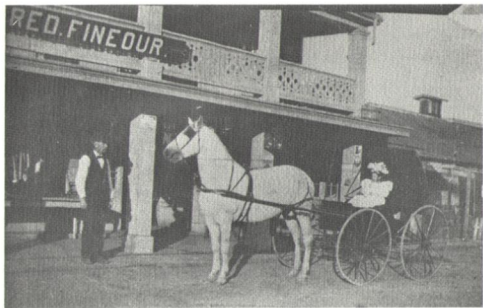


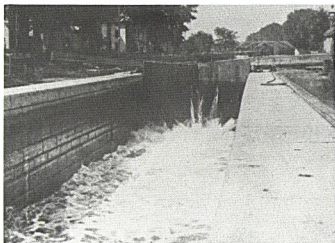
Minnie's Memories



By
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Erie Canal Lock in front of store

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MINNIE'S MEMORIES

"I've got a mule, her name is Sal,
15 miles on the Erie Canal."

These are familiar words sung or heard by many people living in the Mohawk Valley. They represent a way of life on the Erie Canal, a canal that was started in 1817 and opened for business October 26, 1825. At that time it was 4 feet deep and 40 feet wide, floating boats carrying 30 tons. In 1862 the Erie Canal could handle boats carrying 240 tons and had a depth of 7 feet. As the demand for more shipping grew, the Erie and its main branches were enlarged periodically. Along the full length of the Erie Canal hamlets, villages and later cities developed.

When I read statistics about the Erie Canal I often envision what it must have been like for the people running the boats and also for the villagers scattered along the canal edges. I used to feel that if someone from the past could only speak about those exciting canal days of long ago how much richer our feelings and knowledge would be. Sometimes reality is closer than we know and we fail to see it.

I have been most fortunate in finding my "someone" who for 10 years lived close to the canal, my dear friend Minnie Fineour Wetterau. She lives in Fort Plain, New York and has been my friend for a very long time. I had failed to discuss her early years or more likely failed to listen when she spoke of scattered moments in her childhood. She was born December 24, 1890 and for the first ten years of her life lived with her father and mother on the canal for they ran a general store and served the canallers faithfully. May I share her memories with you?

The Fred Fineour General Store was located on the north side of the Erie Canal, an area called Lockville. The front of the store faced southerly and would have sat behind the place where the Lee Fuller car wash is now located on Route 55. As one left the wide stoop (front porch) and stepped down from a high step one encountered a wooden plank walk-way. The walk consisted of two wide, rather thick boards laid side by side. Stepping from this walk placed you directly on the towpath. Needless to say, Minnie was given constant reminders not to leave these wooden planks without using the utmost care. The walls of the canal paralleled the towpath, a path of hardened dirt tamped down by man and beast.

Minnie was born in Mindenville to Frederic and Kittie Van Slyke Fineour moving to the store when an infant. Though she lived only the first ten years of her life on the canal this unusual way of living became so deeply etched in her mind that in this year of 1986 it takes but a slight mention of the Erie Canal for Minnie to recall and paint vivid mind pictures of the middle and late 1890's.

The general store her parents operated served the people of the community but more importantly it served the canallers; the crews, families and animals.

The building that contained the store also consisted of several apartments. Minnie and her parents lived in an apartment directly above the store accessible by outside stairs. There was an up and down apartment to the left and another family was housed in one on the ground floor of the building facing the rear.

What can a child of ten years or less remember you may want to ask? A great deal surprisingly enough. First, her home represented warmth and safety with a generous mother who although tied to the duties of helping with the store found time to share her home with and for her family.

Minnie recalls most of the furnishings of their home. A vivid red glass hanging lamp in the parlor, the organ in the corner waiting to be played are but a few. This same room became Christmas magic when a full green pine tree was decorated with garlands and dolls. At times she played a part in getting this tree by accompanying her father and hired man to the Hogsback section of Fort Plain which was located in the area near and behind where the Elm Tree Restaurant stands on Route 55.



Minnie — December 1897

The kitchen held a large cherry wood cupboard made especially for her mother by a carpenter named Pulver living in the Lockville section. The wood came from the Utica area brought down the canal by a barge hauling lumber. Looking at it today and touching its rich red wood poses no problem of total recall.

