

**The Prairie Navy**

by  
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## Prairie Navy

Throughout the seventeenth century, the era of Cardinal Richelieu and Louis the Fourteenth, French fur traders and Catholic Missionaries made a sustained effort to explore and control the center of the North American continent.

Travel through the wilderness at that time was only really possible by water. In their drive toward midAmerica the French were aided by an extraordinary waterway, the system comprising the St. Lawrence River and the Great Lakes. Their base, Quebec, was founded by Champlain in 1608. By 1615 he had reached Georgian Bay, the northernmost part of Lake Huron. In 1634 Jean Nocolet passed the straits of Mackinac and became the first European to explore Lake Michigan. It had taken the French a bare 26 years to travel from Quebec city all the way to the farthest end of the Great Lakes system. This was a notable achievement, and we can only admire the courage and fortitude of these men, who were willing to push forward into an unknown land so far away from the good food, soft beds, and fine wines of European France.

However, on reaching the shores of Lake Michigan the explorer Jean Nicolet also reached a barrier, the subcontinental divide, which separates



the waters flowing east by the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence into the Atlantic Ocean from those which flow west and south into the Gulf of Mexico. This barrier runs around the southern perimeter of the Great Lakes. In the Chicago area it can be visualized as the ridge between Lake Michigan and the DesPlaines River.

The French had heard from the Indians of the great river which we now know as the Mississippi. If they could overcome the barrier presented by the subcontinental divide between the Great Lakes and the Mississippi, then a world of opportunities would present themselves. They could control the center of the continent, build the forts, settle the land, outflank the English along the Atlantic coast, and construct a New France on the North American continent. The history of the efforts made first by the French and then by the Americans to overcome this natural ridge between the waters is our history, the history of the Upper Midwest. It is also the project of this paper.

The world of the 1670's represented the dawn of the modern age in the Western World. The Royal Society has just been founded in London. This was one marker of the onset of the scientific era. In England the Puritan Revolution had finally petered out, and a Stuart, Charles II, had been restored to the English throne.. Louis XIV was the young and



ambitious king of France. Along the New England coast the English settlers were struggling with the local Indians in King Philip's War. Far inland, in the center of the North American continent, the French were exploring the river systems which would bring them, for a time, mastery over an empire.

In June 1673 a Jesuit priest, Father Marquette, a French fur trader, Louis Jolliet, and five voyageurs, set out from the present site of Green Bay, Wisconsin, to find the great river Mississippi of which they had heard.<sup>1</sup> They ascended the Fox River to the vicinity of Portage, Wisconsin, dragged or carried their canoes over to the Wisconsin River. They paddled down the Wisconsin to the Mississippi and then floated along west bank of this stream as far south as the mouth of the Arkansas River. They then returned upstream along the east bank to the mouth of the Illinois River. They paddled up the Illinois to the DesPlaines, then up the DesPlaines to the point where it is closest to the Chicago River. Here they encountered the continental divide, the barrier between the waters about which we have spoken. They portaged across to the Chicago River, overcoming the barrier, and were able to travel downstream to Lake Michigan, the beginning of the high road back to Quebec. In the course

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<sup>1</sup> New York, Columbia Encyclopedia, ed. 1, 1935 p. 938



of this trip Jolliet and Marquette became the first Europeans to see the upper Mississippi, as well as the first to travel through the Illinois Valley and the first to use the Chicago Portage. They proved that the Mississippi flows south towards the Gulf of Mexico, rather than west, as some had imagined.

The implications of their findings were apparent to them. In a letter to Father Claude Dablon of the Jesuits, Louis Jolliet pointed out the possibility (and importance) of a canal between the Chicago River and the DesPlaines.<sup>2</sup> He wrote:

- “The fourth remark concerns a very great and important advantage which will hardly be believed. It is that we could go with ease to Florida in a bark and by very easy navigation. It would be necessary to make a canal, by cutting through but a half a league of prairie, to pass from the foot of Lake Michigan to the DesPlaines.”

The third and last practical connection between Lake Michigan and the Mississippi system was explored a few years later. Robert Cavalier de La Salle was a seventeenth century entrepreneur and empire

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<sup>2</sup> Dablon, Claudius: Relation of the Discovery of Many Countries Situated to the South of New France, Made in 1673

The Jesuit Relation and Allied Documents, Vol 58, pp. 92-109  
Ed. R G Thwaites, Cleveland, Burrows Bros. Co., 1896-1901



builder.<sup>3</sup> In 1679 he set off up the Great Lakes system and down along the east shore of Lake Michigan as far as the mouth of the St. Joseph River, near to what is now Benton Harbor, Michigan. He and his party of thirty-two men ascended the St. Joseph to the site of South Bend, Indiana. They then portaged a few miles across the wet prairie to the source of the Kankakee River, paddled down the Kankakee and the Illinois to the Mississippi, and then ultimately to the Gulf of Mexico. At the mouth of the Mississippi on April 9, 1682 LaSalle claimed the entire Mississippi Valley as a possession of the French crown.

