

“Illinois-Michigan Canal Restoration Under Way.” American Canals, no. 8, Bulletin of the American Canal Society, (Feb. 1974): 1.

Illinois-Michigan Canal Restoration Under Way



Historic view of Lock 11 on the I. & M. Canal at Marseilles, a few miles above the area now being restored.

“We were tired of talks for 20 some years. We wanted action – and now we’re finally cutting down a tree.” These words spoken by Roy Kurkowski, Illinois-Michigan Canal Coordinator for the canal volunteers, reflect the attitudes of many others who have donated work, materials and time to the restoration project now underway. With tools ranging from pruning shears to heavy earth moving equipment, weekend workers have sawed and scooped the canal free of trees to Split Rock, a point halfway between LaSalle and Utica on the 7-mile section of canal being restored

This attempt to turn the now defunct I-M Canal site into a recreation spot for the people of LaSalle County began more than a year ago when the LaSalle Rotary Club voted to do volunteer work on the canal over a 10-year

period. Rotarians Kurkowski and Dr. Robert F. Whalen (ACS member) led the club’s canal committee. Initial forages into the dense foliage which covered the canal bottom were made with hand tools such as axes and pruning shears. “Needless to say, we didn’t get very far,” Kurkowski said.

They then learned that there was a possibility of obtaining state funds for help in the canal restoration. The Illinois Task Force Committee for the Illinois and Michigan Canal had been appointed on 12 September 1972, “to review the entire canal problem, conduct a cooperative in-depth study and recommend a comprehensive development and management plan.” At a public hearing held by the committee, Rotarians heard of plans calling for eventual construction of a 62-mile linear parkway from the

steamboat basin in Peru-LaSalle to Joliet. A part of the canal which the plan approved for containing water was the La Salle-Utica section, and among the recommendations were the restorations of Lock 14 and of the aqueduct over the Vermilion River at LaSalle. In August \$10,000 was allocated to the city of LaSalle for canal restoration in that area.

On August 19 came the first formal offer of professional help when John Terselie, a heavy-duty equipment operator offered his services. On the first working weekend, 25-26 August, members of Operating Engineers Local 150, Terselie and other volunteers raked up five piles of brush over a 1/4 mile area, a major start had been made. The Operating Engineers Apprentice Program donated the use of a D-7 bulldozer crawler tractor and Zellmer Trucking of Granville offered the use of their D-8 bulldozer.

Heading into the Labor Day weekend, canal workers welcomed a visit from Ralph Fisher, chairman of the Task Force committee for the canal and Bob Thornberry of the Illinois Department of Conservation. Armed with plans and suggestions, the pair, accompanied by several staff members, conferred with volunteers to determine the best course of action. Fisher stayed to work alongside the volunteers and was joined on Sunday by State

Rep. John Kriegsmann from Pekin. On location for the grading of the towpath (done by Orlando Smith and Gene Stevenson at a cost of \$1.00), Fisher promised to do what he could to get the Illinois Department of Transportation to spread two or three inches of crushed rock over the base.

Upon inspecting the floor of the aqueduct over the Little Vermilion River, workers discovered that some steel plates which had been removed when the canal was drained 40 years before would have to be replaced. Lou Mahnic, local blacksmith, welder and historian, assumed responsibility for making the aqueduct watertight. But before the steel patching process could begin, crusty layers of silt, rust and scale accumulation over the last 69 years had to be scraped and chiseled off the aqueduct floor. Mahnic and his cohort John Mateika, along with members of the Ironworkers Local, laid bead on steel plates donated by National Sheet Metal. Plans call for the laying of a coating of gunnite (a special preparation which is seven times as strong as concrete) to make a permanent seal on top of the plates. Labor to put on the gunnite will be donated by the Gunnite Corporation of LaGrange. In the meantime concrete reinforcements, welding, chipping and related work was accomplished.

Kurkowski and Whalen arranged for the rental of an hydraulic pruner to trim back the dense overhang of trees south of the towpath. This machine, along with a tree-popping 100-C Binder, were joined by the D-7 on

September 7. As the heavy pieces tore through the dense undergrowth, the skill and precision of operators was in evidence. Cottonwoods, 50-feet tall and measuring 15 inches in circumference fell before the determined engineers, some of whom did volunteer work for two hours after putting in a full 10-hour day on their own jobs.

By the middle of September one could see the Illinois Central Bridge from the Gun Club, a view obstructed by greenery since 1930. During all the furious weekend activity on the canal, many businesses offered special prices for construction materials; food was bought from a local hotel, and refreshments were donated by many persons. Workers spent 11 weekends on the canal and about half the project was completed before winter came on full blast. The work should be finished in about a year, leaving this section on the canal in total repair, a good example of how a lot of work and very little money can go a long, long way.

Canal committeeman Dr. Whalen comments further: "We are hoping that the state will see fit to put up another \$10,000 this summer. With winter in full blast, canal work is zero. The canal is dry but starting to fill with snow, ice and water. Just perfectly beautiful. With the energy crunch and all, this project makes all the more sense. In fact, the canal section we are involved with is in walking distance of most of the city of LaSalle and is used as a walking trail all year long. Use of the canal will involve no use of gasoline at

all....All of us (the volunteers) are inspired by the work and never cease to be awed by the builders and their ingenuity."

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In 1822, Congress passed the first of several acts which resulted, from 1836 to 1848 in the building of the Illinois and Michigan Canal, connecting Lake Michigan with the Illinois River at LaSalle. The canal and barges which plied it served as the connecting link between the Great Lakes and the Mississippi waterway system for many years. Financed through the sale of state bonds and through the Federal Government's contribution to the state of every other section of land along the canal, the Illinois-Michigan has a 36-foot bottom width, 5-foot depth, 2 to 1 side slopes, a 15-foot wide towpath, and a 90-foot width of land reserve, adjacent to both sides of the canal.

Use of the canal as a commercially navigable waterway has long been discontinued, and little public use of the canal lands has been made subsequent to closure of the canal to commercial navigation. That portion of the canal from its terminus at the south branch of the Chicago River to the vicinity of Summit, a distance of some 7.5 miles, has been used as a right of way for the Stevenson Expressway and is completely obliterated. Although in poor condition in most reaches, the remainder of the canal channel and rights of way, are essentially intact and capable of development.

House Bill 670, passed and signed by Governor Dan Walker, transfers the stewardship of the Canal from the Department of Transportation to the Department of Conservation, to be

incorporated into the State Park System. This became effective Jan. 1, 1974. The state has finished a comprehensive study done by a planning firm, but not yet released to the public. The

Department of Conservation has applied to the Department of the Interior for inclusion of eight segments of the canal as a national historic district.