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# The Paul Bunyan of the Erie Canal

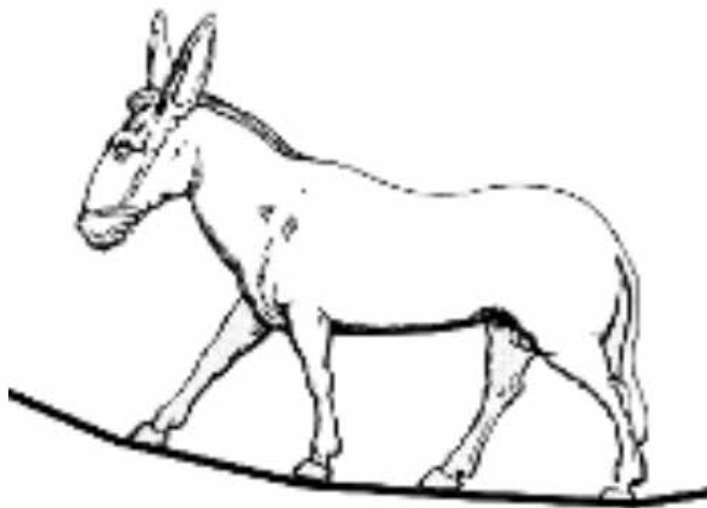
BY SANDY SCHUMAN

We're celebrating the 200th anniversary of the Erie Canal, and since its construction took from 1817 to 1825, this anniversary is eight years long. That gives us plenty of time to learn about the canal's impact on New York State's economy, to understand why it's called "The Mother of Cities," and appreciate its role in the Underground Railroad, European immigration, settlement of the Midwest, international trade, and development of the Adirondack Park. Beyond those grand effects, we may learn about everyday life along the Erie Canal, a world that was 363 miles long and 40 feet wide (70 feet wide after it was enlarged). Perhaps, you'll come across some of the scattered stories about one of the Erie's legendary boat captains, Red McCarthy, the "Paul Bunyan of the Erie Canal."

Here's the scene. A few boat captains have gathered to pass the time in the lock tender's hut, waiting for the water to subside at a crossing.<sup>1</sup> In the American tall tale tradition, their storytelling was no laughing matter; one tried to outdo the other, exaggerating the comic lie, and enjoying an inner chuckle.



"I tried to buy one of McCarthy's mules, but he wouldn't sell," said one. "Everybody wanted McCarthy's mules because of the way he trained them to walk a tightrope. In order to change mules at the end of a six-hour shift, of course, you tie up your boat



Pixabay image adapted by the author.

alongside the canal and everybody—except McCarthy—sets up their hoss-bridge<sup>2</sup> to reach from the boat to the towpath, so you can lead the fresh mule from the boat to the towpath, and bring the tired mule on the boat. That was too long a process for McCarthy. He'd just pull the tow line taut and his mules would walk across single file. Much faster than a hoss-bridge, and time is money. Well, I wanted a mule like that, so I tried to train one, but I had no success. I wanted one so bad, I tried to steal one of McCarthy's. I wasn't foolish enough to come up behind the mule, 'cause I know

how they can kick, so I came up by its side. Darned if he hadn't taught that mule to kick sideways,<sup>3</sup> and I've had this limp ever since."

"Yessir, that McCarthy was a clever man, and strong, too," said another. "I remember when a hurry-up boat<sup>4</sup> was fixing a break in the canal wall that started to damage the towpath. My boat was tied up waiting for them to finish the repair when McCarthy's boat came up, with McCarthy himself driving the mule, making time. McCarthy wouldn't tie up and wait. When he came up to the break in the towpath,

he jumped to the other side of the canal and kept going. This was back when the canal was only 40 feet wide. When he realized he'd left his mule on the towpath side, he jumped back, grabbed the mule, jumped over again, and kept hauling. As soon as he passed the hurry-up boat, he jumped back to the towpath. The repair crew was mighty displeased because, with all that jumping, McCarthy created a depression in the towpath, and they had to level it up."

The lock tender cracked a reluctant smile. Not to be outdone, he picked up the thread. "That reminds me of the time he had his boat tied up in the lock chamber, waiting for me to drop the water. I forgot to sound the warning, and the water dropped so fast he didn't have time to untie his boat and it was hanging by its bollards. He could have used his knife to cut the lines, but it was good line and he didn't want to ruin it. So, he grabbed a couple of lines, planted himself on the towpath, lassoed the bollards on the opposite side of the boat, and pulled up the other side to keep the boat level. 'Now see here, Caleb,' he called out, 'it seems the water under my boat has gone missing and I'm wondering if perhaps you could put some back.' I closed the lock and refilled the chamber faster than I could. I thought sure he would pinch my head off. But, he didn't hold a grudge. Of course, it helped that I gave him every dollar I had, a bottle of whiskey, and my Jew's harp."

