

# WALKING TO WASHINGTON AGAIN AND AGAIN

## Life on the C&O Canal

**JAMES RADA, JR. EXPLORES WHAT LIFE WAS LIKE ALONG THE C&O CANAL FROM ITS BEGINNINGS IN 1828 UNTIL ITS CLOSURE IN 1924**

**O**tho Swain was born on a canal boat on the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal in 1901. His grandfather had helped build the canal in the early decades of the 19th century. His father and uncles all worked on the C&O Canal as boatmen and lockkeepers throughout that century. It should be no surprise that Swain chose to work on the canal as an adult, but unlike his family, Swain would be one of the last “canawlers” when the canal closed in 1924.

Boatmen on the C&O Canal called themselves canallers, though to many people who didn’t live or work on the canal, it sounded like they were saying “canawlers.”

Working on the C&O Canal meant that your life was connected to a stretch of water that was 60 feet wide and 184.5 miles long running from Cumberland,

MD, to Georgetown. The path of the canal roughly followed the course of the Potomac River, which supplied the canal with its water supply.

### THE GREAT NATIONAL PROJECT

The Chesapeake and Ohio Canal was the federal government’s undertaking to facilitate interstate

commerce. President John Quincy Adams broke ground for the canal near the Great Falls in Maryland on 4 July 1828.

The C&O Canal was a construction and engineering challenge for its time. It involved more than simply digging a trench across level land and making it water tight. Boats traveling from Georgetown to Cumberland had to be lifted more than 600 feet on their westward journey.

The laborers were mainly imported Irishmen, who jumped at the chance to come to America, though they quickly found the work unsatisfying. The work was hard and the tools were picks, shovels, horses and black powder.

When completed, the canal had 11 aqueducts, 74 lift locks, 160 culverts, and 12 river feeder locks and guard locks.

The problem was that by the time the canal reached Cumberland in 1850, the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad had already been there eight years, though both projects had started on the same day in 1828.

By the time the canal was completed, it had cost \$14 million or \$9.5 million more than estimated. According to Elizabeth Kytle in *Home on the Canal*, as a portion of the gross national product of the time, building the C&O Canal was the equivalent to putting a man on the moon.

## THE CANAL BOAT AND CREW

Because of the size of the C&O Canal's lift locks, canal boats were designed relatively uniform so that they could fit snugly inside the locks. This meant that they were about 92 feet long and 14 feet wide.

The canal boats could haul 120 tons of coal in their holds, but they also had three cabins built on top of the holds. The mule shed carried the four canal mules each boat generally owned. The family cabin was where the captain and his crew lived. The hay house was for hay storage, storing other items and occasionally housing additional crew members.

The family cabin was 12 feet by 10 feet in size, which made living conditions within the cabin tight. People tended to stay outdoors much of the time and only slept in the cabin.

James Eaton grew up on the canal as one of seven siblings. He said in *C&O Canal Boatmen 1892-1924*, "Whoever was the baby generally slept with their mother and daddy. Then down underneath it (the stateroom bunk) there was a space in there about five or six feet where they'd put a straw tick and that'd sleep about three. Over in there where we eat at they had a little bunk that runs crosswise to the boat. Two could sleep on that, but it was very uncomfortable. Back under the stern, where the quarter-deck was, there was a place about two and a half feet high that went in off the kitchen floor that you could crawl in and you could put a bed in. It had a door. It was nice and cool from the water. That was my favorite sleeping spot, back under the stern."

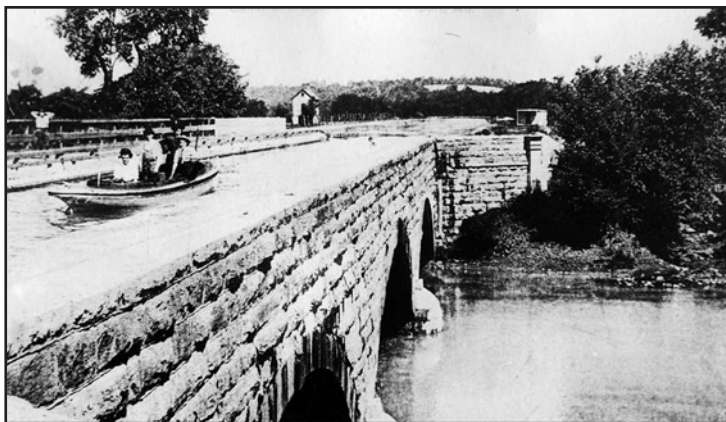
The boats had originally been more personalized; painted interesting colors and given names. However, at the end of the canal's life, the boats were standardized in size and color and given numbers rather than names.

The engines for the canal boats were mules that pulled the boat in pairs. The boats generally had four mules and switched them off every six hours.

Canal boats needed at least two crew members; one to drive the mules and one to pilot the boat. Captains often brought their families with them to live on the canal boat during the season. Of the 65 captains who were working on the canal in 1921, 59 of them were married, according to Thomas Hahn in his book *Canal Boat Children*. Of the married captains, 41 of them had a total



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of 135 children who also traveled with them.

Having a family work on the canal had multiple benefits. The family stayed together and it reduced the captain's expenses with having to hire a crew. Even children as young as eight years old were known to drive mules on the canal towpath.

