

BLACK RIVER CANAL IN LYONS FALLS

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The casual visitor in Lyons Falls sees the usual features of a small north country village, whose chief industry is the manufacture of paper. There are the stores, markets, hotels, and all; the old houses, the new ones, and the big mill whose buildings are situated beside the main street.

It is very normal and prosaic looking, and the visitor wouldn't guess that within a stone's throw of Center Street lies an old waterway, long disused and probably destined to be entirely filled in and forgotten, but with a history in transportation of immense importance in opening Lewis and the other northern counties to trade. And it is filled with the romance of forgotten times.



This waterway, the Black River Canal, was finished to Lyons Falls in 1855. It served to carry canal boats to and from the river, by means of locks, thus by-passing the 70-foot fall of Black River; and it was, in fact, the business thoroughfare of the village and one of its main reasons for being, until the coming of the Black River Railroad in 1867.

Along its banks were general stores catering to the canal trade, commission houses where commodities were bought and sold wholesale, an inn, a drydock where canal boats were built and repaired, and various small industries which filled the need of the "canawlers."

Canaling was a sizeable business before the advent of the railroad, and the only means of export for Lewis County products in quantity. The commission merchants bought and sold lumber, timber, potatoes, butter, potash, the famous Lewis County cheese, and other local products, which were shipped to New York and other cities by means of the canal to Rome, then through the Erie Canal and the Hudson River.

On a brilliant May day, it was peaceful, quiet, and sunny, with small traces of the lively days of the latter half of the nineteenth century. We followed the canal path from the old pier where the steamboats docked after bringing their string of boats up the river from Carthage. Although the old pier has been eaten down by the flow of the river, its limits are visible in the water with an old board or two still remaining.

A long, shallow depression marked the place where the sluiceway carried waste water from the old drydock, and the drydock itself has been partly filled and is overgrown with

weeds and brush. A concrete wall was built to keep canal water from flowing into it after it fell into disuse. A lockgate lay in the bottom of the lock, broken and disintegrating, but the finely laid stone work in the walls of the lock shows few signs of the passage of time. The floor of the locks, built of hewn oak beams, the chinks puddled with a clay mixture, are apparently intact. The towpath is still a road, tire marks showing that it must be used occasionally, but it is partly grassgrown and the edges were blue with violets and it is grown up with "snake grass."

And old building which had been variously used as a store or saloon during canalling days, has been turned into a dwelling house. Abel Basin, which used to be a little pond with red osiers all along its banks, is no longer a basin but a dampish spot overgrown with bushes and trees. A little stream trickles down through the deep woodsy ravine along Dock Street, and water flows through the old canal bed, just enough to make pleasing little waterfalls from one lock to another, and enough so that several juvenile fishermen were out with rod and creel. A little boy fished over the old lock gate, and two bigger ones in bright lumbermen's shirts waded the shallow water and the atmosphere of seclusion induced a pleasant dreaminess.

Above Abel Basin lay two more locks. The old sluiceway which carried off the waste water has fallen into decay and where the lockhouse had stood, there was only a gaping hole. Some years back the sandy hill had slipped away, possibly due to seepage from the lock, and the lockhouse caved with it.

Below, on the riverbank, stands a deserted shack which had been the summer home of Oscar Guilfoyle, an engineer and contractor who helped build the present three-way bridge spanning the Moose and Black Rivers. The house is in a slightly spot with a fine view of the river and the falls.



The next section of the canal, a long, straight stretch of smooth water, had an Old World atmosphere of quiet isolation, although we were now approaching the center of the village. It has always been a favorite skating place for the youngsters in the winter. Overhung with witch hazel and now and then an ambitious small elm tree on the very edge of the water, homes are now built along one bank, and a rock garden lay in a low spot where the cellar of an old store had been.

A bridge spans the canal here at its junction with the pond which lies just back of the main street of the village. This has never had a specific name but is known as The Basin. Originally a small stream passing under Center Street found its way to the river, but with the coming of the canal, it was dammed up to form The Basin.

Across the bridge stands a fine house with great pines, built in 1843 by Hezekiah Scovil, father of the late Judge Carlos Scovil of Lowville. This housed the first inn in Lyons Falls.

