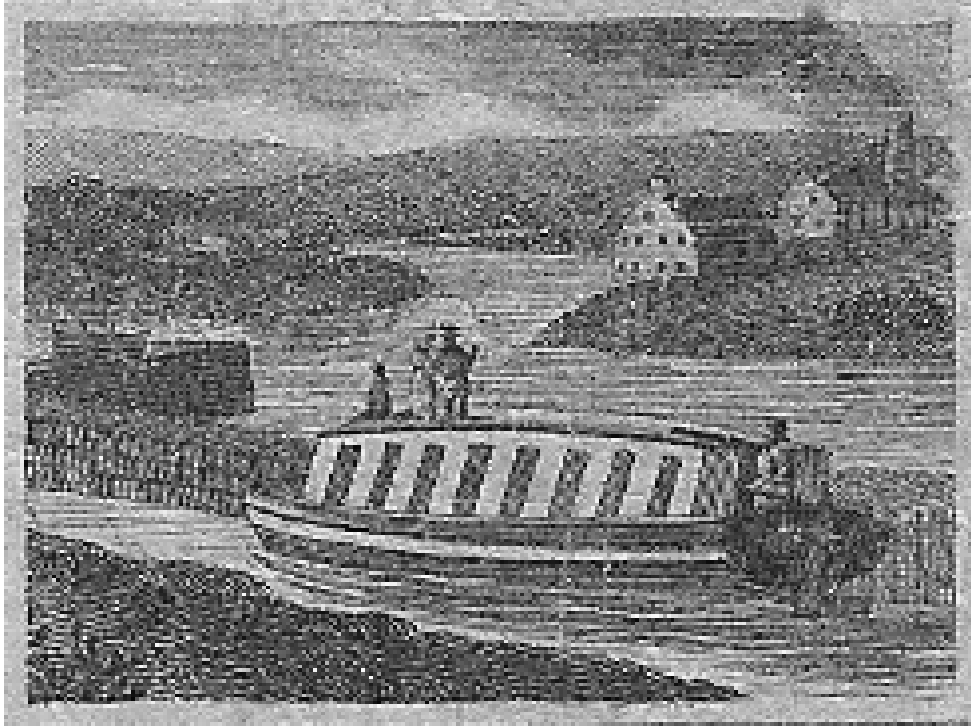
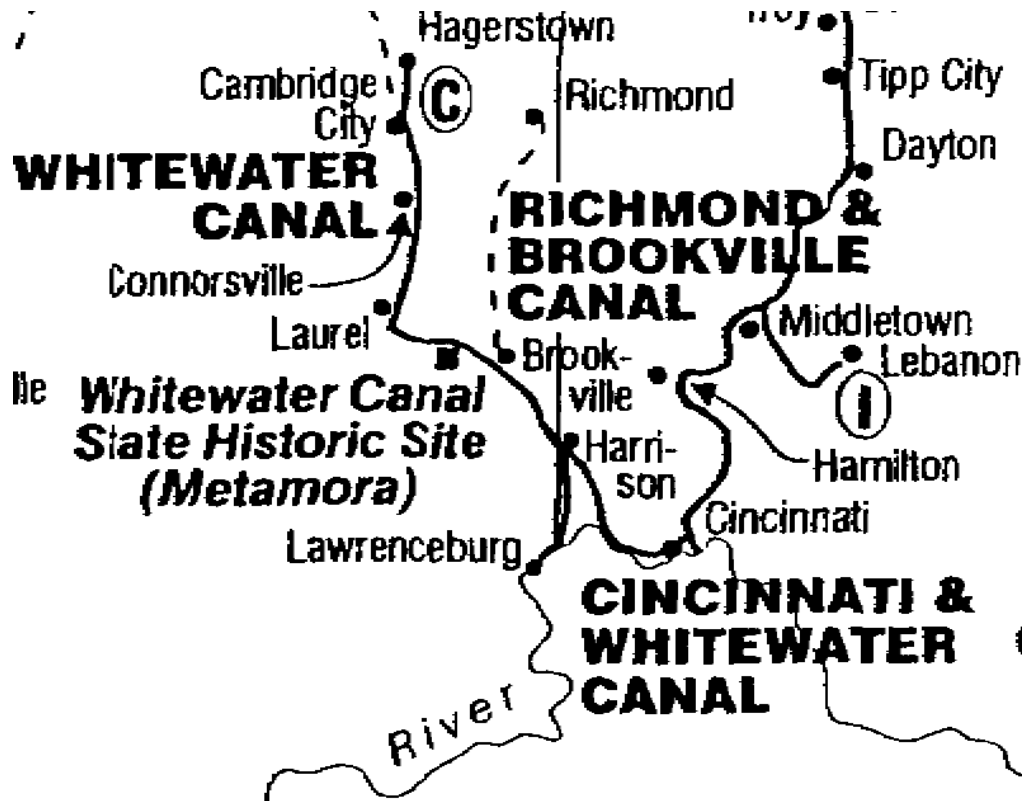


