

Eight Days Navigating on The Erie Canal—A Mega-Trail Journey
By Robert Searns, November 5, 2001

It was the “Moon Shot” of the 19th Century. When first conceived in the 1600’s, the notion of digging a waterway connecting the Atlantic Ocean to the Great Lakes was almost incomprehensible. This was a time when horse drawn wagon was the most advance means of overland travel. In 1816, undaunted, Dewitt Clinton and other visionaries of his time decided it could be done. Nine years later the Erie Canal opened, a continuous waterway running 350 miles from Albany to Buffalo. Today, a bike trail is being built along that historic corridor using much of the old towpath. Completing the trail the entire distance will probably take much longer, but the vision is there.

To foster that vision, the New York State Park and Conservation Association sponsors a ride that covers the distance. Part is on bike paths; part is on highway shoulders and part of the way, near Syracuse, you ride on a single-track path beaten through grass. Following is an eight-day diary of that incredible trail journey.

Saturday, July 7: We arrive in Buffalo and 150 riders gathered at the Nichols Prep School. At dinner Carl Burgwardt, curator of the Peddling History Bicycle Museum, located in the nearby town of Orchard Park, tells us that it was bicycle technologies that lead to the airplane and the automobile. He also told us that the American road system was first championed by League of American Wheelmen to facilitate bicycle travel. Ironic that today bicyclists must fight for every sliver of peddling space even though one of every eight people on earth own a bicycles--the same ratio as 100 years ago!

Right around sunset it starts to rain and many of us decide to sleep in the school’s hockey rink. Somehow that intrinsic energy of a hockey rink is not conducive to sleep and I sneak out the dugout on the ball field and camp there. It rains all night.

Sunday, July 8: We set out for toward the Niagara River. It is still raining but it is a cooling misty rain. We ride through the old Buffalo neighborhoods that housed generations of Polish and Italian workers and merchants, past churches, taverns, bowling alleys and restaurants. At the river we pick up the Niagara River Trail that now runs along the Buffalo waterfront from Lake Erie toward Niagara Falls. We pass rusting industrial sites now being taken over by foliage. Even in the rain there are people out on the trail, families on bikes. I am especially intrigued by a heavy set middle-aged man in coveralls (Buffalo is not a “spandex” place) and his daughter—both on roller blades. Further down, there is a Sunday morning revival session going on right in the middle of the trail, a woman is preaching hell fire and brimstone and the crowd nodding amen. I cut a detour onto the grass and slip around behind being careful not to spill my bike.

Shortly after that the trail turns east and follows Tonawanda Creek. This is the beginning of the Canal and the trail winds along the creek bank fronting more affluent homes through Amherst, NY and on to Lockport. At Lockport we see the first locks of the Erie

Canal and break for lunch. On a map I notice a waterway called Murder Creek and recall that this area was once “home” to Tim McVey.



Prayer Meeting On The Trail Near Buffalo

We follow the towpath out of Lockport through Gasport, Middleport and on to Medina. We wave at pleasure boaters cruising lazily along the canal. The rural landscape here is amazing. Fields of corn, beans and alfalfa stretch to the horizon. There are no power lines, metal buildings, or other 20th Century artifacts anywhere in sight. The landscape looks exactly the way it did 100 years ago. The steel truss lift bridges crossing the canal, the American Gothic homes and churches also date back to another era. Economic stagnation sometimes has its benefits.



Fields Near Lockport

We reach Medina early in the afternoon and pitch camp at a middle school playground field but not before stopping to enjoy frozen custard, a Western New York delicacy. I meet up with Jeff Olson, a major trail and greenway guru and the one who instigated my taking this trip. Right before sunset we make a beer run on our bikes. The girl behind the counter cannot believe we are riding across the state. She says she wants to get a bike.

Monday, July 9: The sun is out and we set out for Pittsford. We discover a hidden waterfall off the road in the town of Holley where a girl and her mother are fishing. We stop for lunch at the Mythos Café, a great Greek restaurant in Brockport complete with baklava and Turkish coffee. We you bike fifty miles you can eat with impunity. Later that day, we ride through Rochester along that city's extensive greenway system and debate taking a side trip up the Genesee River. We opt instead for an impromptu two-man scrimmage at a trailside soccer field. By late afternoon, we arrive at Pittsford where shops and restaurants occupy the old canal side industrial buildings.



Rest Stop Near Pittsford, NY

Tuesday, July 10: The trail along this stretch is paved and smooth. We pass more fields and hamlets. Savvy developers have taken advantage of the canal trail amenity and there are new town homes mixed in with the older building. Some folks take a two-mile detour to visit the farmhouse of Joseph Smith who founded the Mormon religion. Jeff has to head back home to Albany and I ride on. That night we camp in Waterloo. A bunch of us find a great Italian Restaurant and with once again monge without remorse. That night there is a huge thunderstorm. The rain pounds and the lightning hits so close it rattles my tent. I wonder if lightning can pass through a rain fly.



