

Remnants of ballyhooed canal still visible

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By David Litogot
Special writer

The Erie Canal was completed 163 years ago in New York allowing a tide of settlers to pour into the Michigan Territory, billed as the "Yankee land of promise flowing with milk and honey."

With Michigan now easy to get to by water and with land here selling for \$1.25 an acre, the territory soon had enough people to become a state. Twelve years later, in 1837, that was achieved.

One of the first acts of the legislators was to borrow \$5 million for internal improvements to cover the building of railroads, turnpikes and canals.

The Clinton-Kalamazoo Canal was the first of the several projected transportation systems that were planned to cover the state from east to west. The canal started at Mount Clemens on Lake St. Clair and was to end 216 miles away at Singapore at the mouth of the Kalamazoo River. That river empties into Lake Michigan. The route would pass near the center of almost every county through which it ran and for whose benefit it was intended.

Amid much fanfare, digging began on July 20, 1838. According to the Detroit Journal and Courier, "At

sunrise a national salute of 13 guns was fired. The music of shrill fife, the enchanting sound of the bagpipe, and the harmonious beat of the drum, all contributed to swell the importance of the day. Hundreds of the people from the surrounding country came pouring in. . . . Even the red man of the forest were attracted to the village by these uncommon hilarities of the white men."

The "boy governor," Stevens T. Mason was on hand to turn the first shovel of dirt at a point just off Cass Avenue near Mount Clemens. The citizens of this town dreamed that their little village would grow to be a magnificent city. Speeches were given, more music played, toasts given. Drinking was in excess.

THE WORK began. Shovelful by shovelful, the 20-foot-wide ditch stretched slowly toward Utica. Scores of contractors were hired by the mile, working in different sections, and each contractor brought in a crew of workers. They dug their way through a vast wilderness and many swamps.

According to the magazine American Canals, "shouts and risque songs filled the air as men toiled. Overnight, villages sprang up along the route to offer food, drink, and wild fun to the devil-may-care diggers."

Obstructions were removed from the Clinton River, making it navigable for boats from Mount Clemens to Oakland County. A good tow-path was constructed on one bank. Since

there was a 20-foot rise in terrain from Lake St. Clair to Pontiac, the crews had to build locks and dams out of stone and heavy timbers.

Various kinds of mills and distilleries were hastily constructed along the route as speculators got into the building boom.

At Yates Crossing (near present Avon and Dequindre Roads), an aqueduct was constructed that carried the canal over the top of the Clinton River. From here, the canal wound its way through farms, across roads, and through mills until it finally entered a navigable part of the river in present day Rochester-Utica Recreation Area. Work came to a halt at this point.

In 1843, the state funds ran out. The state withdrew its support because it could not find lenders. The Panic of 1837 caused the nation's economy to plunge into a depression.

Over \$400,000 have been spent on the \$10 million project, and in the meantime, the state treasury and the finance companies went bankrupt. Contractors could not get paid, and their workers in turn received nothing. The workers became disillusioned and disgruntled and resorted to

vandalism, destroying much of the construction they had done.

With the coming of the steam railroad, support for the canal vanished.

THE PART completed was little used. Records show that only two boats ever used the canal. One of them was a flat-bottomed barge owned by a Rochester carpenter, Asa Brown. He and some invited dignitaries were towed down the canal about one mile before it got stuck. Their craft was too wide for the lock.

Only 16 of the 216 miles were ever completed. Contractors in lieu of payment, were given land. The Ocelog house of Washington Township was built on land to an unpaid contractor. The completed parts of the canal, however, were used to power several local mills and public utilities.

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footprints in history

Now largely overgrown, parts of the waterway are still visible as it "flows" through both private lands and the Rochester-Utica State Recreation Area. Much of the canal from Mount Clemens to Utica consists of weed-choked drainage ditches. Other sections have been covered over. At Yates Cider Mill, one can still see several sections of the canal channel and ruins of the aqueduct. The city of Singapore, the intended western terminus, became a ghost town.

THE WHOLE project is a reminder of the ambitious plans and unstable conditions of pioneer Michigan. According to Robert Eldridge in the book, "The Past and Present of Macomb County," "The melancholy excavation seemed to be an open grave in which were to be buried the

hopes and dreams that misguided the enthusiastic minds of our early legislators."

If you would like to see the remnants of the canal, the best place to start is at the Rochester-Utica Recreation area, Bloomer unit, at the north end of John R. Road. Here, near the old picnic enclosure is a historical sign and steps leading to part of the old canal bed.

At the picnic area at Avon and Dequindre are remains of the aqueduct. From downtown Utica, you can see a large drainage ditch along Canal Road. This ditch was actually the canal. In Mount Clemens, Canal Road stops at Clinton River Road. Here the canal connected with the river.

It is amazing that so much is still seen after 150 years.

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PREBID MEETING

It is strongly recommended that bidders inspect the existing site. A prebid meeting will be held at 8:30 A.M., Wednesday, May 18, 1988, at 29350 West Ten Mile Road, Farmington Hills, Michigan to review files and answer questions. Bidders are to contact Mr. Ronald A. Aien for a reservation (474-9393).

ISSUE OF DRAWINGS AND SPECIFICATIONS

Drawings and specifications may be obtained after Monday, May 9, 1988, at the maintenance office, 29350 West Ten Mile Road, Farmington Hills, Michigan 48018, 471-6418.

DEPOSIT \$10.00 check per set

Deposits will be refunded in full providing the drawings and specifications, including any addenda, are returned in good condition within thirty (30) days after the bid award.

BID BOND

A bid bond or certified check for 5% of the bid must accompany our bid proposal form which may be obtained from our purchasing department.

LOCATION OF PLANS

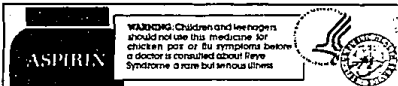
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The owner reserves the right to reject any and all bids and to waive any informalities herein.

JANICE ROLNICK, School Board Secretary

Published May 12, 1988



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