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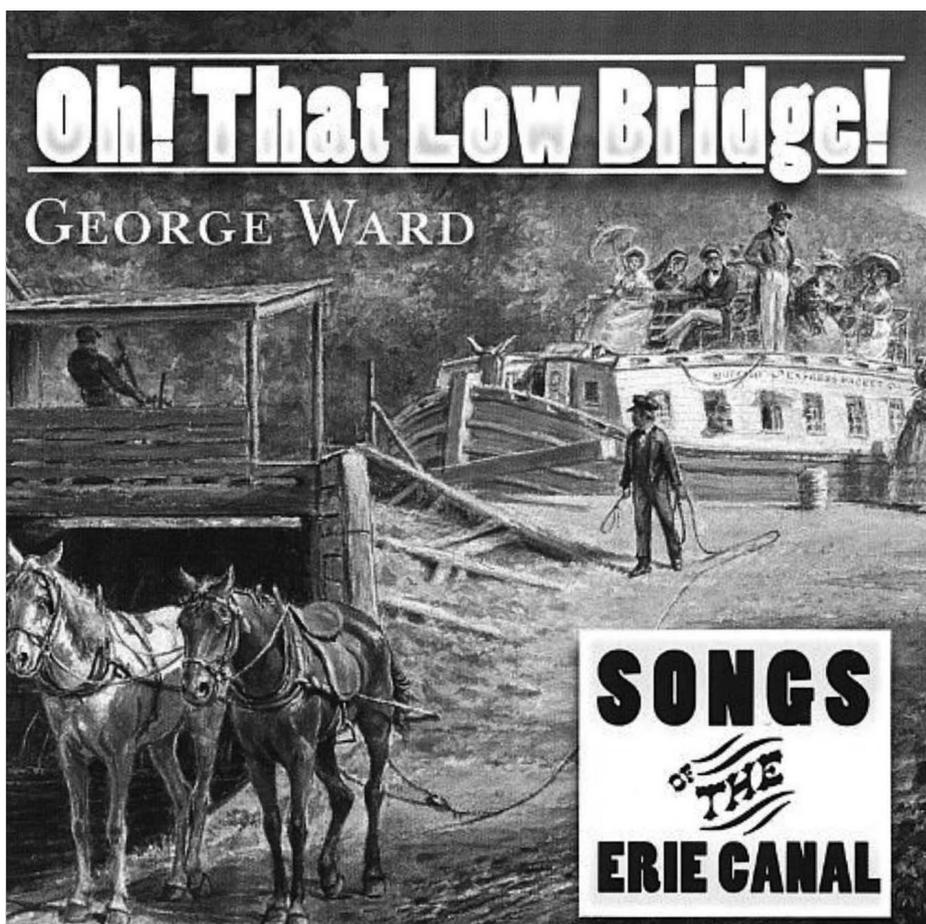
George Ward — *Oh! That Low Bridge!*

BY LIBBYTUCKER

George Ward, one of New York State's best-loved, regional folksingers, brings the Erie Canal's folk culture to life in his wonderful CD *Oh! That Low Bridge!* (2006). Singing and playing the banjo, concertina, and other instruments, Ward helps us feel the emotions of Erie Canal diggers, teamsters, pilots, and travelers: pride, excitement, frustration, and sadness. His waterways research, over a period of more than 25 years, has given us a treasure trove of meaningful and entertaining songs from this important period in New York State's history.

The Erie Canal, which opened in 1825, gave people a chance to travel and haul freight from the Hudson River to Lake Erie. New York State was growing fast, so the chance to move all sorts of materials and passengers from Albany to Buffalo was tremendously exciting. "The Meeting of the Waters," this CD's eighth song, shows how awestruck people felt about the merging of these two mighty bodies of water. Just a few decades later, however, railroads became the dominant mode of transportation. Song number seven, "Lament of the Teamsters," personalizes the sadness of this change: "If we go up to Albany and ask for a load, They'll tell us too late, it's gone on the railroad." Even though the Erie Canal is no longer a vital pathway for movement of freight, it still has a lively bunch of commercial and pleasure vessels. In 2000, the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor opened. One of 49 such sites in the United States, the Erie Canalway encourages historic preservation and celebration of regional folkways.

All of us who have had the pleasure of attending Ward's performances know how eloquently he conveys the spirit of an era. "Fifteen Miles on the Erie Canal" (sometimes called "Fifteen Years on the Erie Canal" and "Mule Named Sal") is very well known in the United States; I learned to sing it in grade school and am fairly certain that most of my fellow Baby Boomers did too. Even though countless Americans have



sung this song over a long period of time, nobody sings it better than Ward does. During his many visits to schools, he has helped children understand why they should pay attention to an old mule named Sal. Times change; now Sal has her portrait on the Erie Canalway's Facebook page. It's nice to see her picture there, but Ward's song keeps her memory alive even better than Facebook does.

All of us who love New York folklore owe thanks to George Ward, who has done so much to keep Erie Canal songs as appealing and exciting as they were in the 19th century. George and his late wife Vaughn produced so many concerts, recordings, festivals, and exhibits that they received one of the only two Evergreen Lifetime Achievement Awards given by Traditional Arts of Upstate New York (TAUNY). Let us celebrate these achievements and enjoy listening to the CD! ▼

For further information, see:

Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor, <http://www.eriecanalway.org>

The Erie Canal Museum, <http://eriecanalmuseum.org>

Erie Canal Song, <http://www.eriecanalsong.com>

George's CDs are available online (<http://www.nyfolklore.org/gallery/store/music.html>) and in the NYFS gallery shop.

Libby Tucker teaches folklore at Binghamton University. Her book *Haunted Halls: Ghostlore of American College Campuses* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007) investigates college ghost stories. She also authored *Children's Folklore: A Handbook* (Westport: Greenwood, 2008). She co-edited, with Ellen McHale, *New York State Folklife Reader: Diverse Voices* (University Press of Mississippi, 2013).



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