Old Dry Docks Near Syracuse

Wednesday, July 11: I end up riding alone today mostly on back farm roads that parallel the canal corridor. It threatens to thunder again as I ride through the Montezuma Wildlife refuge. The rain holds off and by noon I make it to Camillus and visit Sims Store, a re-

creation of 19th Century general store along a restored section of the old canal. By mid afternoon I roll into downtown Syracuse. In the downtown plaza, an Italian crooner is belting out vintage Como, Sinatra and other Solo Mio material and I stop to listen.



Hay Bails Near Montezuma, NY

Thursday, July 12: We ride through Old Erie Canal State Park that follows the historic old canal on the old towpath now a trail running along through a serene 19th Century landscape from Syracuse to Rome. We visit the restored old locks and dry-docks at the Chittenango Canal Museum.



Along The Mohawk Near Schenectady

Friday, July 13: We depart Rome and enter the Mohawk Valley. The Mayor and police meet us just outside of Utica and with his honor leading the way (on his bike) we ride into town. The police then escort us to the Utica Club brewery where we sample the Saranac Lager and other brews thoroughly. Utica's finest on bikes and in squad cars then escort us out of town. Fortunately there is no traffic on the back roads.

By late afternoon we arrive in Canajoharie in the heart of the Mohawk Valley. Tom Porter a Mohawk holly man speaks to us about what the valley was like with it was still a part of the Iroquois nation. He tells us of his grandfather's pain when at fourteen, he was forcibly taken from his family and sent to Arizona to "Indian School" and how he

escaped to find his way back. He reminded us of how the fathers of our country learned much about our democratic form of government from the Iroquois and how we better wake up soon before we destroy mother earth's capacity to sustain us.

Saturday, July 14: The reach from Canajoharie to Schenectady follows the Mohawk through the “Big Nose” and “Little Nose” land formations. The only water level passage through the Appalachian Mountains, this was the gateway to the west in the 18th Century and the site of decisive battles in the Revolutionary war. Segments of the original stone and wood locks of the Erie Canal can be seen here. We camped out on the Union College campus in Schenectady.



Erie Canal Towpath

Sunday, July 15: This is the home stretch from Schenectady to Albany. The ride follows the Mohawk-Hudson Bikeway mostly on a paved bike path first along the Mohawk then turns south along the Hudson. Part of the trail runs on top of the old Mohawk and Hudson rail bed—the first inter-city railway in the U.S. We pass some high school girls running cross-country on the trail cursing their coach for working them so hard. Jeff and his seven-year-old daughter join the ride again and we cruise on into Albany triumphantly ending the ride near downtown.

Epilogue: The concept of mega-trails is one coming into its own. “Mega trails” are trails that cross entire states, even nations. I learned from the Erie Canal trip that the notion of an “interstate highway” of trails is a concept whose time has come. It is not a new idea. After all, the first person to cross the country using his own mechanized vehicle did it on a bicycle. More recently, The National Rails to Trails Conservancy proposed an interconnected national network of trails using old railroad lines and Missouri’s Katy Trail has set an excellent example. The Appalachian Trail, the Colorado Trail and the Arizona Trails are mega trails. When completed, the East Coast Greenway and the American Discovery Trails will be mega trails.

A decade ago, I would have doubted that validity of long distance trails. Who would make the trip—ride that far? At first, I wasn't sure I could go the distance on the Erie Canal but seventy-three-year-old Howard Harris convinced me. He's ridden all over the county and made the trip handily. Nearly twenty years his junior it left me and the 150 or so other 40 and 50 something riders no excuse. Turns out, we all made it, mostly without mishap excepting a couple cases of road rash and a flat tire or two, and more importantly, we all made it without undo stain thoroughly enjoying it. We also all went home with a new appreciation of New York's cultural landscape that you could not experience from a car or plane and a proud sense of accomplishment that we had conquered an entire state by muscle power alone.

Some of the towns along the Erie Canal are struggling to maintain their economic integrity and indeed their identities. With the glory days of canal commerce, and the early 20th Century industry that followed, now long gone, these communities need a new shot in the arm. It struck me, as a bunch of us riders went out for dinner at Amandrea's Italian Restaurant in Waterloo, NY, that collectively the tour probably spent \$ 2000 in that small town on one meal alone. If you figure lodging at the local hotels and B&B's—even though many of slept in the town park that night—that figure might have topped \$8,000 to \$10,000. The point here is that there is a growing market of long distance bike tour enthusiasts likely to expand even more as aging yet fit baby-boomers move into retirement. Yes, bicycle tourists buy more than just a "Granola Bar" and a bottle of water though we bought a lot of those too.



Towpath Near Fairport

Mega-trails like the Erie Canal Trail are perfect facilities for this kind of recreation. Once completed the entire distance from Albany to Buffalo, this corridor will no doubt draw tens of thousands of visitors annually bringing both tourism dollars and redevelopment in communities like Pittsford and Fairport that showcase the canal trail as a hometown amenity. I've now got two states under my belt--Missouri and New York, thanks to their mega-trails. I'm working on Colorado this year hope to be able to draw a "have bicycled the distance line" from coast to coast in five years or so. By then, I hope that we will be well on our way toward creating a coast-to-coast trail and greenway network.