

“ ‘Drunken, Dirty’ Irish Build Canal.” *Lockport Free Press*. “Old Canal Days” Special, 15 June 1978.

‘Drunken, dirty’ Irish build canal

This is the latest of a series on the history of Lockport by John Lamb. Lamb, a resident of Lockport, is president of the Illinois Canal Society. This selection deals with early discrimination against Irish canal workers.

The building of the Illinois and Michigan Canal in the 1840s brought an influx of people into

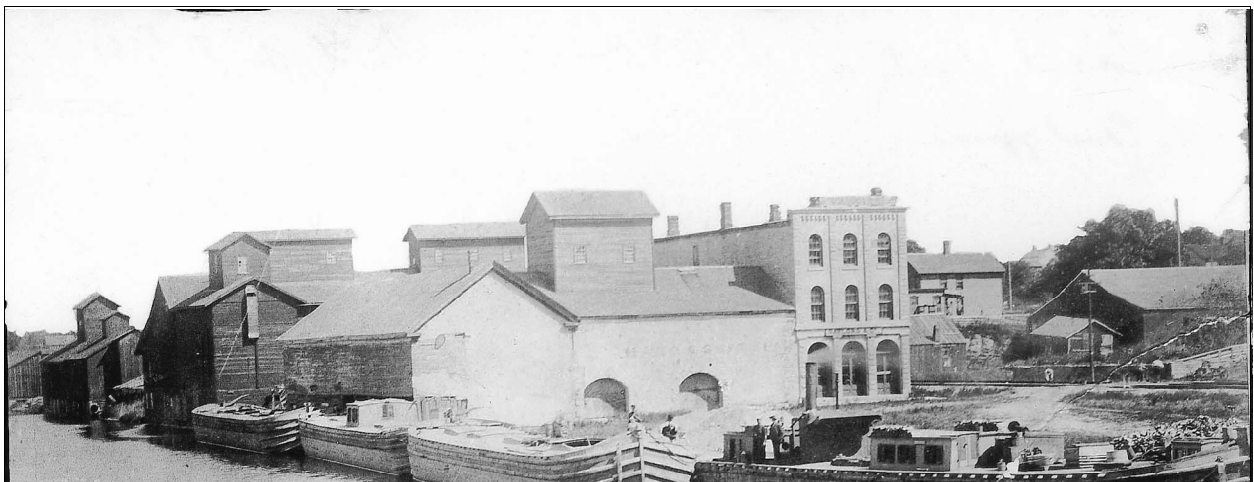
construction was in full swing.

While the Irish laborers built the canal, they were not generally appreciated. As the saying went, ‘To build a canal you needed a pick, a shovel and an Irishman.’

As one experienced canal contractor, David Weber, observed; he had worked on Pennsylvania canals and the I. and

In 1840 a Scotch traveler wrote the following about some Irish canal workers near Utica in LaSalle County. “We had scarcely got beyond the edge of town before we came to a colony of Irish laborers employed on the Illinois Canal, and a more repulsive scene we had not for a long time beheld.

“The number congregated here



The Old Canal, as it looked in its working days, was the result of long hours of work on the part of Irish Laborers who came to the area in the 1840s looking for employment. The Irish then settled in the area and became an important part of the history of Lockport. [Photo courtesy of John Lamb]

northern Illinois lured by the prospect of prosperity on the line of the uncompleted canal. One group that came was not lured by future prosperity, but by the cash promised for hard labor. These were the Irish laborers.

Most of the common laborers on the canal and some of the contractors were Irishmen fresh off the boats. The number of laborers employed along the canal varied from 350 in the winter to 1700 in the summer when

M. Canal, and had concluded that “...one experienced Irish laborer will do as much of any kind of canal work as three raw Hollanders.”

Despite this acknowledged ability as a laborer, the Irish as a group were despised. They were thought to be dirty, poor and drunkards. They were considered as necessary as a freezing spring rain, but their benefits could best be appreciated once they had moved on.

were about 200, including men, women and children, and these were crowded together in 14 or 15 log huts, temporarily erected for their shelter. I had never been in the south of Ireland and cannot say how far the appearance of this colony differed from that of villages there, but certainly in the north of Ireland, over which I have traveled from Dublin to Londonderry, I never saw anything approaching the scene before us in dirtiness and disorder.

