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THE BUOY TENDER

BY K.O. WILSON

The Lock Chief turns the switch, and echoes groan in Schuylerville of the lock gates inching open. Their mass kicks up small waves. Some become whirlpools, hugging the gates, filling cubits of water where the grand doors had been. The Champlain Canal's locks are perpetual motion machines—that is, so long as the Hudson River keeps flowing. Of this ridiculous notion, Kieran Orin paid no mind. This Buoy Tender concentrated on listening to the massive grinding gears. They turned smoothly, as repeated through eight decades now.

Kieran envisioned water funneling through the lock's embedded tunnels. In one, gravity feeding a turbine converts the force to DC, thus electric to the switch, so runs the motors, so moves the gates, and so lifts or drops the culvert valves that fill or drain the lock.

This day cradled especially the pleasantries of summer, overriding that long din of winter. This, perhaps, contributed to the gates seeming to pivot more harmoniously than usual. Or, so it seemed to Kieran. Chirps of birds and cicadas seeded warmth about. Sun, directly above, broadcast inside the lock

on a craft bound from Montreal. It clipped a shadow of wall upon the 38-footer at mid-ship to port alone. Chrome polish of the boat shot sunrays that danced at the rock of the gate ripple. Three-quarters of the family aboard fought the gleam in sunglasses. They worked adjacent the boat's unstepped mast. In quiet French, they uttered only necessary words recalling the craft's lines from the moor. A 14-year-old girl in shorts and halter-top had the aft line. Skip, at the bow, had concern for steerage. He eyed his nine-year old boy, standing strong at the helm.



The 154 tied off in Stillwater. Photograph by K. O. Wilson.

"Eyes to your station, sailor!" the boy mocked with Dad.

The Chief and Orin watched from atop the wall here at Lock C-5. From gestures and expressions, they read the foreign conversation. Mom's head became extra eyes on the helm where she'd poked up from the cabin. Her hair was pinned back with a kerchief, and she was caught midstream holding a spatula in her right hand. But this was the moment upon her. She watched pensively and did not speak, leaving the boy to his command. Dad smiled with chagrin, and re-checked the bow where the boat eased off the wall. Cap'n's orders, after all. The mast of *Duo-Du-Rod-Omee* would stay prone until the boat passed through the federal lock five locks downriver in Troy. From there south, the river's flat surface drops 1.2 feet across 160 miles. Prevailing tide, wind direction, and the bridges below Albany built high and wide would then lick at Skipper to step the mast and run with the tide. Or not; he'd wait until the Atlantic Ocean.

The boy engaged the ketch to a knot-and-a-half speed. The family watched quietly as the concrete walls turned to steel gates. Timbers on them were scuffed where barges had made multiple contacts. The barges fill the entire lock, floating jet fuel to Plattsburgh. Past the gate, eight eyes watched the channel widen to lush green and trees aside. A great blue heron labored to flight, flushed out of the wetland where the land-cut rejoins the river. It pumped slow strokes with broad wings, gained speed over the water surface, rose to the boughs of an elm tree on the opposite side and alit. This sight the family absorbed with intimacy, and Mom, with the spatula, pointed to the son, "*Don't get cocky!*" and disappeared below. Away now, the boy's ears showed he'd grinned. Kieran noted the girl appeared to say, at the next lock she'd be Cap'n.

It had been Lock Chief Lenny Wright throwing the switches that drained the pond and opened the gates here on the lower side. He was a Greenwich boy, next town over. He and Kieran remained tantalized with the bacon aroma that lingered from the boat in the lock.

"That'd be two more to luncheon, please," over-vocalized the Chief, across the gap, wall to wall.

"...and be so kind as to serve on the fore-deck," Kieran egged.

They laughed. The chamber's hollow swallowed some of their voice while water, ever trickling through the closed upper gates, splashed into the lock. Its rain, too, camouflaged their banter. The worn timbers where the two gates make closure were scheduled for replacement on the coming winter's shutdown. Kieran was happy to be a part of two centuries of canal history. He grinned fondly about his circumstance, walking along with Len on one side, he on the other to the upper gate separated by the lock. It was glorious working the canal. Across the gates' catwalk Lenny carried a rod. Its tip is bent 90-degrees, and here, these mindful canawlers came face to face.

"What's the afternoon's plan?" Len quizzed.

"Argh! Bounty and women! Life on the brine!" Kieran punctuated in pirate.

"Golly; and all this time I thought this river was fresh water," Len said.

Len inserted the tool at a grasp point of corrugated steel here in the works, leaned back, and drug the first of several plates away. This exposed the gears that drive a one-ton, toothed bar projecting out of the wall to extend and retract the gate. Thus, Len was left greasing the gears as Kieran made his way to the buoy shack. He grabbed brushcutters, a six-volt battery, and carried them to Buoy Boat 154. Her 26 feet lay fresh on the water. Midship, the cabin is made of glass panes built completely around. Her steel hull is painted state blue. The trim is sun yellow. A Detroit diesel pushes the single prop. Kieran cranked her over, listened for inadequacies to its familiar tap, and satisfied, cast off navigating north.

"We are digging our ditch through the mire," he sang of those men, long ago with picks and shovels. He dreamt of horses and rope pulling the 154 along, "Yes, we are up to our necks, by heck!" was the rejoice of Kieran Orin. ▼

This article is Chapter 1 of a book in progress by the author. The boat is now a museum piece. It is on blocks at the C-5 recreation trailheads.



K.O. Wilson's journalism and photography appear in multiple periodicals. His first was a three-part canal series, "As Written by an Insider" in the Glens Falls *Post-Star*, 1987. The byline tickles him still. And "The Buoy Tender" is his first published fiction. Mr. Wilson's collection of 57 original photographs of 16 New York counties are available at the New York Folklore Gallery of New York Artists as a boxed set of postcards, called KOWCARDS. His special digital photo display, "Exhibition of Current Trains," was featured in the NYF Gallery in Fall 2015, as part of the "Artist in the Gallery" series. Photo: The author, self-portrait in the buoy shack, 1986.

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