This same kitchen was used for the many Bee's that her mother held. On a monthly basis there was a Quilting Bee with the ladies sewing rainbow colors of material into serviceable comforters.

The Rag Rug Bees? Again a female gathering where rags of all kinds were sewed in strips, rolled into balls and eventually sent off to a company that would dye them and turn them into rugs.

There were the Larkin Clubs where a dozen ladies would gather, look over merchandise that the "Larkin Lady" displayed. Premiums were available for household items and many people today own "Larkin Furniture." One popular item was the Larkin desk; tall, of light oak, with a drop front, two book shelves underneath and topped by a small bevel-edged mirror nestled among smaller protruding shelves.

All this activity was a social outlet for her mother and a delight for an only child to be a part of. From springtime on, never really knowing when, a peddler, a "nice gentleman," would come from the towpath, open his magical bag on the kitchen table and let tumble forth linens, threads, ribbons and beautiful laces from Brussels. Each time something different, each time welcomed anew.

There was an umbrella man selling his wares along the well-worn towpath. People walked in the elements much more than we do today and a good sturdy umbrella was a necessity. He would repair your own favorite weather protector as well. And what lady could pass up a beautiful lace parasol?

Another delight was the organ grinder with his pet monkey. For a meal and some monetary comfort he would spend the day at the establishment entertaining the Fincoeur family as well as customers that came for their groceries. This added treat would be in store for the boat families as well if they were fortunate to pass through the lock across from the store. Locking time took from 20 to 60 minutes which gave them added time at the store.

Such major decisions for a young child to have to make. Should she stay at the store and listen to the organ grinder play while men from the boats came in to replenish their supplies? While the boat was going through the locks many men would play dice, throwing the dice down from a leather cup that Minnie still possesses. As the men talked and played, Minnie's mother would be making a refreshing drink of egg nog, a most welcomed repast. Or should Minnie run out and catch a thrill by hanging onto the lock gate itself as it opened? Or should Minnie and her friends watch the changing of the team of mules, mules that had been harnessed to pull these boats for six hours at a time?

The tired animals were led down a ramp and Minnie recalls that some were quite obstinate in performing this duty. It never ceased to make a child's world of action a bit more interesting. These beasts of labor were soon convinced that being put in the hold of these cargo boats wasn't the worse place to be for fresh water, hay and grain awaited them as they occupied stalls made vacant by the second team that were now rested and eager to be topside and out in the open. Space was at a minimum for man and beast on these floating cargo vessels.

Many times a man owned two boats, one laden heavily with cargo, the second being towed would carry the owner's family, the animals and more cargo.

Two or three mule or horse teams walking the towpath pulled these boats connected by a long lead rope. A driver accompanied these animals always on the alert for debris on the path or barking dogs or even large snakes that could startle the mules.

At night it would be a lonely and frequently a cold wet walk for the driver. On hot summer nights he would be plagued by insects. Minnie felt much compassion for these men for many times they appeared worn and tired.

Since the canal was opened from mid-May through mid-November the main object of the canallers was to move cargo and keep it going for delay meant less income for the owner.

These stores located along the canal carried everything a boatman could need. Fresh water and food staples were plentiful. Cooking utensils, lamps and oil and colorful candy as a treat were always in evidence. All necessary tack and harness supplies for the teams were available as were hay, straw, shavings and grain.

Minnie recalls her father being extremely busy when the canal was open for boats ran 24 hours, every day, all season. He had a hired man and they would take turns on alternate nights to be on duty, oftentimes taking cat naps while lying on top of the wide counter. Bells or whistles would signal a boat coming up or down the canal. In time her father could recognize what particular boat was coming by these sounds or by the voices of the drivers talking in the night. These men were proficient in keeping the mules calm with their soothing chatter. Later on he could identify vessels by the sound of the engines of individual steam boats which were starting to replace the animals as towpath power.

The 30-minute average wait for locking the boat always brought her father news from up or down the line. On one occasion a hired man failed to give the canaller enough change from his purchases and Minnie can recall that hired man running a "fair piece" to return the proper monies. It left a deep honest impression on Minnie and a deed that we can learn from yet today.

Minnie was not too young in those canal years to realize that life for the boat families was a hard life and full of concern especially for the woman living with her family on these boats during the season's run. Many owners took their wives and children and made it a way of life until winter and the freezing of the canal forced them to winter dock their boats and live in a village and hope that some work could be obtained. If not their frugal ways sustained them over the cold months.