“For this, here at least, poverty could be no excuse, as the men were all paid at the rate of a dollar a day for their labor, had houses rent free, and provisions of every kind abundantly cheap. But whiskey and tobacco seemed the chief delights of the men. Of the women and children, no language would give an adequate idea of their filthy condition, in garments and person. It required only a little industry to preserve both in a state of cleanliness, for water was abundant in the river close at hand, and soap abundant and cheaper than in England. It is not to be wondered that Americans conceive a very low estimate of the Irish people generally, when they have such unfavorable specimens of the nation, as these almost constantly before their eyes.

“Unhappily, of the immigrants who land at New York, the large majority are not merely ignorant and poor...but they are drunken, dirty, indolent and riotous, so as to be objects of dislike and fear to all those in whose neighborhood they congregate in large numbers. And yet the remedy is within their own reach to be clean, sober and industrious and is surely within the power of every man.”

The opinion that the Irish men, women and children were drunken, dirty, ignorant beasts was all pervasive among the inhabitants of this area at that time. The references to the Irish were usually deprecating. For example, Will County historian George Woodruff says that in the election of 1840 in Lockport the Irish voted as many as twenty times apiece, giving the Democrats an

overwhelming majority. Woodruff also quotes with approval a story about an Irish wake in which the living participants were so drunk that they lost the casket and its contents on the way from Lockport to the cemetery. They went on their merry way unperturbed until they had to present something to the open grave. Then they retraced their steps, retrieved the remains of the principal participant and buried him.

The Yankee engineers and overseers sought to woo the Irish away from demon rum but with no success. Buckingham interviewed the Superintendent of Laborers at Ottawa who told him that at first the Canal authorities said nobody who used “spirits” could work on the canal, but they could get no Irish workers with such a stipulation.

Next authorities said the consumption of spirits was all right as long as they were purchased by the Irish themselves. But in order to keep their men they were obliged to supply a gill of whiskey each day to each worker at the expense of the canal fund. It might be called the 19th century equivalent of the worker’s martini lunch.

Finally, there were the Irish riots. Fighting between two Irish factions was particularly intense in the 1830s. The two factions were the “Corkonians” from the southern part of Ireland (Cork and Limerick) and the “Fardowners” from northern Ireland (Ulster and that area). In the riots of 1838 and 1839 the “Corkonians” always seemed to get the upper

hand. Killing of “Fardowners” and “Corkonians” was not uncommon. There was a serious riot on July 4, 1839, in this area that ended only when the Sheriff in Joliet summoned a “Posse Comitatus” that met the victorious “Corkonians” at Romeoville, scattered them and arrested many. While the Irish may have killed each other in their fratricidal struggles, their non-Irish neighbors turned with even greater savagery upon the Irish.

In 1838 a posse in LaSalle County stopped a group of “Corkonians” who had overrun the “Fardowners” marching toward LaSalle. At Split Rock the LaSalle County Sheriff and his men shot down seven, and three more Irish were found dead in the tall grass, and no one knew, or seemingly very much cared how many more had been killed.

From the Irish side it must be remembered that they were on the lowest step on the economic ladder, and were hurt the worst by the canal’s financial difficulties in the 1830s and 1840s. The script the canal commissioners issued from Lockport in 1840 finally came into the hands of the Irish who found that few would accept it as money.

The dollar a day that was praised by Buckingham in 1840 was a dollar that could buy little and frequently not the needs of life. It could be used to purchase land though, and some of the Irish canal laborers did purchase farm land and did settle down to become prosperous farmers.

One of these was Patrick Fitzpatrick of Lockport who

bought land on the west side of the Des Plaines River.

But for most of the Irish canal workers, the reward for their hard work was canal script that was not worth anything outside the canal area, nor worth very much along the line of the canal.

The workers, like all such exploited people, were sometimes easily used by various political demagogues who were anxious to promise them anything so that the laborers could be used for the demagogue's own political gain.

In 1847 the State Trustee of the canal, Charles Oakley, was

engaged in a bitter fight with the canal administration, and to get a leg up in this struggle he was able to encourage a strike on the Summit level of the canal, that stretch between the Chicago River and Lockport.

The "turn-out" was triggered by a demand for \$1.25 a day for laborers. The workers still used English denomination and demanded eight shillings. The "turn-out" was a failure although it stopped work on that segment of the canal for about a week.

What was demanded by the strikers was \$1.25 a day or

reduction of working hours 6 a.m. to 7 p.m. with two hours off for breakfast and dinner. But as their strike failed, they were forced to return to work at \$1 a day for 16 hours of hard labor.

Despite these hard conditions the Irish contributed much to Lockport and northern Illinois. They built the canal after all, and contributed citizens such as Patrick Fitzpatrick, who raised a company to fight in the Civil War. His heirs contributed the land upon which Lewis University is built and also helped to build the St. Dennis Grade School.