

THE PACKET-BOAT

"CHIEF ENGINEER OF ROME"

You are now gliding along on a 2-mile stretch of one of the most historically important waterways in the U.S. And, you are riding in a replica of a packet-boat, completely rebuilt and christened the "Chief Engineer of Rome", in 1985, named for the first packet-boat to float on the Erie.

The Erie was started here in Rome, NY, July 4, 1817. There is a marker on the bank, as you head west, showing where the first shovelful of earth was turned. The then Gov. DeWitt Clinton was primarily responsible for the canal and it was affectionately nicknamed "Clinton's Ditch".

The canal was finished in Oct. 1825, and Governor Clinton traveled from Lake Erie to New York City for the greatest celebration in the state's history. Cannon boomed all along the canal to let the people know from one end to the other that the Erie Canal was complete.

Early on, the operation of the canal brought a sharp reduction in freight shipping charges. From \$100 to \$10 a ton. The packet-boat afforded a more comfortable ride as compared to a jolting stagecoach. The Canal opened the West to trade and immigration, goods and raw materials could flow more easily both eastward and westward--and a prosperous financial operation allowed the seven (7) million dollar canal debt to be paid in full by 1836.

A team of horses could move 500 tons along a waterway like the Erie; on land it took 6 to 8 horses to move only 6 tons. The bulk of Erie traffic was freight vessels, such as scows, lakers, and bullheads (a covered boat that carried cargo needing protection like flour or grain). They were all pulled by horses or mules, as were the packet-boats.

They were called "packet" after ocean-going ships that carried only passengers and mail. Canal boats charged an average of 5¢ a mile with meals and bed, less if they chose to bring their own food and sleep on deck. Horses worked 6 hours on and

6 hours off; extra horses or mules were carried in the bow of the boat, as frequent changes were necessary. The speed limit on the canal was 4 mph and was strictly enforced to save wear and tear on the banks; but express packet boats often exceeded that limit, the captains willing to pay fines in order to make good time. The packet boat had the right-of-way over other traffic. As the towpath was only on one side of the canal, passing another boat called for one boat to stop its team and swing wide. If the timing was right, the tow rope would sink to the bottom and the second boat could pass over it. Some boats carried sickles on the bow to cut the other boats tow rope if the maneuver was not made correctly, and to lessen the possibility of having the animals pulled into the canal.

Some bridges over the canals were low enough to sweep passengers or anything else off the deck as the boat passed underneath. Fresh produce and other things were sold to passengers from the bridges along the way.

In 1836, the state began to widen, deepen and straighten the canal to 70 feet wide, 7 feet deep, and with 11 less locks; it then became known as the Enlarged Erie. You are now riding on a section of the straightened canal. There were no locks on this section because it was a level stretch where no locks were needed. The original canal, "Clinton's Ditch", runs through the village near the schoolhouse.

Between 1900-1903, New York State voted for the construction of a different canal along the same general route; this was to be called the Barge Canal. Delta Dam became the reservoir for the Barge Canal. Navigation on the Erie ended in 1917. The Barge Canal opened the same year, 1917, and is still used today, mostly by pleasure boats.