The only sign of life around The Basin now is at the rear of Lyons Inn and the stores facing Center Street.

As we went along the towpath towards the three upper locks, we had another fine view of the falls and the river. Soon we came on the huge stack which is part of the new steam plant built by Gould Paper Company and our journey into the past came to an abrupt end.

The second lockhouse which stood back of the Hoffman shop has disappeared, and of the three upper locks, two are being used as storage for coal by the Gould Paper Company. From there to the river above the falls, the canal has been filled up and it is used as part of the woodyard for the mill.

But compare the quiet of this same area with the scenes of 75 years ago! It was then a beehive of activity. A steamboat came up the river, its whistle tooting for a mile or so, and the long-drawn-out cry “b-o-o-ata-coom-in” went up on all sides. Men and boys came running to see the locking through of the boats. The word “steamboats up” was passed, storekeepers prepared to wait on trade, the storehouses made ready to load and unload, the tavern keepers polished their bars and their glasses in preparation for the lively business they expected for the next few hours. There might already be a group of scows waiting the arrival of the steamboat to take them down to Carthage. There were often forty boats clustered in The Basin.



Old Abe Shaw appeared on the scene with his lone mule to tow each boat into the lock at 25 cents per boat. Abe was a tall, rangy man with a ruddy complexion and a big reddish mustache, and the children imagined he must have been a sailor or a pirate because of the tiny brass rings in his ears. As a matter of fact he was neither, but strictly a landlubber. It was said that his mule was one of a pair which had belonged to Mrs. Judge Seger, who gave it to him when its mate died. She had often driven them harnessed to a big buckboard, the commonly used vehicle of the period.

The drydock was a lively place. It was run for many years by Jesse Irons, who came from New London in 1876, and started to build canal boats at a time when they were “Built by the mile and sawed off.” His carpenter shop had four benches each fitted with a shining array of tools and lathes, and he employed several men throughout the summer. The shop, blacksmith shop, lumber sheds, and drydock formed a quadrangle, which was full of activity during the canalling season.

The boats were built alongside the dock, and when ready for launching, the little doors (shaped something like a painter's palette) in the lower part of the gate, were gradually opened. What fun it was to see the water pour through, and see it gradually creep up the boarded walls of the drydock until it was brim full. And then the launching! Small wonder that there was always a crowd!

Sometimes a boat was floated into the drydock for calking. The oakum was pulled, then rolled into little ropes and stuffed into the seams. After that it was daubed with melted greenish-black pitch.

A bridge formerly crossed the canal to the towpath just above the drydock, but it was removed some years ago. There were several canal barns for the use of those boat owners who did not wish to take their horses or mules with them on the trip down river. One of these stood below the lockhouse and, after it fell into disuse, was taken over by an ashery. Potash and pearlash were produced there for some time.



The locktender often spent spare time in making pike poles for the canallers, which they used for propelling their boats around when they were not being towed by steamboats or mules. These poles were 18 or 20 feet long and tipped with iron points made by the local blacksmith.

The focal point of the canal trade was around the upper Basin. A general store on the bank of the canal where it joined the Basin was one of the earliest frame buildings in Lyons Falls and had considerable trade. It was first owned by N. B. Foot of Rome, who through his agents, also conducted a commission business. Among other agents were the Mills Brothers, Spink and Bleness, and A. H. Tyler. Later the business was sold to H. C. and D. C. Markham, who carried on an extensive commission trade, shipping quantities of potatoes, flour, lumber, dairy products, potash, etc. to the city markets. Davis and Cottrell ran this store for the Markham brothers, and later May I. Sterling and Shaw and Ryan, the last occupants of the building. After the store had been abandoned for many years, it was torn down and rebuilt into houses by William Dominick.

An old account book used in this store gives an idea of the kind of goods shipped and of the prices paid. As an example:

“Received of boat Matt and Jess by Captain Cunningham, for G.H. P. Gould, 5 bbls pork, \$16, 60 sacks Empire, 5 bbls Onondaga, 1 bbl Amos Bert \$42. “(This was salt from Syracuse). The captain received ten per cent, and the storekeeper a small charge for handling.