It was the woman's job to cook for her family and the crew, do their wash using canal water and keep track of the children which was no easy task. The children were confined within the limits of the boat, many times not being able to be topside when passing under low bridges. If the boats were empty they would ride high on the water and not have the necessary clearance for even a child that would be standing up. Accidents would occur if a child and at times an adult forgot to duck. A dunking in the canal would result for the forgetful one. Adults were retrieved by a pike pole or rope thrown to their waiting hands and children by an adult diving to the rescue.

Minnie tells of the many people falling into the canal by being careless when using the crossovers or by standing too close to the edge and taking a misguided step. She can recall vividly the rescue by her father of a young man subject to seizures. He had fallen into the canal a short distance from the store. Her father rushed to the edge of the canal and was able to snag his jacket with the curved hooked tip of the pike pole and pull him out. Minnie was so proud of her father that day.

Family and crew had to sleep around the duties of running the boat. The crew and animals worked six-hour shifts. There was always activity; the locks to go through, villages to pass by, country to see, torrential rains to tolerate, thunder storms to endure, hot muggy insect-filled hours to pass and animals to feed and fuss over.

The lock tenders worked eight-hour shifts, staying in a small shanty near the gates. Many times they would frequent the store visiting with the Fineours and getting to know many of the customers. When signs of an approaching boat came they were at their posts. It was a necessary job performed with care that made the whole process run smoothly.

Minnie's father, meanwhile, was more than busy taking care of the store and its supplies. In back of the store the land was flat. A large dirt track encircled the edges of a marked-off field. The track was used by the firemen to run meets with their fire companies using their hose carts. It helped morale and also kept the men fit. Minnie recalls that these events entertained more than one child.

In the center of this track many people would have gardens, the land being ideal since it was situated near the water. Her father had such a garden and as a result had fresh vegetables to offer his customers.

The store contained shelves of merchandise; dry goods, canned goods and hardware. Near the counter stood a cracker barrel and a sugar barrel was near the store entrance. Minnie relates with affection the closeness her father, Fred Fineour, had with a white horse named Maude. He would ask Maude if she would like some sugar and the horse would proceed to step on the porch to the open door and put her head inside and try to get close to the sugar barrel.

The counter held a coffee grinder, giving forth deep rich aroma each time it was used. Many times Minnie would go to the cracker barrel and take some crackers for herself and her girl friends to use for their tea parties. They would soak them in water until they puffed into little white pillows, devour them and call them "simply delicious." Next to the coffee grinder was the cheese wheel and Minnie was so proud to see her father cut off a chunk of cheese for a customer and have it be the correct size and not "even be an ounce off." This part of the business took care of the needs of the people.

Mr. Fineour was equally busy taking care of the needs of the animals that were so much an important part of this canal, this waterway of cargo carriers.

In back of the store there was a large barn. Horses and mules were kept there and some could be boarded as well. The barn held hay, straw, shavings and grain. Another barn was a distance down the towpath toward Canajoharie. By having so much stock Minnie's father was able to supply the canallers. He also had extra space for men who walked the towpath, men who would enter your life for a day willing to do some job for a meal. Some would spend a night, sleeping in the hay loft of the two-story barn. With typical curiosity of a child Minnie would awake early in the morning, peek from her bedroom window and see the wanderer slide down a pole that lay near the open upper barn door. Rested and refreshed he would be on his way to traverse the towpath. Many made this their way of life during the warm weather seasons. It was always a mystery to Minnie where these men spent the winter. They were well mannered and brought no fear to any family. They simply appreciated any kindness shown.

The canallers were not the only people who benefited from the dried grasses and grains. Minnie remembers the circuses that came to town. They arrived by railroad and tents were set up on the flats. They bought food for many of their animals and also food for the circus family of entertainers from the Fineour store.

Rodeos or Wild West Shows came to perform with their colorful cowboys and Indians riding horses of every kind. Her father was given tickets to these exciting shows because of his kindness shown to these artists. Minnie said no one could ever forget the grand entrance they made as the whole troupe rode hard and fast, shouting and waving dressed in loud bold colors.