The first captain shook his head and tried to bring this stream of tales to an end. "I heard McCarthy retired. On his last haul, he had a load of crushed stone. He was driving the mules when they came into a fog so dense, he couldn't see the mules' arses in front of him. Suddenly, the tow line went slack. It had broken, and the mules run off. It was so foggy he didn't even try to find them. He just picked up the tow line

and hauled the boat himself. The crew never even noticed. Well, his old boat leaked a good deal and, with that heavy load, sank to the bottom of the canal. McCarthy kept pulling for another five hours, digging the canal four feet deeper from Pittsford seven miles to the Genesee River. Mind you, he was pulling west against the current, too. It's a good thing the fog lifted, and he saw the aqueduct,<sup>5</sup> or he might have gone ahead and ripped it out. Anyway, the Erie Canal Commissioners awarded him \$500 for scooping out the canal, and that's when he retired."

"Yeah, he retired all right," another chimed in, nodding his head. I offered to buy his old boat, but he made a better deal. He hauled it out of the water and turned it bottom up. The bottom was scraped smooth and shiny, and he sold it to the Town of Camillus as a dance floor. They paid a lot more than I'd offered. Some months later, I saw him at a wrestling contest at the Madison County Fair. To win, you had to hold your opponent up over your head for the referee's count of ten. Well, no one wanted to wrestle McCarthy, so he went into the ring by himself and held himself up for the ten count. The judges wanted to disqualify him 'cause he didn't have an opponent, but he gave them such a look, they awarded him the prize money anyway."

"Have a look," Caleb interrupted, his nose pointing out the window, "you captains have been stretching the wind so long the creek has near dried up! Time to quit your jabberin' and push some water." ▼

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Where the canal crossed a creek at water level, if the water flow in the creek was too high, boats had to wait until it subsided.

- <sup>2</sup> A wooden plank that temporarily connected the boat and the tow path, used to transfer mules on and off the boat.
- <sup>3</sup> Unlike horses, mules can kick sideways. Apparently, it was news to this boat captain!
- <sup>4</sup> A fast boat with a work crew that made emergency repairs to the canal wall.
- <sup>5</sup> The Erie Canal crossed over the Genesee River via an aqueduct, a water-filled bridge that spanned the river gorge.



Sandy Schuman [www.ny-tales.com/](http://www.ny-tales.com/) is fascinated by familiar things and their unfamiliar stories. He brings remarkable historical tales to life ("some of our folklore is truly unbelievable, some of our history is even more so") and reveals the little-known stories behind some of our best known songs. A winner of the Susquehanna Folk Festival Liars Contest and the St. Louis Jewish Storytelling Contest, he has been featured at the Northeast Storytelling Conference, Riverway Storytelling Festival, Caffè Lena, Proctors, Tellabration, and Limmud Boston. His stories have been published in *Tablet*, *Memoir Magazine*, *Distressing Damsels*, *Stories We Tell*, *Story Club Magazine*, *New Mitzvah Stories*, *Storytelling Magazine*, and in his book, *Welcome to Chelm's Pond*. Sandy is a member of the Story Circle of the Capital District, Northeast Storytelling, National Storytelling Network, Jewish Storytelling Coalition, and Lifetime Arts Creative Aging Roster. Photo courtesy of the author.

*A statewide organization, the work of New York Folklore (and its business office and gallery in Schenectady) is located on the traditional territory of the Mahican, who referred to themselves collectively as the "Muhhekunneum" or "people of the great river" in reference to the mighty Hudson River. By 1680, this area was the home of the Kanien'keha'ka. In English, they are known as the Mohawk and are one of the Six Nations that make up the Hodinönsö:ni' Confederacy, with a homeland that stretches from the Adirondack Mountains to Niagara Falls.*

## Errata:

On page 20 of *Voices* Fall-Winter 2020, the name of the poet, whose poem was featured on that page, "BLM by Michelle (Pastel) Villalba" was misspelled in a sentence within the text. The sentence should read: "Villalba moves us to a future where people of color fully live in agency and cultural vibrancy."

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