

A
FIELD GUIDE
TO THE
'UPPER' WELLAND CANALS
THE FEEDER CANAL
THE GRAND RIVER

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CCS SPRING FIELD TRIP

1986

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Glimpses of Yesteryear

by
HAROLD V. MELICK

Article No. 15

The Feeder Canal

Some time ago the daily masthead feature, *Did You Know* . . . second section. The Evening Tribune, Welland, contained the following information:

"The Feeder Canal was the biggest thing that ever happened to Wainfleet. It opened up the central part of the township to commerce and business and as soon as this happened the settlers came in. The canal was built in 1829."

This brief quotation — from David Michener's Centennial Book, *Wainfleet, Story of a Township* — states the results of an important public project upon a specific area. The net results, however, were widespread. What was the basic or primary reason for such an enterprise at that time?

In an earlier sketch of this present series, *The Welland Canal*, that purpose was stated clearly, concerning the First Welland Canal which was opened November 30, 1829:

"In order to obtain a sufficient flow of water to lift the ships over the summit, that is, the Niagara Escarpment, and lock them into the the Welland River at Port Robinson, a 'feeder' canal was dug from there through parts of Crowland, Humberstone, Wainfleet Marsh and Moulton to the Grand River, 20 miles to the south-west, where a dam had been constructed at Dunnville, 4½ miles above the Naval Depot at Port Maitland. A branch line feeder from Stromness joined the main feeder canal, to give access to Lake Erie at Port Maitland."

Therefore, the second purpose of the Feeder was to provide a water route from the upper river to Lake Erie other than by way of the Welland River (Chippawa Creek) and Niagara River.

The same dynamic William Hamilton Merritt, chief promoter of the Welland Canal, also was mainly responsible for this project. As early as 1826 he had been advised by certain Erie Canal engineers of New York State to dam the Grand River at Dunnville and extend a "feeder" from there to Port Robinson in order to have an adequate water supply.

Eventually the government granted the Welland Canal Company 13,000 acres of land as a right of way and concession for this enterprise. Since such a dam would cut off navigation on the lower river from Dunnville to Port Maitland, a branch feeder would be dug from Stromness to the mouth of the Grand, providing access from the upper river to Lake Erie. By means of locks at Dunnville, a head of eight or nine feet of water would be both possible and available. Flood gates midway in the dam would insure the required water level.

Despite rather strong opposition on the part of some Canal Company directors, on September 12, 1827, the first nine miles of excavation was awarded to Monson, Simpson and Co., with the completion date set for October 15, 1828. By January 31, 1829 the whole Feeder Project was under contract with the date of completion expected for the following June.

William Hamilton Merritt moved his engineers to Marshville, now Wainfleet Village, where the work was started on January 31. On October 3, just 214 days later, after many difficulties such as bad weather, illness and fever among the workers, and continual financial problems, the project was completed. Water was turned into the Feeder Canal at the western end or terminus. This final test revealed certain flaws in bank construction and water levels. Another six weeks delay was required for repair work, and the official opening was November 14, 1829 — the grand finale of work carried out under adverse circumstances by primitive means — bare hands, shovels, scrapers and teams of horses. The day of triumph had arrived at last!

Two festive barges, with a continuous party on board, were the first craft to be towed by horses through the inland waterway, from Allanburg to the Grand River, during the mid-November season, just before the long winter "freeze-up".

The first commercial boats the following spring — on May 10, 1830 — to pass through the Feeder were four barges loaded with 1600 barrels of flour for Burlington, transported at a cost of 20 cents a barrel instead of the overland price of 80 cents per unit.

Within a short time a thriving packet freight line was established between Port Robinson and Dunnville, making three return trips a week, and this business venture continued to prosper for a number of years. In later times picnickers from St. Paul's Anglican Church, Port Robinson, sometimes were passengers to Christ Church, Wainfleet.

