



**Traveling by Water Across Illinois  
from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

**John M. Lamb**

The rivers have been, since the Europeans first touched these shores, a path to the interior, a reminder of Europe and a gate to the wilderness. But with settlement and development, different concepts of the river began to emerge, and it was shunted to the background except insofar as it can be used for transportation. In order to better serve that end, it had to be manipulated, dammed

he had no oxen from France, he could use those of this country, or even the animals possessed by the western savages, on which they ride as we do on horses.”<sup>2</sup>

Jolliet also felt it would be easy to dig a short canal between the Chicago River and the Des Plaines so that boats could easily travel from Lake Erie to the Gulf of Mexico. He seemed also interested in encouraging settlement in the “Illinois Country” as it was called.

Around 1695 another Frenchman, De Gannis, waxes lyrically as he describes the Illinois and its shores.

“Here [after the Des Plaines and the Kankakee join] you begin to see the beauty of this country both for the soil, which yields beautifully, and for the abundance of animals, you see places on one side that are unwooded prairies requiring only to be turned over by the plow, and on the other side spreading half a league, and the same on the other side spreading half a league as can be seen from your boat. Afterwards you find a virgin forest on both sides, consisting of tender walnuts, ash, whitewood, norway maple, cottonwood, a few maples and grass taller than a man. More than an arpent in the woods you find marshes which in autumn and spring are full of bustards, swans, duck, cranes, and teals. Ten steps further on are the hills covered with woods extending about an eighth of a league from which the prairies are of extraordinary extent.”<sup>3</sup>

The Frenchman who would try to really exploit the Illinois Country was La Salle. In 1680 he entered the area, and despite consistent setbacks, sought to develop trade and bring in settlers, in the end to no avail. In 1680 he built a fort at Peoria called Fort Crevecoeur. He then left it under the direction of his lieutenant, de Tonty. At the fort under Tonty’s direction, La Salle’s men went about building a large vessel to carry goods down the Illinois to the Mississippi and the Gulf of Mexico. The goods were furs mainly, as La Salle had gathered the Illinois Indians into his plans. However, the Iroquois were equally anxious to control the furs from this area. They moved into the area from the east and successfully attacked the Illini. De Tonty, while out searching for a better place for a fort, learned that the party remaining at Fort Crevecoeur had mutinie



“...Moreover the utility of a canal would not be very great, for I doubt when everything should succeed, if a boat is overcome by the great flood which the currents of the Des Plaines cause in the springtime. These are much heavier than those on the Rhone.”<sup>6</sup>

The knowledge of the existence of this portage integrated the new country United States because of the possibility of a link enabling one to travel by water from the east to the Mississippi and the west. Around 1790 a map and description of the river were transcribed by a certain Lieut. Armstrong. Who actually drew the map and made the notes is not clear. Whoever it was, however, saw the river flowing through green and verdant fields.

“The river in general is about 60 yards broad and runs nearly Southwest, there is not much winding, and the current is not strong until you arrive at Isle de Cache, or hidi

than three miles in the driest season, but in the wet season boats pass and repass with facility between the two rivers.”<sup>9</sup>

One year later a young clerk working for the American Fur Company passed over the portage with a company of voyageurs and traders. He recollected the experience some years later in his reminiscences.

“Mud Lake drained partly into the Aux Plains and partly through a narrow crooked channel into the South

“We passed several towns today, as Liverpool, Havana, Beardstown – the former small settlement, but which its inhabitants intend to make larger as they have already a railroad in contemplation across the Mississippi....”

Ms. Steele also makes some observations on the boat itself. There were numerous signs around indicating the proper etiquette for particularly the male passengers, such as, ‘no gentleman was to lie down on a berth with his boots on, and none enter the ladies salon without permission from them.’ She notes, “We found in the boat three indications of being near the south, liquors on the table, gambling in the gentlemen’s cabin, and a black chambermaid slave to the captain.”<sup>11</sup>

In 1851 another traveler on the Illinois describes with more detail and anxiety than Eliza Steele, the vessel on which he embarked was not concerned with gambling and liquor, but the flimsy thing itself.

“A western steamboat is at first sight a novelty to one familiar only with eastern models. The boats on western waters are very slightly built –  
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“At early dawn I contrived to slide off my shelf and effected my ablution on a bucket on deck, before any of my fellow passengers had taken themselves down.

“From Ottawa to La Salle is a distance of about 20 miles, rocky islands occasionally present themselves, now surrounded by fertile prairie and cornfields. These islands in the plain much resembled some I had seen in China, within the Yang-tse-kiang-River....”<sup>13</sup>

Passenger travel declined on the Illinois River after the coming of the railroads in the 1850s. The completion of the Rock Island railroad in 1853 destroyed the passenger business on the Illinois and Michigan Canal. However, freight traffic continued to ply the waters. One of the canal boat captains recalled how he started out on the canal in the 1880s as a mule boy.

“I drove mules along the towpath, three, four or five mules. I was thirteen or fourteen; these old mules you had to know their language. From Lockport down you’d need three or four mules, hung in tandem, one behind the other, you know. The towrope, we called it the towline, reached back to the barge about 300-350 feet, you know. A man on the barge had to steer that barge, but the mules (they had them trained) they’d walk along the towpath as nice as you please.

“You’d walk or ride. The back mule we called the saddle mule, and that had a saddle on, you could get on and ride or walk – whatever you wanted to do.”<sup>14</sup>

Capt. Schuler recalled that the mule boy worked from sunup to sundown with no relief. Another view of life on the canal was that expressed by a juvenile boy’s author of the 1920s and 1930s, Leo Edwards, in a series called *Jerry Todd*. Much of the action takes place in Utica, Edward’s home town, which he called ‘Tutter’ and on the canal. The attitude toward the waterway is very similar to that of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, a boy’s adventure on a waterway apart from the adult world. In *Jerry Todd and the Oak Island Treasure* the adventure revolves around an old canal boat and the summer spent on it.

