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How the Erie Canal Helped America Grow

BOB DOUGHTY: I'm Bob Doughty.

MARIO RITTER: And I'm Mario Ritter with EXPLORATIONS in VOA Special English. In the early eighteen hundreds, traveling in the United States was dangerous. Business and trading were limited. Then came the waterway called the Erie Canal. It helped build America.

BOB DOUGHTY: Two men recently traveled the more than five hundred eighty kilometers of America's Erie Canal in kayaks. Then the two guided their kayaks into the Hudson River to complete their trip to the Statue of Liberty in New York City.

Richard Harpham of Britain and American Glenn Charles piloted their light, small boats more than eight hundred kilometers in about twenty-one days. Along the way, they made stops for cultural and historic activities.

The event was called the "The New York State Spare Seat Expedition." The two men invited others to join them for parts of their travels. These "guests" rode in the additional seat in the boats. Many kayaks have a single seat.

MARIO RITTER: Richard Harpham and Glenn Charles call themselves "expeditionary kayakers" – explorers on the water. One goal of their trip was to honor the struggles that built the Erie Canal. It became America's first national waterway in eighteen twenty five.

At that time, the Erie Canal crossed the state of New York from the city of Buffalo on Lake Erie to Albany and Troy on the Hudson River. The Hudson flowed into the Atlantic Ocean at New York City. So the canal joined the Great Lakes with the Atlantic. The canal made New York City a major port.

The difficulty of traveling through the Appalachian Mountains had kept many people from going west. The mountains also prevented people in the west from sending their wood and farm products east. But the Erie Canal overcame the natural barrier of those mountains. It helped open the American West. The canal made the United States a richer and stronger young nation.

BOB DOUGHTY: Politicians, businessmen, farmers and traders had talked about

creating a canal connecting the Great Lakes with the Atlantic for one hundred years. A lawyer and politician named De Witt Clinton finally succeeded in getting the canal built.

As early as eighteen-oh-nine, Clinton saw the need for the canal. Then he had to defend his idea against people who laughed at him. Some critics called the canal "Clinton's Folly" -- a stupid project. In eighteen twelve, the federal government rejected a proposal to provide money for the canal.

But five years later, the New York State legislature provided more than seven million dollars for the project. The lawmakers named Dewitt Clinton to head a committee to supervise the development of the canal. Clinton was elected governor of New York that same year.

MARIO RITTER: The Erie Canal was five hundred eighty-four kilometers long, more than eight meters wide and one and one-half meters deep. It could not have been completed without the hard and dangerous labor of many workers. Historians say about one-third of the workers had recently moved to the United States from Ireland. They received about fifty cents a day for building the Erie Canal.

The men used explosives to break the rocky earth. Many workers were injured. Many were infected with the disease malaria. Twenty-six workers died of smallpox. Some were buried in unmarked graves along the canal.

BOB DOUGHTY: Big guns were fired in Buffalo in October, eighteen twenty-five. The cannons were part of a celebration to observe the completion of the Erie Canal. Governor De Witt Clinton and his wife left Buffalo on a barge called the Seneca Chief. The boat moved at the rate of less than five kilometers per hour. It reached the Hudson River nine days later. To mark the arrival, Governor Clinton dropped some water from Lake Erie into the Hudson River.

MARIO RITTER: Within ten years, the Erie Canal had repaid the cost of building it. Transportation of products by canal was less costly than other methods. The waterway carried barges. Most of these boats had flat bottoms for carrying goods. The barges measured up to twenty-four meters long and about four and a-half meters wide.

Mules and horses on land pulled the barges through the canal. Eighty-three locks raised the water levels by more than one hundred seventy meters from the Hudson River to Lake Erie.

BOB DOUGHTY: Over time, the Erie Canal grew. Many improvements were made between eighteen thirty-five and eighteen sixty-two. But a few years later, the

canal began to lose importance. Trains were becoming an easier and more profitable way to transport goods.

As the canal was losing business, some of its levees began to break. Levees normally hold back the water, preventing floods. The breaks damaged the towpaths next to the canal and halted travel.

Age or heavy rains often caused the levees to break. But the breaks were not always an accident. Towns like Forestport, New York, had been suffering from the closing of businesses. Then, in the last years of the eighteen hundreds, several area levees broke under suspicious conditions.

MARIO RITTER: Breaks in the levees should have been bad news for Forestport. Difficult repairs were needed. But few people in the town seemed sad about the breaks. Instead, many were pleased. Almost two thousand men were brought in to repair the damage. That was more than the normal population of Forestport.

People crowded into places to eat, drink and have fun. The town had money again. Life became as profitable and wild as it had been during the best days of trade on the canal.

BOB DOUGHTY: The administration of New York Governor Theodore Roosevelt grew suspicious. State officials investigated. They charged several men from Forestport with plotting to damage canal property.

Michael Doyle is a reporter who writes about legal issues for California newspapers. He did research on some of his ancestors who had lived in Forestport. His book, "The Forestport Breaks," was published in two thousand four. Mister Doyle said he learned that his great-grandfather took part in the wrongdoing.

At the beginning of the story, a farmer sees water flooding over a levee in Forestport. He warns local officials. His warning prevents more severe damage. But some of the townspeople refused to praise the farmer for his actions. Instead, Mister Doyle writes that they want to kill him.

MARIO RITTER: By nineteen-oh-three, some businesses were pressuring New York to build a whole system of canals. These people did not want the railroads to completely control the transport of goods. So the state formed the New York State Barge Canal System in nineteen eighteen. The Erie Canal became the largest part, linked to three shorter canals.

The canal system stayed busy until nineteen fifty-nine. At that time, the United States and Canada opened the Saint Lawrence Seaway. This waterway permitted

ocean ships to sail up the Saint Lawrence River and through the Great Lakes. The Erie Canal lost a lot of its business.

BOB DOUGHTY: But the Erie Canal and the other parts of the New York canal system got help. In nineteen ninety-one, people who cared about the historic canal held a big public event. The group was called Erie's Restoration Interests Everyone. It made the same trip that had celebrated completion of the canal in eighteen twenty-five.

As Governor and Missus Clinton had done, the group traveled from the city of Buffalo, New York to the Hudson River. A man playing the part of De Witt Clinton dropped water from Lake Erie into New York Harbor.

A few days later, New Yorkers voted to take steps to re-develop the state's canal system. Today, barges still use the system to transport heavy goods. One estimate says the canal system carries more than four hundred thousand tons of goods each year. More than one hundred fifty thousand pleasure boats also use the system each year.

MARIO RITTER: Today, an area called the Canalway National Heritage Corridor contains parts of the Erie Canal of the eighteen hundreds. You can walk, run or ride a bicycle in this area.

You may want to paddle along in a small boat, like Richard Harpham and Glenn Charles. Or, you can take a historic Erie Canal boat trip. Thousands of people do this every year.

The boat moves slowly along the water. You listen to guides tell about the animals and the men who pulled the barges. And, musicians play songs of the days when the Erie Canal was helping a young nation grow.

BOB DOUGHTY: This program was written by Jerilyn Watson. Our producer was Mario Ritter. I'm Bob Doughty.

MARIO RITTER: Join us again next week for EXPLORATIONS in VOA Special English.