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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. 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 alongside the canal and everybody—except McCarthy—sets up their hoss-bridge 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, 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 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.”

A fast boat with a work crew that made emergency repairs to the canal wall.

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

1. 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.

2. A wooden plank that temporarily connected the boat and the tow path, used to transfer mules on and off the boat.

3. Unlike horses, mules can kick sideways. Apparently, it was news to this boat captain!

4. The Erie Canal crossed over the Genesee River via an aqueduct, a water-filled bridge that spanned the river gorge.

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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