LIFE
along the
WHITEWATER CANAL



*By Bonita Porter
And Paul Baudendistal*



Map of the Whitewater Canal (Hagerstown to Lawrenceburg, IN) and Miami Erie Canal (Lake Erie to the Ohio River). They are linked by the Cincinnati Whitewater Canal between Harrison and Cincinnati. Parts of the Cincinnati & Whitewater Canal parallel the Ohio River.

Developed for the Whitewater Scenic Byway and the Presidential Pathways Scenic Byway
By Bonita Porter and Paul Baudendistel

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“They’re saying that boats are going to come by here and go all the way to Cincinnati. You remember coming up here from Cincinnati along this Whitewater River? And I know it’s called the Whitewater River for a purpose. You know they’re places in this river no boat’s safe, and places where no big boat would fit nor float. Down there in Cincinnati, I can’t figure how they’re going to get any boat over those hills. Remember what it was like for the horses when we moved here.” I laughed as I told my older sister, Ida, about the rumors brought by the trader/tinker, selling his wares to the several farmhouses in the area. “You hear the craziest things from people passing through here.”

“Hank Miller, It’s nearly 1836! Things are changing and anything is possible!” Ida smiled indulgently at her lanky brother, so newly tall and thinking he was already grown up. He was so young when they moved to Indiana ten years ago, he probably didn’t even remember the building we occupied in New York City. He probably also had little memory of Philadelphia where we caught the steamboat that brought us to Cincinnati. It was little wonder he had so little imagination about what was possible.

“You go think on it by the river. Experiment, and see what you can figure out.” Mrs. Miller said, always looking for a way to teach her children, even though they had outgrown the learning available in the school house.

Even if I could not figure out these things, the Indiana and Ohio legislators had already raised the money for the project, modeling it on the Erie Canal in Pennsylvania. Surveyors and engineers soon came into town, packing their equipment so they could lay out the route of the Whitewater Canal. I loved sitting on the porch of the canal office after work and talking with them about their plans. They envisioned a canal that would use the water of the Whitewater River, now only good for canoeing if it wasn’t running too fast with the rains or falling over rapids. They believed that by digging a canal parallel to the river, the depth and speed of the water could be controlled. Dams would be used to keep the water in the canal about four feet deep, deep enough to float a long canal boat. Locks could raise and lower the boats over the hills. They showed me drawings of these locks as they developed; stone structures with added metal and wood mechanisms. They drew complicated timber joints that could stop the flow of water altogether! Talking to them was an education all on its own. It took a long time for those engineers and all to mark out the route and make sure it would work before the first man pushed the first shovel into the dirt.

In the next year, laborers from out east walked into town one or two at a time to help dig the big ditch that could float boats and rafts of trees to feed the people and sawmills in Cincinnati. The cities along the Ohio River were growing fast and they needed food, lumber, straw and hay for their horses. The men talked about how much a canal boat could carry on the Erie Canal over in Pennsylvania. And, after all, it was the 1830’s! Everything was possible now that Indiana was a state!