Back of this store was a storehouse and a big barn belonging to Homer Markham. He was an ardent horseman, ran a livery stable, and had race horses. On a tract of land he

owned across the river (now the site of the village park), he had made a half-mile track where he exercised his horses, and there when their day was done, he buried them, with headstones and all.

The Markham house, next to the store, had been moved from its original site on the little creek, when the canal was put through and the creek dammed.

A hotel first named the McAlpine and later called the Walton House, was put up by Gordias Gould in 1859. It stood opposite the present Lyons Inn. It was a handsome building of three stories, surmounted by a cupola, with large, comfortable rooms, always painted white and with green blinds.



A hostelry of considerable note, at one time it had "summer boarders" from the cities, who enjoyed the bracing air and amused themselves with boating on the Basin and the river, with driving, and an occasional dance. The ballroom was on the third floor and an old resident remembers that when the crack Constableville band came down into the valley to play for parties, they often played on the roof within the railing which surrounded the cupola. The Walton House burned in 1901 and was never rebuilt.

Situated across from the Walton and on the Basin, stood a building which was owned by Archibald McVickar and was run as a general store and commission house. It was purchased by Watson Shaw in 1907 and converted into the New Walton Hotel, later called the Lyons Inn. Near this site Gordias Gould had a small sawmill and also a sash and blind factory.

At one time six or seven derelict canal boats were gathered up by Captain John Whittlesey and sunk in the Basin to get them out of the way of canal traffic. And a "laker," a boat with a pointed prow, as opposed to the scow type, sank in the Basin with its load of hop poles. For a long time it could be clearly seen in the bottom with its cargo intact.

In 1895 Watson Shaw built a large general store on Center Street. It was ninety feet long and on the Basin had four stories with a dock where goods were hoisted from the canal boats. Until 1941 Mr. Shaw operated this store, which was famous for its versatility. Any want could be supplied. There were drugs and paints, boots, shoes and rubbers, jewelry, groceries of all kinds, crockery, hardware, furniture, clothing, and an endless variety of



anything the customer might ask for.

Mr. Shaw was the first mayor of the village, and a book of Village Ordinances of his term says, "The doing of a retail business in the sale of goods of any description from canal boats, in the canals, or from the lands by the side of such canals, and within the boundary line thereof, within the limits of the village is forbidden within a license, Except products of the farm and unmanufactured products of the forest excepting coal and salt." Such a license cost \$25 a year, \$3 a month, or \$2 a day.

Of all the small businesses along the canal of that period only one is now being used for its original purpose -- Markhams Old Mill. This was built for a feed and grist mill by Homer C. Markham in 1880, and since then has been owned and operated by O. E. Davis, later by Jay Markham, then by Charles McDonald. It fell into disuse in 1960.



Although the paper mill does not belong in the category of small business, it is located on the canal as well as on the river, and its construction marked the third event which gave impetus to the growth of the village, the others being the building of the canal and the arrival of the railroad. Built in 1894 by G. H. P. Gould, using the valuable waterpower of the falls, it was enlarged in 1910 when the "new mill" was added to the present structure. It remained in the hands of the Gould family until 1945 and became one of the largest producers of paper in Northern New York and it has always been one of the few in the country which owned its own forest land, and produced paper "from tree to finished roll."



It is now owned by Ralph Luethi, and has undergone considerable rebuilding and modernizing, with a new steam plant and office building added.

Near the junction of the river and the canal, beyond the canal bridge, a kindling wood factory was built and operated by the Kilham brothers and J. P. Whittlesey during the 1880's. Later a tissue mill was built on the same site by the Moyer brothers, but it burned after a few years of operation.

For about fifty years trade and transportation were brisk on the canal, but gradually the railroad gave them such keen competition that it was no longer profitable to use the slower method of freighting by water. So it was abandoned.

But while along the state highway to Boonville the locks were torn away to make room for the concrete road, in Lyons Falls a small part of the waterway is still intact and might

well be preserved as a momento of the method of freighting by canal in Northern New York, and of the tremendous part played by it in the opening up the region to the markets of the southern part of New York.