The schooner "Eric" of Cleveland, Ohio, bound for Youngstown, was the first large vessel to pass through the waterway with a cargo of lumber, barrel staves, cattle and farm products. The Buffalo based scow, "Sarah Jane" was one of the greatest users of the Feeder for a number of years and transported mainly timber to either Buffalo or Hamilton. A raft of timber, comprising 150,000 feet, bound for Black Rock, was transported by this route.

In 1892 the last sailing vessel passed through the waterway with a load of stone for Forks Road docks. This stone was transported from there overland to be used in the foundation of the Clark McCallum home along the Welland River, east of O'Reilly's Bridge, on what is now Highway 3A.

Sixteen years later — in 1908 — Edwin Hern was granted permission from J. H. Weller, Canal Superintendent, to boom the Feeder at Marshville and float 4,000 railroad ties to the McAlpine Mill, where they were sawed and loaded on pontoon scows and towed by horses to Welland. At that point a steam tug, "Ida Bell" owned by Captain Freeman Green of Dunnville, towed them to Thorold for the N. S. & T. These ties were used for the trolley line between St. Catharines and Niagara-on-the-Lake until the line was abandoned and finally torn up in 1932. The movement of these ties was the last commercial enterprise on the Feeder.

Timber and wood products as well as farm products were the main cargoes to pass through the Feeder, since most of the land along both the Grand River and the waterway was forested, and farms were being cleared.

Marshville and Stromness became important villages and relay stations where horses and mules were changed during the towing of barges through the canal system. There were tow paths on either side of the canal.

Dunnville became firmly established as an important centre of trade and commerce, a customs depot, and western terminus of the feeder waterway. In fact, as soon as the Feeder was completed, the building of boats and barges became a thriving business. Also because of the vast shipping of products down the Grand River, the village was a centre of great activity.

One person who greatly benefitted by the Feeder Canal was Lachlan McCallum, later a senator, who bought large tracts of land in the Stromness area where he built a mansion. He built his own boats and soon established a prosperous timber trade at Black Rock. Later he found the steam tug a more profitable way of towing timber through the Canal than by tow horses or by rafts down the Lake Erie shoreline. In fact, his timber tug, W. T. Robb, played an important part as a Fenian Raid gunboat during those troublous days.

In the meantime, because of the dangerous and treacherous currents of the Niagara River from Chippawa to Lake Erie, it seemed imperative that the first route of the Welland Canal should be changed — that it should push southward from Port Robinson to Gravelly Bay on Lake Erie. Consequently this southern part of the waterway was completed in 1833.

As early as the year 1853 it had seemed apparent that the Grand River could not furnish sufficient water for the Welland Canal. Finally, in 1881 the use of the Feeder Canal was discontinued, and the water for the main waterway was taken directly from Lake Erie at Port Colborne.

Furthermore, the advent of the railway era meant inland transportation for the full year whereas by water there was the long winter seasonal layoff. Coal, instead of wood, was becoming the main fuel. This transition meant a big loss transportation operation.

As a result, the once busy waterway became idle; villages such as Marshville and Stromness diminished in importance; the locks and bridges gradually deteriorated and became useless, as has much of the actual waterway itself — now a meadow of stagnant water or duck ponds — while other sections have been filled in for roads, parking areas, or neglected spaces of trees, shrubs, and swamps. The Feeder Canal has accomplished its work in a credible manner and many traces of it are still visible to remind us of an earlier, busy inland waterway in the southern part of the Niagara Peninsula during the pioneer period of settlement.

Glimpses of Yesteryear

by HAROLD V. MELICK

Article No. 21

Two Craft of the Feeder Canal

An earlier article of this series, *The Feeder Canal*, stated that the construction of the Grand River Feeder for the Welland Canal was begun on January 31, 1829, and was opened officially on November 24, of the same year. Two barges decorated in a festive manner, towed by horses, were the first craft to pass through the waterway from Allanburg to the Grand River at Dunnville, while the first commercial venture had to wait until the following spring when four barges loaded with flour for Burlington passed down the Feeder on May 10, 1830.

Within the first decade of operation, one person of a large group years later briefly recalled the trip that waterway.