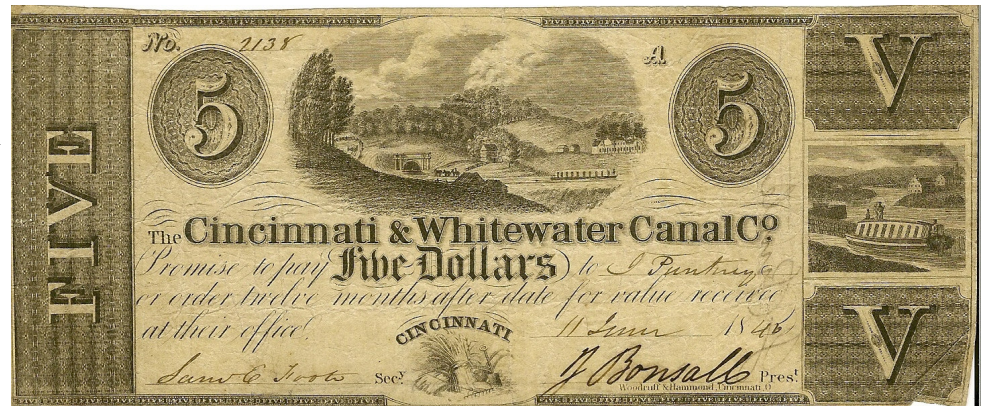
Harrison, Ohio, named after the 9th President, William Henry Harrison, was a particularly interesting place along the canal. At Harrison, the Whitewater River crossed into Ohio. The Indiana lawmakers could not provide money to build a canal in Ohio, but to go more directly south to Lawrenceburg, on the Ohio River, would mean leaving the Whitewater River. It would be costly and would require at least four locks, but the legislature approved the plan to continue to Lawrenceburg. The Ohioans, seeing the benefit of bringing Indiana produce to warehouses and ports of Cincinnati, agreed to build the Cincinnati Whitewater Canal from Harrison to Cincinnati. So Harrison sat right there at the junction, in a good position to benefit from both canals!

An engineering office was soon rented right there in Harrison. Men in suits arrived to hire other men. They brought in supplies of picks and shovels, pry bars and explosives. Immigrants from Ireland, Scotland, England and Germany started arriving, one man at a time, at first. Those first ones moved in with local people, paying a little for their upkeep. But the work was taking longer to get started than anyone planned. Those laborers who could not find work building homes and such for the surveyors, engineers, draftsmen and office workers, hired themselves on to farmers for the price of a barn to sleep in and two meals a day. But the trickle

of laborers increased and soon, things started going missing.

I joined the protection society to keep an eye on the neighbors' farms close to Harrison. At nearly 14 years old, I was already considered man enough to raise enough ruckus to scare off a thief. Men with little to trade and thinning bodies too easily saw a farmer's chicken or rabbit as a meal. A cooling pie was medicine to cure hunger pangs. I knew all too well that the same rabbit or chicken could feed my whole family when combined with last year's potatoes and new greens. I also knew how we carried those dry cherry pits, peach pits and apple pips from our trees back east down the Ohio River and soaked them till they sprouted. I knew the labor of planting those cherry tree sprouts, protecting them from hungry rabbits and deer year after year, and the patience of picking off the spring buds for five years or more so the trees could mature properly. Each family in the area had a story of spring rains drowning their tender young trees, of deer nibbling them down to the ground in a hard winter, foxes and bears getting into their chickens & rabbits or drought taking off their kitchen gardens. There's been some lean years out here when families had to share what little they had with others or watch their neighbors die or move away. Too many have sold up and moved on already.

Mom kept Ida busy. Our farm is near the canal site and she makes up midday meals for those that can pay. The canal company pays by the month in paper scrip. No one knows exactly what that's worth. But there's precious little United States money out here. Mostly we trade food or labor for what we need. It took some time to settle on what that company paper was really worth, but an agreement was finally worked out. Still, most workers ran out between one pay day and the next.



The Cincinnati & Whitewater Canal Company issued its own currency. The picture in the center of this \$5 note is of the envisioned Canal Tunnel in Cleves, Ohio. A canal boat is featured on the right.

