

TURNPIKE TALES

by Jim Ford

"TURNPIKE TALES" #8

(Historical items from the "Madison Bouckville Antique Week" region)

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The Madison-Bouckville area has been rich in history from the arrival of the first settlers to the present day. As an addition to the website, we have decided to share some of that history in order that the patrons who travel to the Madison-Bouckville Show will have a better understanding of our truly unique region.

FACTS, TALES AND OTHER ITEMS FROM THE CHENANGO CANAL

The Chenango Canal, which passed through the Town of Madison, generated a significant boost to the local economy for a number of years. Goods were shipped from Binghamton to Utica on a canal that was considered to be an "engineering gem." The route of the canal, passing through Bouckville and Solsville, brought goods from distant points and allowed our local merchants to expand their product lines and show a fine profit.

As for the facts concerning the canal, they speak for themselves – a stretch of 97 miles in length, connecting the growing communities of Binghamton and Utica, with 116 locks, 52 culverts, 162 bridges and 19 aqueducts constructed. Seven reservoirs were also built to keep an adequate supply of water in the canal at all times.

The canal was 42 feet wide at the surface and 26 feet wide at the base. The channel itself was 4 feet deep. Workers on the canal project were paid \$11.00 per month.

And while all of this hard work led to a masterpiece of engineering, the years of operation from 1837-1878 was but a brief period of time after all of the effort put into construction and maintenance. But as we know, the railroad, which followed the same route as the canal and being capable of year around operation, was the deciding factor in the closing of the Chenango Canal.

When the canal opened, a speed limit of 4 miles per hour was established. This was to prevent erosion of the canal banks. The slow speed of the boats gave more than adequate time for youngsters along the route to have their fun. A large rock was secured and taken to a nearby bridge, like the one in Bouckville near the Landmark Tavern. When a packet boat passed by with passengers aboard, the boys would heave the rock into the canal so that it splashed next to the boat and soaked the passengers.

Another prank by the youngsters was to have a rope suspended over the canal at a height well above boat level. When the boat passed by, the rope was quickly lowered and tightened. Any cargo not tied down and any passengers who were not wary enough, were thrown into the canal.

Another fact of life during the canal days was the number of fights which broke out. During construction, the workers, who were often Irish, expected to be paid on time. Sections of the canal had been contracted by the State of New York to various individuals to perform the construction. Some were very prompt in their payments to the workers, while some were not. When payments for work performed were not forthcoming, a mini-riot could break out or a general strike of the workers would ensue. Drinking also led to fights, especially at the local taverns. There were even fights over who the best captain on the canal was or which boat would pass through a lock first.

The first boat to ply the canal was the "Dove of Solsville." Other boats from the township were the "Madison of Solsville" and the "Niagara." Boats that carried passengers were known as packets and those that carried freight were called bullheads. However, this was not always an exclusive rule as we shall read later in this article. Mules pulled the freight boats and horses pulled the packets. The animals were changed approximately every ten miles.

The maximum load to be carried was 65 tons. We are somewhat surprised by that tonnage figure but the dimensions for the boats were a maximum of 14 feet wide and 75 feet in length, a lot larger than we would have imagined and certainly capable of carrying such a substantial load.

These were not the only boats which used the canal. Canoes, rowboats, rafts, houseboats and excursion boats also added to the traffic on the canal. To travel on a Sunday afternoon from Bouckville to the aqueduct just outside of Solsville for a picnic stop, followed by a leisurely return, must have been an enjoyable experience.

The canal at Bouckville was the "summit," meaning the highest level on the canal route. The seven reservoirs, previously mentioned, were constructed with the idea that a great deal of the water would be designated for the summit level.

The word summit became a part of Bouckville lore with the naming of the local baseball team – the Bouckville Summits and the brand name for the products at the local feed mill – Summit Feeds. Just outside of Bouckville there was even a farm called the Summit Stock Farm.

A popular item to ship on the canal was barrels of whiskey. Grain that was grown locally would have been hard to transport on the roadways of the time and too bulky to ship on the canal. Converting the grain to whiskey reduced the size of the load to ship and was very profitable besides. Bouckville had a distillery along the canal bank, in fact when Samuel Mott, of apple fame, arrived in Bouckville in 1868; he had purchased a one-third interest in this distillery. He went into the cider and vinegar business exclusively with the arrival of the railroad.

We are also amazed at the accounts from record books of the time period kept by local boat owners. From the record book of James L. Howard, who owned the boat – Madison of Solsville – we find a detailed entry of the cargo carried for a period of one year.

"45,000 feet of pine lumber, 5,000 oysters, 23,000 clams, 9,000 buffalo robes, 15,000 pitchforks, 500 passengers, 40 barrels of rosin, 150 dozen sheepskins tanned, 900 bags of shot, 150 kegs of powder, 100,000 yards of broadcloth, a threshing machine, along with customary staples of crockery, salt, sugar, coffee, rice, clothing and dry goods."

This is a truly amazing listing and gives us a good idea of the variety of goods shipped through our area.

The canal certainly left its mark on our township. Solsville and Bouckville grew and thrived. Many of the original construction workers on the canal grew to love the area and remained. It is sad to see the remains of the Chenango Canal now, but the stories of the glory days will last for many years to come.