William I. Imlach was one of a group of relatives, friends and retainers of Colonel John Johnson, C.B., a retired officer of the East India Company service of the Bombay Engineers, who came from England in 1838 and settled in the Port Maitland area of Dunn Township, on a tract of land near the mouth of the Grand River, which he had purchased a year or two earlier. In 1900 W. I. Imlach, then of London, Ontario, wrote *An Old Man's Memories* in eighteen installments or chapters for the now defunct Hamilton Herald. In these articles he recalled a vast amount of information concerning those pioneer days.

The following quotation from Chapter Three of this interesting series deal with the journey up the waterway by Robert Murdy's Packet Boat to Dunnville, seven years after the completion of the Grand River Dam.

"On the morning after our reaching Port Robinson (after coming there from Buffalo by way of the Niagara River and the Chippawa Creek (or Welland River), our party embarked on what had the title of the 'Packet Boat', nearly filling the same from stern to stern. However, this said packet in its day did good service as one for the only means of reaching the interior of this section of the country — with the village of Dunnville the great objective point — as being at the head of the canal. This point was reached by our boat at night, having taken a whole day to compass about thirty-five miles, with its one old tow-horse as the propelling power. Such a sudden influx of so many taxed the full capacity of the place to put all up for the night. Here we had our first experience of the bloodthirsty Canadian mosquito, which seemed to revel in the taste of good old English blood.

"It is hard to attempt to give an impression of this village as it then appeared, but its first view at daylight next morning had a most gloomy effect, especially as it was to be in the future our town of source from which the needs of our new settlement could only be supplied. As near as my memory serves me, there were two small stores, a tavern or two, and a few houses mostly built of logs. Her Majesty's post office was kept in one of the stores."

Mr. Imlach hastened to explain why the foregoing scene seemed so gloomy.

"The most depressing effect of this view of it (the village) was from the appearance of the river, which from being dammed up, of course flooded the low lands for miles up, and unfortunately for our first impression, this old dead timber was then standing, as you passed up the main road in this place, which is on a level with the river."

— This sight of the upper river would seem to substantiate the fears and objections of the Six Nations Indians for any Grand River improvement. Early in 1829, John Brant, then Superintendent of the Six Nations, led the opposition to such improvements on three basic points: Indian lands would be flooded, their fisheries would be ruined, and a vast number of acres would be lost by the Canal Company. By the end of that same year the truth of their opposition seemed well established and confirmed. The Dunnville Dam, indeed, had resulted in the flooding of many acres of Indian land, the destruction of their cornfields and the source of much of their winter provisions. Lewis Burwell, Public Land Surveyor, estimated that at least 1,825 acres of their lands had been destroyed. Two years later the Welland Canal Company still was struggling to borrow money in order to pay off Six Nations damage claims and, as late as January 1833, the Indians had not yet received satisfactory monetary settlement from the Company as a result of the Dunnville Dam flooding their lands.

The second boat worthy of some attention and space in this article was a schooner, "Rapid City of Toronto", the story of which was told in a feature series, "Schooner Days", Number 133, under the caption, "Eva and the Rapid City" which appeared in the Saturday, April 7, 1934 issue of the defunct Evening Telegram, Toronto.

Captain Blake Mathews had sailed the schooner on a weird and somewhat wondrous trip from Toronto to Dunnville with a cargo of 65,000 feet of lumber. This cargo was the reversal of ordinary boat shipments. The year was 1890 when Toronto's lumber trade seemed to be waning. A schooner, built a few years earlier in Brainerd, was a trustworthy vessel and with its load, together with a favourable breeze, had "kited" across Lake Ontario from Toronto to Port Dalhousie in three and a half hours. From there it had been towed by the canal tug "Liz" as far as Allanburg where the schooner had to be locked into the Feeder for the Grand River village. In this operation, the crew helped the lock-tenders, as was the custom, at the hand winches that operated the lock gates.