Ida peels potatoes, and parsnips from the root cellar, picks and washes spring greens from the garden. Neighbors further away from the canal bring in vegetables to sell, sometimes a whole deer! The ladies around here shared that deer out and it was gone in a day. A caldron of soup and sourdough bread hit the spot for the men moving dirt and clay one shovel full at a time. On Saturdays, the soup cauldrons hereabouts get filled with laundry for those same workers. With her earnings, Mom bought some solid tin dishes to serve the workers. Mom won't let Ida go down to the ditch no more to serve the workers. Mom says those men use language no unmarried woman should here and they's a bit too in need of female attention down there for a young girl to be safe. So Ida stays home doing chores.

My Dad took a job working in the engineer's office. He knew how to read before we moved out here. He can copy out letters with a fair hand too. The money wasn't much, but pure hard cash in any amount made it possible to trade at the new general store. And now the orchards was producing, we all felt rich.

I helped by taken on some of Dad's farm work, caught me some young rabbits to fatten up in my hutch and set a nice fence around it and the chicken coup to discourage thieves. Though, how much discouragement it might be, I don't know. I can jump it easy enough. I'm also chopping wood every day. Our winter supplies is almost gone to heat the soup and laundry water. I can't fall whole tall trees like my father can, so I concentrate on the smaller shorter trees on the edges of the hay field. I can be pretty sure they won't buck me off my feet when they come loose from the ground.

That ditch is finally taking shape. It's taken them months of heavy digging, often in really cold water,

and dirt hauling to get this far. The edges are two parallel lines running right past town. You can even tell where the dock is going to be. A nice even track runs along the sides for the tow mules and the clay bottom and sides look like they been smoothed by the hand of God.

They's supposed to finish building the lock today. Strong wooden hoists had been built to lift stones and wooden beams into place to dam up the water, build up the lock walls and build the gate that would hold back both water and canal boat and then release it a little at a time until the boat comes even with the lower level of water on the far side. Dad took me into town to see the opening of it. The construction was something to behold, all strung with banners and such. People stood atop the lock walls. The engineer was running around checking this and that. The workers milled around in groups, passing bottles of whiskey amongst themselves like it was a holiday or something. Finally, a guy in a suit stands on the top of the lock and everyone quiets down so they can hear. I was pretty far forward in that crowd, so I could only hear a word or three. Then the guy jumps down, something moved on the far side and I heard the water pouring into the lock. The gate on our side starts seeping water but it was mostly holding it all back. It took a while to fill up, but finally the gate was opened and the water comes flowing out the bottom. Not all the water of course, but a nice controlled flow, letting the row boat in the lock lower down slowly. Then the gate opens completely and the small test boat floats out to great cheers and shouts. Success! They pulled that man out of the row boat like he was some kind of hero and carried him on their shoulders into the nearby saloon. There was so much hoopla, I would never have guessed that the real grand opening was the next day with a real canalboat and a lot more in the way of speeches.

It wasn't a year after that lock opened until we had regular traffic along the canal all the way down to Lawrenceburg and up to Metamora. And all of it had to stop at the lock and wait for the water to raise or lower until they could move on. People get off the boat and stroll up and down the town, maybe buying food or trading with local merchants while they wait for the boat to get to the other side of the lock. It was quite the evening entertainment, watching men, mostly wearing suits, come off the boat and stroll up and down Main Street, trying their best to look all grand. The merchants come out of their shops to look over merchandise for their stores. Some men coming off the boats stop to ask about work hereabouts. But since the pick and shovel work has ended on the canal, there isn't so much work to be had unless you knew your numbers and can work in one of the shops or you have a trade like blacksmithing or some such.

Although some people ride on the canal boats, they mostly haul freight—grains, wood, and such on their way south and all manner of manufactured goods on the way north. The boatsmen tell how there is all manner of women's doodads and geegaws, come down the Ohio River from Pennsylvania or up the Mississippi River by steamboat. There's even porcelain china come in all the way from New Orleans! There'd be no more waiting for the itinerant tinkers now. The store was always stocked with whatever was needful. My mom is ever so happy to have so many bolt fabrics to choose from! She has ever complained about how the local homespun just don't hold a shape.