"Ordinarily, family members didn't get paid for their work. The family, they boated for their bread and their clothing and for a place to stay. That was their wages. You might get a little money once in a while for something. When they got about eighteen or nineteen years old, they might have slipped them a couple of dollars. That was all there was to it. But if they had to hire any help, it would be five to ten dollars a trip," Clifford Swain said in *C&O Canal Boatmen*.

## CANAL RUNS

Most canal boats carried coal from the Cumberland, MD, basin to Georgetown, though some would make a short run from the Cushwa Basin in Williamsport, MD, to Georgetown. The Cumberland to Georgetown trip took an average of five days. This could vary depending on how large the crew was and how long the captain traveled.

Most boats only ran during the

day, but some would travel into the night in order to be able to make the run faster.

"Memorizing the canal was really the hardest thing about boating. You had to know where the deepest channel was in the canal. You'd have to know the places where some other boat would stop off at night. In case a boat was stopped and you were going on, you'd have to watch out for it. The stopped boats didn't have any lights and mules would be tied to the towpath. You'd have to holler back, "Boat on the towpath!" to your captain or whoever was steering," Swain said.

In the early days of canal operation, boats would carry all types of cargo. However, due to the competition between the canal and the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, hauling coal soon became the best way that a canaller could make a living on the canal.

According to Hahn, a canal boat captain made between \$24 and \$28 a trip in the late 1800s and early 1900s. From that amount, the captain would then have to pay his crew and expenses.

## LIFE ON THE CANAL

Despite the travel, there was a sense of isolation. Canallers couldn't really put down roots because they were always on the move. The only people they had

regular contact with were other canallers and lockkeepers.

Since boating on the canal was generally done during the daylight hours only, boats would pull over to the side of the canal and tie up for the night with other boats.

"We would sit there and she would do the mending, while I played. Some of the time, some of our friends would tie up behind and that would be wonderful. The men would talk among themselves, leaving their wives and kids to visit one another. My mother and the other lady would talk and exchange recipes and the kids and I would play barefooted in the dewey grass. When it got dark, we would go either in the neighbor's boat or our boat. The men would spin their yarns, and mother and the neighbor would visit," Lavenia Waskey Brust said in *C&O Canal Boatmen*.

Meals were prepared on the canal boat generally with food purchased at stores in Cumberland or Georgetown or from lockkeepers who tended gardens as well as locks.

"In the morning, you'd have cornbread, corn cakes. We'd make them the night before. And you'd have coffee, and eggs, and bacon. You ate a lot of ham, and many times you'd have fish that you'd catch off the boat — big-mouthed

bass and black bass — out of the canal and the river. They were certainly fine eatin'. We ate a good deal of molasses on the cornbread. We had potatoes and other vegetables. We had a coal stove and it had an oven; we ate the same things we'd eat at home. There used to be boats that came up to Georgetown and they had groceries on them. They'd pull up right along side and you'd buy anything you wanted," Swain recalled in *Time Was* by Elizabeth Kytle.

The reason that ham was so plentiful is that it was cured and kept well on the canal boats. Sometimes canallers would set snares in the hopes of catching rabbits overnight so they could have fresh meat the next day.

Though the canal was quiet, many canallers would sing while they walked mules or piloted the boats. They might sing a popular song of the day or, more likely, make up a tune of their own.

Overall, the health of canallers was good. It wasn't often that a doctor was needed. If a person got sick, they were tended to as best as could be managed. The exception to needing a doctor was when there was an accident. Most of the accidents were minor crashes between boats, but sometimes a new canaller might fall in the water and drown (experienced canallers knew how to swim).

## CANAL KIDS

The isolation of the canal could be seen in the education of the children. Clifford Swain said in *C&O Canal Boatmen*, "When we got to school, school had already opened and been runnin' for three months. We'd get in there and start in the middle of the book. By the time you'd get through a good bit of the middle of the book, we



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ended. We had to get back on the boat, so we never saw the first or the last of the book. We quit in April and school would go on until June."

Mothers were left to fill in the gap or children had to learn on their own.

Just because the children didn't have to go to school didn't mean that they got to spend their days playing. From a young age, children were expected to help with

all of the chores and jobs that needed doing on a canal boat.

There were plenty of children to help out, too. Overall, there were probably at least as many children on the canal boats as there were adults.

Besides walking, the other exercise that children got to do while on the canal was swimming. Children were even known to tie themselves to the boat and be towed along. Younger children who couldn't swim were tethered to the roof of the family cabin so they could move around on the roof, but not so far that they would fall into the canal.

## END OF THE SEASON

When the air turned colder and ice crust appeared on the edges of the canal, canallers began planning for winter. The canal company would keep the canal open as long as possible, but there usually came a point in December when it would have to shut down for a few months. The water would be drained and the boats were left sitting on the canal bed.

Many canallers spent their winter months in their homes. Sharpsburg, MD, was a popular location for canallers to live. It was located about halfway along the canal and close to it.

When word came along that the canal would reopen, canallers rode out to the boats to make repairs and maintenance and wait for the water to return. *Em*



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**JAMES RADA** is an award-winning writer who lives in Gettysburg, Pa. His newest book is *No North, No South...: The Grand Reunion at the 50th Anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg*. You can find out more about his books and articles at [jamesrada.com](http://jamesrada.com).