At Allanburg the captain hired a teamster with his span of horses to tow his small ship to Dunnville. As soon as the towing charges or fees were determined, the schooner began to inch her way slowly up the canal.

The Evening Telegram writer of a generation ago rightly observed. "In its day the Feeder Canal had borne countless thousands of barge loads of cordwood, stave bolts and lumber, all coming down current from Grand River. Lake schooners had traversed its length, coming in fully laden by way of Port Maitland and some few had been towed up light from Allanburg to load at Dunnville; but never before had a cargo of lumber been towed up the canal, and none ever has been since. Besides all that, the Feeder had been put of business as a commercial waterway for several years when the 'Rapid City' undertook the Dunnville trip."

There were different problems to be solved if the schooner was to complete its mission. The canal banks had collapsed at several points, oaken "spiles" along the towpath had rotted and become useless, while the towpath itself had been washed out at several places, and the bridges had become badly rusted because of inactivity. Indeed, the Feeder had deteriorated in many ways.

About four miles beyond Allanburg the schooner came to the first of several swing bridges. The "Rapid City" coasted to a stop by the canal bank and all crew hands, together with the teamster, tried in vain to swing the bridge. The rust, the caked mud — the incrustation and general deterioration of a decade — had rendered the swing mechanism useless, so it seemed, despite the use of heavy cranks, strong crowbars, stout sledge hammers and reliable prices. Nothing seemed to budge.

After about four hours of effort and hard work, the teamster became discouraged with his bargain and decided that the only sensible thing to do was to return to Allanburg, wash his hands of the agreement and forget the job — which he did — leaving the schooner stranded below the first of several unswung bridges.

Night came on, when the tired and weary members of the crew, after a hard and long day of discouragement and frustration, were able to settle down to peaceful and restful sleep.

Early the next morning the crewmen were awakened from their slumber by the lusty voice of an old man.

"Hey thar. Whar you fellers goin'?"

"We're going to Dunnville," Captain Mathews answered.

The local octogenarian, after having surveyed the situation carefully, said he believed he could solve the bridge problem — that is, he together with Eva — who weighed a ton!

"Me and Eva'll do it," the old man promised. "Wait here a while and I'll be back."

A half hour later the old fellow returned, leading a heavy bay mare, already harnessed for the task at hand.

On asking for the strongest rope on board, which he was given, a stout, doubled new dock line was fastened to Eva's whiffletree and to the bridge structure. After a certain amount of gentle coaxing by her master, the mare started to draw the line very taut, as she steadily leaned forward braced herself and flexed her muscles as the collar and harness became tighter and tighter, with the strong traces groaning under the heavy pressure exerted by Eva. Finally the bridge began to rumble and the rusted mud-caked mechanism slowly gave way as the structure began to swing under the strong muscular force and strength exerted by the heavy draught mare. Within minutes the bridge was swung open for the pasageway of the schooner.

With this splendid show of strength and the general 'know-how' on the part of the teamster of an earlier generation, Eva and her master were engaged to tow the schooner to its destination.

