

Canal operated at profit for first 57 years

Legend, romantic adventure tales, song and poetry have woven a glamorous web around the Erie Canal. Strictly speaking, the Erie Canal is the part from the Hudson to Buffalo, with the Champlain Canal branching off above Troy to go up to Lake Champlain, the Oswego Canal branching off near Three Rivers to go up to Oswego and Lake Ontario and the Seneca-Cayuga Canal connecting Seneca and Cayuga lakes with the Erie Canal.

Canal systems do not play the dominant economic role they did 100 years ago. But in 1937, there were 5,010,464 tons of freight handled by the barge canal system. The present barge canal system was designed to carry a maximum of 10 million tons annually, or rather, seasonally because the canal system of course is closed by freezing weather.

The New York state waterways system includes 442.6 miles of canal construction and 358.7 miles of lakes and rivers for a total of 801.3 miles. The old Erie Canal was a toll canal until 1882, when charges were abol-



ished and free use of the canal system by and for the people of New York was guaranteed by a constitutional provision.

At a period when commercial development was starting in earnest and trade routes to the vast western frontier were laying the foundations of today's great cities, there is little doubt that the canals in this state were "the greatest single factor in bringing to the state and city of New York their remarkable development and prosperity during the first half of the 19th century, giving the latter the initial impetus which has made it the chief metropolis of the western world." That is a quotation from the official report of the Erie Canal Centennial Commission is

not an exaggeration can be seen by a glance at the early figures of canal traffic. By 1846, 21 years after its opening, the canal was carrying down to tide water shipments of greater total value than the whole export trade and the state and more than half the value of all the trade of all chief commercial states of the nation.

As early as 1783, George Washington had communicated to New Yorkers his belief in the worth of a westward canal.

Nothing, however, was done until 1808, when the Legislature ordered a survey of a route from the Hudson River to the Great Lakes for the information of President Jefferson, who recommended to Congress a public

works program of sufficient canals and waterways westward. The Legislature finally, in 1810, appointed a commission to study the whole problem. As a result of these studies, on April 15, 1817 the Erie and Champlain canals were authorized, and on July 4 of that same year ground was formally broken at Rome.

Eight years later, on Oct. 26, 1825, the Albany-to-Buffalo canal was opened, setting off a tremendous wave of canal building throughout the country.

"Clinton's Ditch," so-called after DeWitt Clinton, who was governor in 1817 and again in 1825 when the canal was opened, was a ditch in every sense of the word. It was four feet deep, 28 feet wide at the bottom, 40 feet wide at water level, had 84 locks in its 363 miles from Albany to Buffalo, with a total lock lift of 689 feet.

The original cost was \$7,142,790 but as soon as 1836, 11 years after it was opened, a program of improvement, deepening and widening was started, which lasted until 1862 and cost nearly \$32 million.