Other public events were the clambakes put on by the Firemen. They were held on an island that lay between the Erie Canal and the Mohawk River. It was land owned by a Jacob C. Nellis and was part of the main farm with the house located on Route 5S. The farm house then is now the Elm Tree Restaurant. This ground, known as Nellis Island, was a piece of very fertile land, highly prized for raising and harvesting crops. It apparently was deemed worthwhile to have a cable set up to help pull boats across. The one or two teams of horses were made to swim across. They were kept there, sheltered in an open-type shed until the crops were harvested. Afterwards, they once more returned to the main farm by swimming the canal.

At the west end of the island stood a large grove of trees where the clambakes were held. Boats again were used to take people and the food to these yearly gatherings. Minnie attended these outings with different relatives because it would be rare that her parents were able to leave the store for any great length of time.

"Someone" always returned with plates of the good food so the Fineours were never left to wonder what feast they were missing.

On occasion a boat would get "caught" in the canal, a boat that tried to navigate one more load through before the water froze everything hard and white. The boat would have to stay, the boat people would have to "put up" in the town they were near and wait for spring to release their craft.

Yes, the frozen canal stopped shipping but it brought new adventures for the populace. They would now sharpen their talents and skate blades and have much pleasure from the canal. Minnie learned to skate on the canal! Races were run from Fort Plain to Canajoharie. Carefree fun-filled days of winter but the canal could still be a danger to one not keenly aware of its potential.

One particular winter Minnie and her friends would change skates sitting on a "frozen lump" of ice that was located in "just the right spot." When the spring thaw came the "frozen lump" proved to be the body of a man who had disappeared over the winter. Though only a few feet deep the canal was a man-made wonder to be respected at all times.

Winter graciously gave way to spring year after year. Excursions were run up to Mindenville for the public's pleasure. When the weather co-operated to the satisfaction of the people, these pleasure runs were tranquil and beautiful. The thick dense greenery edging the canal was peaceful and serene. The canal water was quite clean considering its depth and the fact that all refuse from humans and animals from the boats was dumped into the canal. All waste was biodegradable and with a steady current coming from the fields run-off and from feeder streams the canal had a constant flow of fresh water. Although not a crystal clear expanse of water, to a child's eye growing up on the canal it was a large amount of busy water.

Living in Lockville Minnie would first use a crossover walk-way to proceed toward Fort Plain. She would then have to cross the Otsquago Creek via a covered bridge. We think these bridges something but to a small child they were awesome holding many dark nooks and crannies, something that Minnie could never adjust to alone. She first started school at the present Masonic Temple. She walked "uptown" for piano lessons and proved to be an apt student and for many many years brought extreme pleasure to her family and friends through this keyboard wonder.

Uptown there was something different to do. Seeing the operation of the lift bridge on River Street was invariably exciting. Going to the Fritcher Opera House was a delight. Minnie loved the minstrel shows and seeing "Uncle Tom's Cabin."

Gradually the horses and mules used for pulling the boats along the towpath gave way to steamboats. For the animals working the canal it would mark the end of a special period in history. Today we see picturesque scenes of mules pulling a boat along the tree-lined towpath, vibrant greenery everywhere with miles of quiet with Mother Nature as the only befitting companion. But in reality it was a difficult arduous duty that these loyal creatures enacted day after day. They worked long hours in all types of weather for all types of men. They rested but not in spacious barns or lush pastures. Small cramped cubicles on a constant moving boat was their only reward at the end of their six-hour trek.

Yes, Minnie felt sympathy toward these horses and mules for she saw their weariness, their reluctance to go below deck and the sores that they developed on their chests from the constant chaffing of the large collar.

Man needed these faithful comrades for that particular time period to make man's dream of a 400 mile-long waterway a reality.

The Fineours left the store and the family moved into Fort Plain. Mr. Fineour worked as a locktender for one year then he became the first rural mail carrier. His faithful horse Maude was a loyal partner. For a long time Minnie missed the canal life. Later a brother, Frederic, joined her but a void still was felt. Eventually, she adjusted and remained in Fort Plain her entire life.

Thank you, Minnie, for sharing your life on the canal with us.

Norma C. Frank

August 5, 1986



Erie Canal Lock Grocery

Minnie second from right next to her father
and her mother is second from left.

**Note: An inch to a foot replica of the Erie Canal Lock
Grocery building is on display at the Fort Plain
Museum, Canal Street, Fort Plain, N.Y.**