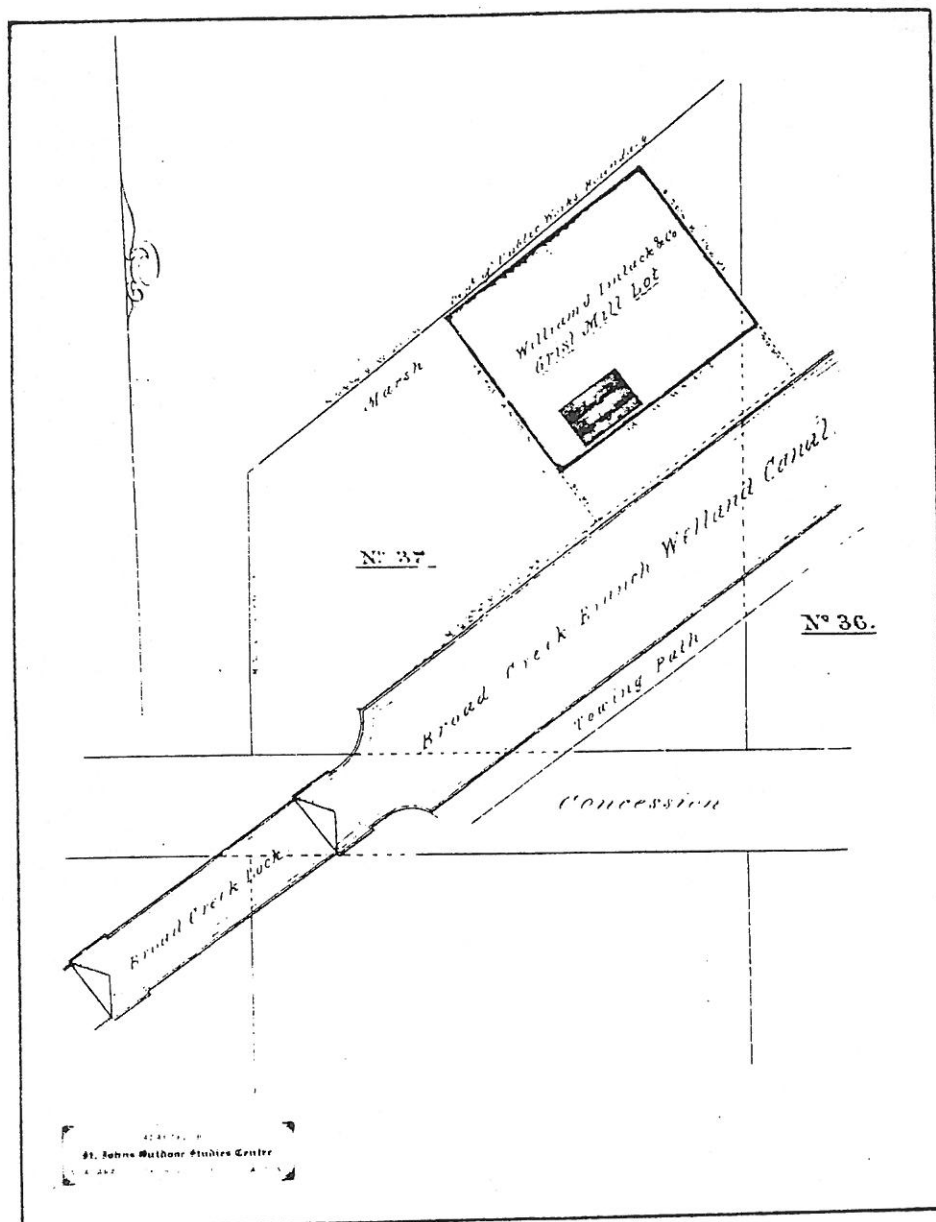
The other bridges proved less stubborn to manipulate. The second one was not too difficult to swing. The third and fourth were quite easily operated, while the fifth and last one was swung after an hour or so of preparatory work; and, consequently, the vessel reached the Grand River village.

The schooner and crew were given an enthusiastic and hearty welcome by the Dunnville people. During her three-day stay there, while her cargo was being unloaded, the vessel and crew were never lacking crowds of admirers and well-wishers.

In due time Eva, under her master, towed the boat back to Allanburg. The old canal teamster was offered a liberal remuneration for the round trip.

"Wal," replied the rustic octogenarian, "when I was in the business forty years ago it was five dollars for the round trip. Them days is gone now, but Captain, I guess you won't mind paying the reg'lar charge. Five dollars, please!"

Without the teamwork of the 'ancient' teamster and his heavy, powerful, draught bay mare, Eva, Donovan and Oliver's cargo of lumber on board the "Rapid City of Toronto" would probably never have reached its destination of Dunnville by way of the Grand River Feeder to the Welland Canal.



THE STONE LOCK AT BROAD CREEK: SECOND WELLAND CANAL PERIOD. NOTE THE GRIST MILL SEAT. AN ORIGINAL RE-TOUCHED.