

THE KANKAKEE NAVIGATION

by John M. Lamb

In the 1830s and the 1840s Illinois, like other western states, was swept by a wave of enthusiasm for internal improvements. The enthusiasm resulted in virtual bankruptcy for the state. In Illinois the only achievement of this fevered era of speculation was the Illinois and Michigan Canal, which ran from Chicago to LaSalle, Illinois, thus connecting Lake Michigan and the Illinois river. By the time this work reached its finishing stages the state awakened from its internal improvements debauch, but the Canal fostered along its route a new fever of land speculation and other efforts to capitalize on the canal's importance.

One of these efforts was the attempt by means of dams and locks to make the Kankakee River, and its tributary, the Iroquois River, navigable from the Illinois and Michigan Canal to the Indiana border. The Kankakee River rises in Indiana near South Bend, and flows in a westerly direction until it joins the Des Plaines River to form the Illinois River. The Kankakee has been seen as an important waterway since the time of the earliest explorers. LaSalle, for example, used it as the connecting link between Lake Michigan and his projected empire in the Illinois and Mississippi watershed.

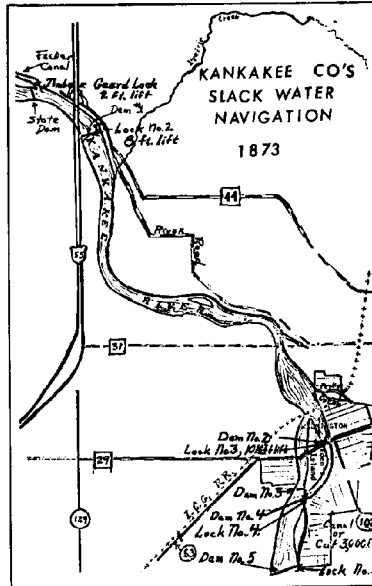
When the Illinois and Michigan Canal was built, a town called Kankakee was laid out by the Canal Commissioners where the Kankakee joined the Des Plaines; and where the Kankakee feeder to the canal crossed the Des Plaines river by means of an aqueduct to supply water to the canal. The town was widely promoted, but nobody moved there; by the 1850s the name had been taken by a city on the Kankakee River about forty miles east of the original town. It was like LaSalle's empire 200 years earlier, a great idea for the river that died aborning.

In 1847, in order to take advantage of the nearly completed canal, the state legislature approved the formation of the Kankakee and Iroquois Navigation and Manufacturing Company, with headquarters at Wilmington, about nine miles up river from the mouth of the Kankakee. The company wanted to raise \$100,000 by selling shares of stock at \$50.00 apiece (or \$5.00 down). One of the members of the board of directors was Peter Stewart, who had been a contractor on the Illinois and Michigan Canal. When the first contracts were let (with much fan fare in September of 1847) Stewart was awarded the only contract for a lock just north of Wilmington. It was apparent that though there was much rhetoric about pushing the navigation to Indiana, Wilmington would be about as far as it would get.

In December of 1847, further contracts were let with much promotion about the advantages of investing \$50.00. It was promised both the Canal and the Kankakee would be open for navigation in the spring. The canal was opened but nothing was heard from the navigation company. It seems that not enough people had advanced \$50 for even one lock to be built. In 1850 an effort was made to whip up some enthusiasm by reorganizing the company, but this brought in no



Remains of Guard Lock on Kankakee Feeder, most of which was timber construction.



money. In 1851 the state legislature approved an act allowing the voters of Wilmington township and the neighboring Reed township to vote a tax levy to bail out the Kankakee and Iroquois Navigation and Manufacturing Company, but the voters, in their infinite wisdom, declined the opportunity.



Interior of Lock Number Four of the Kankakee Navigation.

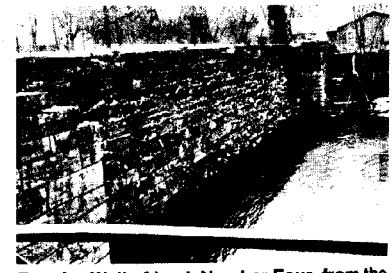
In the early 1860s the affairs of the Kankakee Navigation Company were taken on by Hiram Alden. Alden had extensive property holdings along the Kankakee River in Wilmington and also property in the newly opened coal fields five miles west of Wilmington. As a local paper noted, contracts were awarded for locks and dams on the river, and concluded with a cartoonal note that stands in sharp contrast to previous enthusiasm. "It is believed that this third attempt to secure slack water navigation from the Illinois and Michigan Canal to Wilmington will prove more successful than the former ones."

However, it was not much more successful as the only thing completed was a lock and dam about one mile upstream from the Kankakee feeder Lock and Dam No. 1. There was a state dam downstream that provided Kankakee water to the feeder to a maximum depth of four feet. Under the circumstances there was not sufficient

depth between the Feeder and the first dam and lock to provide adequate navigation.

Things seemed to take a turn for the better, when the old Kankakee and Iroquois Navigation and Manufacturing Co. was bought by the new Kankakee Company. This company was empowered to raise \$1 million and its directors included Hiram Alden, a Wilmington banker and the aforementioned Peter Stewart. Promises of locks and dams on both the Kankakee and the Iroquois were made to provide access to the bog iron fields of Indiana. Also, it was stated that the coal field near Wilmington would turn the area into another Pittsburgh. But again, capital was found more difficult to raise than ideas.

In the 1870s, through the efforts of Hiram Alden, the enterprise found support in the east from Boston bankers. President of the newly reorganized company was William Chafin, the Governor of Massachusetts; Alden was the secretary and the Engineer had the appropriate name of E. S. Waters. With a million dollars of capital, construction began at last. The State dam was raised two feet, providing a depth five



Exterior Wall of Lock Number Four, from the river side.

feet in the Kankakee feeder and enabling boats from the canal to get into the river. A timber lock was built at the entrance to the Kankakee feeder. Dam No. 1 and its lock were rebuilt and raised; the lock had an eight foot lift. A lock and dam were built at the foot of Alden's Island and at the head of this island in Wilmington another lock and dam. There was also a dam (west) on the main channel of the river. Between that lock and the river a channel 3,000 feet long was built at the end of which was another lock and dam. The dams were strengthened by aprons built of twelve-inch timbers, and secured to the river bed rock by heavy irons, guaranteed to last for generations.

Although the promotional material of the Kankakee Co., like its predecessors, showed navigation to and into Indiana on both the Kankakee and Iroquois rivers, the river was in fact, only navigable 21 miles to Werner's Landing. Once a week in the 1870s a boat set out from Werner's Landing carrying local farm goods to Chicago and returned with lumber and other goods from the big city. No high level of industrialization developed and no iron or coal was shipped; only the sleepy trade of the river towns and the neighboring farms. As a result of this in 1878, the Kankakee Co. was under trusteeship; in that year it sold all its rights to collect tolls and lease water power from the river, to the Kankakee River Improvement Co. By 1893 this company also was bankrupt and had to sell its assets to a water power company in Wilmington.

This monument to water navigation and private capital left its mark, as most of the lock walls are still standing in whole or in part. The dams, meant to last for generations, were breached or tipped over by the rampaging Kankakee. The company may have been short lived, but it left some monuments.

(John M. Lamb is president of the Illinois Canal Society and a director of the American Canal Society. He also took the accompanying photos.)