“Coming to the small wide waterways, halfway between Tutter and Ashton [Utica and Ottawa] we anchored the scow close to the right hand wooded shore, putting out the required lights. Then we turned in.

“Just before I dozed off I heard a big fish flop close to the boat. It must have been a big carp. Then a screech owl settled on a limb directly over the boat and told us in mournful plaintive hoots, what it thought of us. There were a thousand fire flies in the air. The night was wonderfully still. I filled my lungs with the cool air, wouldn’t it be fine I thought, if I could always live like this, and never again have to sleep in a stuffy bed room.

“Peg was the first one up the following morning. We heard him give a yell, which was followed by a large splash.



“ ‘Come in, you sleepy eyed bums,’ he shrieked, splashing around in the water.

“ ‘Next,’ I shouted, showing off my underwear.”<sup>15</sup>

Leo Edwards’ imagination looks backward. It is doubtful if this aquatic adventure took place in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Edwards undoubtedly wrote from memories of his 19<sup>th</sup> century boyhood. A more thoroughly modern look at the Illinois and Michigan Canal or perhaps a look imbued with visions of progress occurs in a 1905 promotional pamphlet for Lockport. The concluding chapter is on “Possibilities of Lockport.”

“When one looks upon the long vista of years that have elapsed since Lockport was evolved from the primeval forest [at most 75 years] of the region it seems almost incredible that Lockport has not progressed more rapidly. When you think of the beautiful hills and high bluffs on which the town is located, it would seem an ideal spot for a modern town. But there are several reasons why people have not cared to locate here, chief among which is the Illinois and Michigan Canal. The disagreeable odor has been widely talked of as a menace to health... Think what a great boulevard could be made from the old channel; it could be filled up and macadamized! One could come down from Chicago, with nothing to bar the way. It is possible that such may be the case.”<sup>16</sup>

In fact the voracious automobile would devour part of the old canal, as its bed was used in the Chicago area to build the Stevenson Expressway, or I-55. By the 1950s the old canal was either a place to build a highway on, or an historic site to take in on a Sunday drive.

By the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was a great push to enlarge the canal and raise the level of the Illinois River so that boats or larger tonnage could use this waterway. The argument for this was first of all military, based upon the presumed threat of a potential British control of the Great Lakes. Commerce took second place to a military need as far as those who appealed to Congress were concerned. In 1867 after making a survey of the river and canal for the purpose of raising the level by means of a series of locks and dams, General Wilson appealed to Congress to support the project giving this reason:

“The recent confederation of the British American provinces shows the anxiety felt by the English government in this behalf, and must be regarded as a movement in hostility to the people and institutions of the United States. While it does not actually increase the aggregate British strength on our northern frontier, nor in any way encroach on our territorial rights it consolidates the policy in regard to canals, as well as other matters, and reorders available the entire force of those provinces in any difficulties which may arise between England and the United States.

“The government must either connect the lakes and the Mississippi River by a Canal of sufficient capacity to accommodate gunboats suitable for

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means of a series of locks and dams, and a large influx of water from Lake Michigan, maintains an eight-foot depth and large capacity locks from Chicago to the Mississippi.

But this waterway was not regarded as an aquatic wonderland sheltered by trees and peacefully languid. In 1950 in his autobiographical novel *A Stretch of the River*, Richard Bissell has all the action taking place on the Upper Mississippi, but a drowned barge worker reminisces from his muddy grave about his experiences of the Illinois Waterway.

“After that I went over to the Illinois again on the Marcin T., quite a comedown after the big Mack, and we messed with them ice cakes all winter and punched a hole in her bottom at Marseilles, and all got off but the mess boy – when they raised her they found the poor bastard down in the hole. Looking for some soap powder I suppose when she went down. And we used to go over there to the “Ace of Clubs” by the landing in Joliet, and play the juke box and get lit up, and go out in a cab to the whorehouses when we got a chance, and then two months on the little Mortimer Jones in the drainage canal and a few trips down the Sag to South Chicago with one load at a time; that run gets awful old awful quick.”<sup>18</sup>

And finally the modern poet of the industrial mid-west locates the waterways in a completely industrial setting. Carl Sandburg in his poem *Joliet* contrasts the present industrial scene with a pre-historic glacial grinding and tearing free. No sylvan peace here.

*Joliet*

*On the one hand the steelworks  
On the other hand the penitentiary  
Santa Fe trains and Alton trains  
Between smokestacks on the west  
And grey walls on here*

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## FOOTNOTES

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3. Pease, Theodore, ed.: The French Foundations 1680-1693, Collections of the Illinois State Historical Library, Vol. XXIII, Springfield, Illinois, 1934, pp. 305-306.
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9. Op. cit., Knight and Zeuch, pp. 25-26.
10. The Autobiography of Gurdon Satonstall Hubbard, The Lakeside Classics, R. R. Donnelley, Chicago, 1911, pp. 42-43.
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13. Ibid., Cunyngham, Arthur, A Glimpse of the Great Western Prairie, London, 1851 pp. 256-257.
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15. Edwards, Leo: Jerry Todd and the Oak Island Treasure, Grosset and Dunlap, New York, 1925, pp. 72-74.
16. Lockport Illinois Past Present-Future Souvenir Book, issued by Lockport Woman's Club, December 1905.
17. "Letter from the Secretary of War," 40<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, House of Representatives, Ex. Doc. 16, p. 9.
18. Bissell, Richard: A Stretch of the River, Little Brown and Co., Boston, 1950, pp. 182-183.