

Bethinking of Olde Orleans: Canal break of 1927

BY C. W. LATTIN
Orleans County historian

8-16-12



Vol. XXXIV, No. 33



Bethinking of Olde Orleans

With the Erie Canal now emptied between

Middleport and Holley for repairs to the Albion Eagle Harbor Road, I thought it would be interesting to reflect back to 1927 when the last big Canal break occurred locally.

I kind of have a personal involvement in this story as on Monday evening July 30 around 9:40 p.m., I drove over what became a sink hole a few minutes later on the Albion Eagle Harbor Road.

Because of bright lights and a man working at a culvert I slowed down to about 20 miles per hour when I went through a deep rut in the road which had not been there 40 minutes before. At any rate this year's break was nowhere as serious as it might have been and

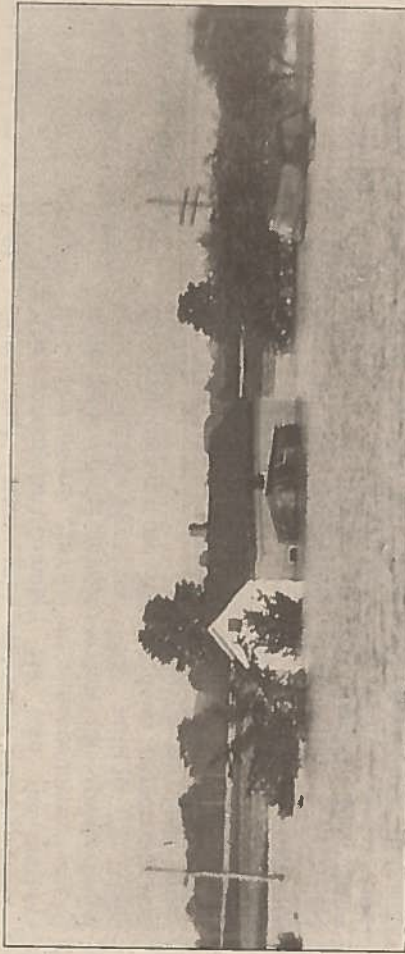
no way as bad as it was in 1927. The following story is from this column published back in 1983.

"A little ways east of Eagle Harbor in the Town of Gaines, Otter Creek flows under the Barge Canal through a culvert. Because of the geographic terrain high embankments of earth and concrete support the canal much above the level of Otter Creek. Early in August 1927 two boys who had been walking along the canal bank t that site noticed what appeared to be a small leak. Upon arriving at Eagle Harbor they reported their discovery to Leon Walter, the bridge tender. But before any state officials

or equipment could arrive on the scene the south bank had collapsed.

"A large piece of concrete which plunged down blocked the southern opening of the culvert through which Otter Creek flows. Within minutes water started backing up Otter Creek which in turn flooded hundreds of acres of fertile land to the south. An inland lake two miles long and a half mile wide was reported south of the canal along Otter Creek. In places this water was fifty feet deep.

"It was believed that muskrats digging in the canal embankment caused the leak which grew bigger and bigger by the great pressure of water.



"This photo which was taken shortly after the water had started to subside shows the Albion - Eagle Harbor Road looking at the Otter Creek gully east of Eagle Harbor. The house of "Skinny" Porter in the distance and another house next to it were under water up to the second floors. The residents of these marooned houses were rescued after spending a night in upper rooms.

"About one half mile south of the gully, ran

the tracks of the B L & R electric trolley which were under five feet of water. Trolley passengers were transported by autos during this flooding between the Gaines Basin Road and Eagle Harbor stop.

"Stop gates on the canal were closed as soon as possible shutting off other levels of the canal. This however meant that canal navigation was tied up west of Rochester until the damage was repaired. Over one hundred feet of the canal embankment

was washed away in the disaster. It took more than one hundred workmen with steam shovels, electrically operated concrete mixers, pile drivers, other machines and six weeks of steady labor to repair the canal bank.

"Because of blockage in the culvert, the water damage to crops and farmland was self-contained. Had the canal broken on the north side, extensive damage would have occurred to farms all the way to Waterport."