In 1843, Dad decided to take us on a holiday. The branch from Harrison to Cincinnati had just opened and he couldn't wait to see it. He got one of our neighbors to take care of our cow and horse, chickens, rabbits and the dog that just appeared one day and stayed around to guard the chickens. We all dressed up in our finest gear and bought us four tickets on the canalboat all the way to Cincinnati. We were on a real adventure! My Mom took this opportunity to show us where we'd be going on the map in the engineer's office. On that map, there were notations of elevations, distances were measured by the inch and then calculated to the actual distance. I guess maps have to be some accurate to make a canal. Little notes were pinned on top of the map in places describing soil conditions, rock outcroppings and such that made trouble for the diggers along the route. The aqueducts and locks were noted and other constructions along the way. My dad pointed out some things, but I figured I knew everything after spending those evenings on the porch with that engineer fellow. I figured he was smarter than my dad since he'd been to college back east.

The mosquitoes hadn't all given up for the winter yet.. Once in a while, they would just swarm over us, like they hadn't fed in years. Women pulled veils over their faces, babies faces were covered. The rest of us just had to suffer and swat. The canal water, still as dirt and covered in slimey green stuff in places, seemed to attract those bloodsucking torments. And sometimes the smell was so bad it like to suck the very air from a person.

The view across the valley from the aqueducts was terrific! One aqueduct stood between two locks just south of the little pond or lake near Harrison that was used to join the Whitewater Canal to the Cincinnati & Whitewater Canal. At Harrison the ground dropped off and then lifted again to create a big gorge. If we was to go down it and back up it again, we'd be here all day doing nothing else. But by lowering us some, then crossing the gorge on that aqueduct, we was ready to get lowered a second time on the Cincinnati side of that gorge in just a couple of hours. "Modern marvels of engineering!" my father said. "Just wait. The big aqueduct is still to come."

As we moved out over the aqueduct, I thought I was flying! I could look out over the towpath and see a whole lot of sky. And I could only tell I was moving along the canal by watching the grass on that towpath move on by. It made me kinda dizzy. But then, I adjusted my brain to look out beyond the path and look at the gorge below. I didn't want to think how far down. There was so much to see out in that gorge! The fall leaves was coming on and as we moved south and east, the trees put on a real bright fashion show! Red and yellow maples, coppery brown oaks, shimmery yellow sycamores all mixed with the greens of cedars and pines. Some trees had already given up their leaves, their gray limbs a stark harbinger of the winter to come. The light yellow corn stalks and bean stems still stood, drying out for storage through the long winter. Red sandstone outcroppings popped up now and then as well as grey limestone. Little homesteads studded a rolling landscape. And once, I thought I saw an Indian ducking into a stand of trees, but it might have been my imagination. Everyone knew that Old Tippecanoe Harrison had pushed all the Indians west after defeating them up in northern Indiana.

My dad showed me all the ways they managed to make the canal so flat! All the specialized work it took to make each lock work considering the soils and rock formations in a particular location. My land, I never would have guessed it would take so much piling up of dirt to make the edges of the canal, or so many curves to move us gently around a hillside. My Dad, having worked in the engineer's office had a lot to say on just about everything to do with the canal. At one point, Dad and I took a turn at walking behind the mule so he could show me some things up close. He talked about the heavy blue clay shales they had to dig through up around Brookville. He showed me the sea shells found in so many rocks. Some looked like corals, while others looked like mussels. I didn't quite know what corals or mussels were, but Dad had lived close to the ocean before he married Mom and he should know. A few looked like three pill bugs side-by-side. And there were some that looked like a fish's spine but without the ribs. Now how could sea shells end up in rocks? And so far from any sea? This world just kept surprising me.

The man who ran the canal boat had his whole family living on the boat with him. His boys took turns leading the tow mule. His wife did what all wives do, either on the boat or at stops along the way. Mostly, she cooked, cleaned, took her turn steering the boat or walking the mule. She even helped with the loading and selling at the locks. She did it all, even climbing up and down the ladders to cross the full storage hold, while carrying her little girl, tied in a scarf to her chest. The girl was ailing some and fretful. Mom and Ida, sitting on the boat's roof for the good light, laid down their needle work to spell the boat woman, holding the infant and trying to help her to sleep with a bit of soft singing or tales of fairies playing jokes on humans. It was a long trip. The top speed was four miles an hour, but no mule would last long at that speed towing such a load as this, so I guess we averaged about two miles an hour. Then you had to add the stops at the locks. By the time we unloaded everyone on one side of the lock waited for the water to change levels, got to the other side and got everyone loaded again, that could take more than an hour at each lock and there were three of them between Harrison and Cincinnati. On that map, there's four locks between Harrison and Lawrenceburg—and that's only

half the distance!

