hybrid, comfort? And \$490 for a couple of wheels? Ah, but the hybrid Specialized Vienna 1 was a beautiful machine that hummed along Watertown's Black River Trail at an easy 13 mph (according to my \$30 speedometer, which also recorded mileage, time, calories burned).

Then on July 11, we drove to Buffalo to join our group. This year's ride was the 11th annual Cycling the Erie Canal bike tour sponsored by Parks and Trails New York, with 500 participants from 39 states. I signed up for the two-day ride, Sunday and Monday, covering 101 miles from Buffalo to Medina to Pittsford (\$200). My son-in-law, his mother, an uncle and cousin, more experienced, were doing the full 400-mile eight-day ride on to Waterloo/Seneca Falls, Syracuse, Rome, Canajoharie and Schenectady,

PHOTOS



'SAGGER' FRANK JOHNSON

Riders cross a lift bridge over the Erie Canal at break time during the 11th annual Cycling the Erie Canal bike tour in July.

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ending in Albany on July 19 (\$525). The fees included breakfasts, most dinners, camping, snacks, admission to museums, boat rides, programs, an official T-shirt and water bottle.



"Tent City," sprawled across the campus of the Nichols School, was in full swing when we arrived. The field was crowded with pup tents, family tents, campers, minivans, supply trailers, big gear trucks (for a small fee, you could have your tent/equipment moved from site to site), picnic tables, folding chairs and, of course, hundreds of bicycles of all types and their enthusiastic riders.

The evening program introduced us to the staff, safety tips and the week's routine. Breakfasts and dinners would be hearty buffets set up in the cafeterias of the host schools, and there would be morning and evening briefings, as well as educational programs (everything you wanted to know about the Erie Canal — and more!). We'd cover 40 to 60 miles a day, mostly along the fairly level Canalway Trail, but with some riding along public roadways. Morning and afternoon rest stops with refreshments were scheduled, along with a break for lunch, and a variety of activities. Except for the opening ceremony on Sunday, riders could start and stop at their own pace.

As we walked back to our campsite, lanterns, like fireflies, lit up folks relaxing, comparing notes and fussing with their bikes. A local band was playing, and the line was still backed up at the bike detailing kiosk, where people were getting their wheels cleaned up and tuned up in preparation for the ride. But by 10 p.m., Tent City was fast asleep.



"Eat plenty, especially the carbs," they told me the next morning at breakfast, so I piled on the potatoes and muffins, as well as eggs and sausage and fruit. Eating all this at 7 a.m., though, was a challenge to someone used to two cups of tea before her eyes focused. "Don't we have to wait an hour before riding," I asked, "like with swimming?"

But by 8 a.m. we were all assembled, as antsy as racehorses, for final words of wisdom (when you pass, yell "On your left!"), encouragement ("See you in Medina!"), the national anthem, and the starting gun. We were off!

The morning was glorious — clear blue sky, with the sun just beginning to warm the cool breeze — as we followed the Niagara River until cutting over to the stone-dust Canalway path. Tooling along at a comfortable 12 mph, I could see that my fellow riders were a varied lot — singles on recumbent bikes, doubles on tandems, teens, seniors, couples, families with children riding (one young girl rode the whole trip with a cardboard Statue of Liberty crown atop her helmet), families pulling little ones in trailers, and everyone in high spirits. This was fun!

Our official morning rest stop was about 20 miles out in Amherst, where we were treated to cookies, granola bars, pretzels, bananas, nectarines, Gatorade, lemonade, juice packs and water. After a quick tour of the small Amherst Museum, with its exhibit on how laundry day ("This is the way we wash our clothes") had changed for women over the years, we hopped back on our bikes (who had time to rest?) for the next 10 miles.

Our box lunches and "saggers" were waiting for us at the Lockport Canalside. Saggers are the loyal relatives and friends of us bikers who look after our things, set up and tear down our camps, bring us the stuff we forgot, take hundreds of pictures of us, and keep us company at the stops as we ride merrily along, oblivious to all practical cares. Kind of like the knights of old and their squires.

After lunch we crowded onto a tour boat for a narrated cruise along the canal. Commissioned by Gov. DeWitt Clinton, the Erie Canal was derisively called "Clinton's Ditch" during its troubled construction. But the canal was hailed as the "Eighth Wonder of the World" when completed in 1825. By opening up the interior of the country to trade, the canal made New York into the Empire State.

We also learned that the hand-dug 363-mile canal took eight years to complete and had 83 stone locks to overcome the 541 foot rise from the Hudson River to Lake Erie. Today, there are 35. Our little journey took us through locks E34 and E35, raising our boat 49 feet as we headed west toward Niagara Falls, and lowering us back down as we returned east.

Recharged and with the Erie Canal refrain (Low bridge, ev'rybody down/Low bridge, for we're comin' to a town!) playing relentlessly in our heads, we cycled on to the afternoon's rest stop and then into Medina around 4 p.m., for a 48.2 mile first day.



By 7:30 Monday morning, we were once again riding along the canal, watching the ducks and geese ripple the quiet water, the small boats bobbing at their docks, and seeing the low bridges materialize in the distance as we were "comin to a town."

These are the lift bridges, 16 of them on the western section of the canal, which can be raised upon request. Today the towns were Albion, Holley and Spencerport, quiet and quaint now but once bustling with barges hauling "lumber, coal and hay."

In the afternoon, we rested at the Genesee Valley Park near Rochester. Our goal was Pittsford and the lovely campus of Nazareth College, for a total of 53.3 miles.

This was the end of the road (or canal, so to speak) for me, but the other riders would continue on to visit the Women's Rights National Historic Site in Seneca Falls and the Burnet Park zoo in Syracuse, to ride more canal boats (learning that whole families

lived and worked on the boats, that mules were favored over horses for pulling because of their low maintenance, and that "canal fever," or malaria, was common), and tour the Chittenango and Canastota canal museums.

They explored the Erie Canal Village in Rome and Fort Stanwix National Monument, before cycling on to Canajoharie and spending their final night at Collins Park in Scotia, where there were end-of-the-ride celebrations, a bike decorating contest, live music and fireworks. All that was left on Sunday was the last 30 miles to the Corning Preserve boat ramp parking lot on the Albany Riverfront.

As folks packed up their gear and said their goodbyes, I heard shouts of next year's rides — Pedal the Coast (Maine)! Tour de Wyoming! Michigan's Upper Peninsula! The Great Hudson Valley Pedal!

Yeah! Bring 'em on!

Next year.

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