

Cycling the Erie Canal

By William Tuthill

Who hasn't heard of the Erie Canal, the one that is celebrated in song and story?

It was not until I recently bicycled the length of the old canal, however, that I began to understand why it matters so much in American history. Seeing it up close, from the all-revealing perspective of a bicycle seat, made it clear – along with the daily lectures, museum visits and tours along the way.

The Erie Canal changed the way European Americans settled the West in the 19th century. It made New York the economic center of the United States for more than 100 years. Much of the industry is now gone, but the bones are still there. Buffalo, Rochester and Syracuse and many smaller Erie Canal cities, with their wide streets and grand public buildings and parks, retain an air of greatness.

Of course, history was just one of the attractions of the 400-mile ride July 6-13 from Buffalo to Albany, sponsored by the New York Parks and Conservation Association. There were probably as many reasons for doing the trip as there were people (some 400 riders from 35 states, ranging from 17 months to 81 years in age).

For me it was the joy of discovery, of riding through gently rolling countryside and then, every 15 miles or so, entering a town or city, where the Erie Canal had been the "main street" in its heyday. The route usually took us to the center of town, where the principal buildings and monuments of the Erie Canal era often still stand. The canal today doesn't have the great social and economic impact it once had, but these towns have not turned their backs on the canal either. Many have used the old infrastructure as a base for modern-day tourism.

The tour logistics – food, maps, route markings, rest stops, bike repairs -- were taken care of, leaving the participants free to enjoy the physical and mental stimulation of riding 50 miles a day through constantly changing landscapes. More than half the ride was trails paralleling the present-day Erie Canal, or on small roads close to the canal's original 1825 course. (The Erie Canal has been widened and realigned over the years, sometimes moved miles from the original.)

Fifty miles a day is roughly the distance traveled by the earliest mule-pulled canal boats. One hundred seventy-five years later, the riders on the Erie Canal bike tour traveled at the same rate, albeit with far fewer hardships (cycling and camping in the rain notwithstanding!) The pace allowed riders to see the breadth and variety of upstate New York, from the level farm country in the west, the rolling Finger Lakes region, the industrial cities in the middle, and the rugged terrain of the Mohawk Valley, where the river cuts through the mountains on its way to the sea.

Lecturers and performers appeared every night of the ride to talk about the history and culture of the canal. One speaker talked passionately about the accessibility of the canal to people of all ages, backgrounds and economic levels. You don't have to have a quarter-million-dollar yacht, he said. There are no choice sections reserved for the higher-paying elite. The canal is there, for biking, boating, hiking, museum-going, staying in bed-and-breakfasts, watching canal locks in action, or just sitting. It is a beautiful resource open to all.

This spirit was reflected in the bike tour group. There was a great variety of people, of many ages and abilities. The ride was a leveler. I loved the freedom to join up with new acquaintances for a day or two, or to go off on my own to explore at my own pace. For one week, we had a shared purpose – to get up in the morning, eat together, ride, try to stay dry, set up tents at each night's stop, and enjoy the incredible resource that is the Erie Canal.

The ride across New York was my first organized bike trip with a group. It will not be my last.