As we passed out of the first lock three boys dropped down on the boat from the lock walls above us. They was about my age and the slow ride to the next lock was a lot more lively talking with them about the many folks they'd met by jumping into the canal boats. They met a guy purporting to be a gambler headed for the larger steamboats on the Ohio. He told them he could play poker all the way to New Orleans on one of those boats. How can you credit such a fabrication as that? Can't think of no one who could do that. What would he have to trade that would last him so long a time? The boys said it didn't look like he had a single thing to trade except for a fancy hand gun he carried strapped to his waist. Handguns were not plentiful around Harrison. You couldn't hunt with one. No one could aim one accurately over any distance to speak of. Even with the best aim, you could miss a full grown buck at 100 ft. with one of those things. Seemed like a waste of goods and space to me.



CINCINNATI,

This postcard was made of a photo of Cincinnati in 1856.

The big aqueduct stretched out over eight support pillars to cross the Miami River. It must have been nearly 700 feet long. The forests and small farms that dotted the landscape showed off the rich land there was to be had in Ohio. And that river was busy with all kinds of boat traffic. And all those boats looked like children's toys, they was so far away. It was easy to see that Ohio had gotten their statehood much earlier than Indiana! I can't remember when I've seen more people on a river in every kind of conveyance. Some even driving their wagons across it, with the water nearly up to the wheel hub and the horses all skittish from the high water and trying to dodge the canoes and rowboats as they crossed. Didn't look at all safe to me!

The locks were a welcome break. At least there, we could get off the boat, walk around and stretch. At one lock a big, rough looking, bearded man invited himself aboard the boat hauling a load of pelts across his back that showed no sign of tanning. They stank worse than a three-days dead skunk! That boatwoman stepped in front of that big man just as he was about to throw them stinking hides into the hold of the boat. She pointed back toward the tiller. "There! You put there!" The man growled, looked at that baby on her chest and decided to do as she directed. He dumped that load of pelts by the tiller. The boatman didn't look too happy, but the gruff man flipped him what looked like actual coin of the realm for the privilege. The boatman looked at the coin, back and front, then decided to hold his tongue.

Nothing could compare to the tunnel we floated through to get to Cincinnati. My father said that tunnel was nearly 1800 feet long, going straight through a huge hill. Once inside, it was as dark as pitch. The boatman had to light lanterns and hoist them out in front of the boat just so's he wouldn't run into anything. A gray spot at the far end was the only indication there was even an end to it. I checked to feel the floor of the boat under my feet. I suddenly felt all queasy thinking I was disconnected from anything on this earth. We come out of that tunnel into another lock. I looked out at the bottom of that lock and Dad showed me how we was near the same level as the great Ohio River that lay in grand splendor not far away from the wall of the canal. The gigantic buildings of Cincinnati clung together as they marched in rows up the hills that stepped up and away from the river. Here, the canal widened up to forty feet across, allowing for two-way traffic. Water trolleys took people to and fro. Barges loaded with freight pulled up to warehouse landings to unload their goods. I found out that the Miami and Erie Canal came down here all the way from Lake Erie on the northern border of Ohio. It was just a hop across the lake to get to Canada. Somewhere along the line, we had slipped into that larger canal.

Overall, though, we spent a pretty long day on that canal, not much to do for an active boy like me. We could have covered the 25 miles faster by horse, but then we'd arrive in the big city all sweaty and stove up from the long ride. Then we'd have to find a livery for the horses. Mom and Ida might never have made it on horseback, even if we had four horses instead of just one. And our buggy is no better jogging over rutted dirt roads and rocks that could destroy the wooden wheels, especially going up and down those hills. All in all, we arrived in pretty good shape considering we hadn't done much more than sit all day.

Aunt Mary's family came to meet us at the dock on Fifth Street near the engineer's office. Her husband, Albert Heinemann, managed a warehouse near the stockyards here. He looked quite the dandy in his well-pressed suit and shiny shoes. Quite a contrast to the sweating, dirt-covered men we see around home. Mr. Heinemann rented a carriage just for us. We loaded into it and headed up the hill to their home. It seemed like that four blocks went straight up, that horse was sweating and straining so much against the lines, I thought he'd die from the strain. I could hardly contain myself at the site of their four story brick home. My, it looked fine! Ida sighed with envy when she saw the lace curtains at the windows. I was taken by the glass in the windows. We didn't have but two small windows on the farmhouse and they'd only had glass here recently.

Cousin John told me of the marvels that were stored in his father's warehouse. Everything from bales of cotton working their way from the south to weaving mills in the northern states to lumber and finished furniture waiting to be shipped south to build a town called New Orleans. "Some of the wardrobes being shipped south were nearly as big as whole rooms up here." John said, but I think he was telling me a big fish story. And the sounds of building! The rhythms of saws and hammers was everywhere. John says they're expecting the number of people in Cincinnati to double in the next two years. John said the houses was growing faster than any plant ever could. Having seen Harrison do that too, I could credit this story with having some truth to it.

Dad had to check in at the Canal Engineers office next morning. He came back telling us all about the threat of the railroads. "Those Railroad Companies have appropriated a bunch of the money that Ohio had set aside for canal development. Trains with steam engines can handle more freight than the canal boats and they move so much faster! So far, the railroads are concentrating on getting to Chicago, but it won't be long until they're running rails south. You just mark my words. This will be the end of canals!"

Dad paced up and down the street, huffing and puffing, arguing with his absent boss about the meaning of railroads in the state. He couldn't reach any manner of understanding, but couldn't lose that tight, aggravated look of concern on his face. He poured over the newspapers looking for any information that might forecast what would happen with the canals upon which he had tied his good fortune. I couldn't see the problem myself. We had done well enough before the canal come through and we could do it again. That canal had caused such disruption in everybody's lives. When the canal opened, and the diggers were no longer needed, they just picked up and in a week, they was gone with no more than they'd arrived with 2 years earlier. The way I saw it, we still had the orchards and some of the profit off all our efforts.

But Dad packed us all up again in the returning canal boat the next day and kept pacing up and down the whole way back. When his nerves couldn't be contained no more, he'd jump over to the towpath and lengthen out his stride, walking faster than the mule and then tracing circles in a clearing until the boat caught up to him. He'd call out to us, making sure we was all here, I guess, and then go pacing on up the path. I don't know why we even paid for the ticket. Some of those boys who jumped aboard from the locks rode more than my daddy.

Dad ran off to the engineer's office the next morning like he was running away from fire. I don't think he'd slept at all, despite all the exercise along the towpath yesterday. He came back that evening forcing

himself to smile and look confident. He told the family that it would be awhile, maybe a few years, before railroads came so far south, but that we should be ready for the switch. He said that the northern canals in Ohio, that had been open about as long as the Whitewater, was having trouble staying open in the winter. They would ice over and trap the boats for weeks. They were already talking about selling out to the railroads because the trains could still get through light snows and just plain old cold didn't slow them down a lick.

That next spring, the melting snow combined with the spring rains to flood the Whitewater River. The water overflowed into the canals and the flat bottomed canal boat couldn't navigate in the fast moving waters without the reliable mules. It took a while to clear the broken bits of trees and home goods that was washed into it by the flood waters. By then, some of the boat owners, already lean from a hard winter, sold their boats and moved on west or hired on to one of the riverboats down on the Ohio.

Several years of even heavier floods spelled the end of the Whitewater Canal. In 1850, it was sold for only \$2500 to private investors. That wasn't even one cent on the dollar what was spent building it. And don't you know? My dad was right. It wasn't too long till men came along wanting to lay railroad tracks along the towpath. The Cincinnati & Whitewater branch canal couldn't sustain itself without the raw goods coming down from Indiana. That canal closed a few years later. By then, I was married with a small cabin and a child of my own. My little boy just loved to hear tell of my adventures along the canal.