The travels of Father Marquette, Louis Jolliet, and LaSalle in the late seventeenth century established the three major connections between the Great Lakes and the Mississippi, those associated with three streams flowing into Lake Michigan: the Fox River at Green Bay, the Chicago River at the future site of Chicago, and the St. Joseph, at the future Benton Harbor. Inevitably one of these connections would be developed so as to allow for unimpeded water travel through the center of the continent. And when this happened, the settlement at the mouth of the river would become a world metropolis. The only questions were - which

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<sup>3</sup>Parkman, Francis: LaSalle and the Discovery of the Great West  
Boston, Little Brown & Co., 1901, pp. 57-81



one and when.

It certainly didn't happen right away. It's hard for us in the late twentieth century to imagine how primitive conditions were in the regions around Lake Michigan in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Here is what a Jesuit Priest, Pierre Francois Xavier de Charlevoix, had to say about canoe travel with the Indians in that era. This comes from a letter written in 1721 from Father Charlevoix, then in camp at the south end of Lake Michigan, to the Duchess de Lesdiguieres in France.<sup>4</sup>

- "If you travel in a canoe the confined posture you are obliged to sit in, and the apprehension occasioned at your first setting out, by the extreme fragility of this vehicle; the inaction you must of necessity be in, the slowness of your voyage, which is retarded by the least shower of rain, or gale of wind; the little society or conversation that can be had with persons who know nothing, who never open their mouths whilst they are employed, who poison you with their stench, and who fill you with vermin and nastiness; the caprice and rudeness you must put up with from them; the insults to which you are

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<sup>4</sup>P F X de Charlevoix: Journal of a Voyage to North America  
Chicago: The Caxton Club, 1923, vol II p. 125



exposed from a drunkard, or a person whom any unforeseen accident, a dream or the remembrance of any thing disagreeable puts into an ill humor; the avarice natural to those barbarians at the sight of any thing they covet, and what has cost several missionaries their lives; and in case war happens to be declared between the nations, in whose territory you are, the danger you are constantly exposed to, either of being reduced to the most wretched slavery, or of perishing in the most hideous torments: such, Madam, is the life that has been led by the first missionaries."

Under conditions such as these it's not surprising that Louis Jolliet's vision of a canal between Lake Michigan and the Illinois River remained unrealized for a century and a half.

The French, despite all their courage and sacrifice, failed in their effort to found an inland empire along the watershed of the Great Lakes and in the Mississippi Valley. Throughout the eighteenth century the fate of the northwest frontier remained linked to events in Europe and along the Atlantic coast. In 1763 the Illinois territory passed from the French to the British, and twenty years later, as a result of the Treaty of Versailles at the end of the American Revolution, this territory passed



over to the Americans.<sup>5</sup> Almost immediately plans for a canal revived. The British had concerned themselves with the fate of the Indians and had tried for a time to confine the colonists east of the crest of the Allegheny Mountains.<sup>6</sup> The Americans had no such scruples. In 1795 they bought from the Potawattomi Indians the land at the mouth of the Chicago River and eight years later erected Fort Dearborn at this site. By 1818 Illinois had become a state.<sup>7</sup> Originally the northern boundary of Illinois was supposed to be at the level of the southern end of Lake Michigan. However, it occurred to Illinois politicians that such a boundary would give to the future Wisconsin any canal built between the Chicago and Illinois Rivers. They were, therefore, able to persuade Congress to move the northern boundary of the State of Illinois up the shores of Lake Michigan some sixty miles, thus including within the boundaries of Illinois the future site of Chicago and the route to the Illinois River.

As early as 1810 it had become apparent to the practical, business-

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<sup>5</sup>Barraclough, Geoffrey, Ed. The Times Atlas of World History  
Maplewood, NJ: Hammond Inc., 1979 p. 194-5

<sup>6</sup>Geoffrey Barraclough, ed.: The Times Atlas of World History.  
Maplewood NJ, Hammond, 1984 p.164

<sup>7</sup> Ford, Thomas: A History of Illinois  
Chicago, the Lakeside Press, 1945 p. 4 et. seq.



minded Americans that the land west of the Great Lakes had enormous economic potential.<sup>8</sup> It was also apparent that at least one MiddleWestern city would serve as the gateway to the West. St. Louis had many advantages. It was situated at the point where the Missouri River joined the Mississippi. The Missouri River gave access to the western territory all the way to the Rocky Mountains. St. Louis also had outstanding connections by water with New Orleans and the Gulf of Mexico. However, the town suffered from one drawback in its role as a commercial center: It had no good connection by water with the East Coast, which was then the center of population in the United States of America.

The southern shores of Lake Michigan had this connection. Trade could be carried east via the Great Lakes, the Erie Canal, and the Hudson River all the way to New York City. It seemed to astute observers at the time that some settlement along the southern shore of Lake Michigan would be in a position to dominate trade of the East with the West and vice versa if only a connection could be found between the Lake and the Illinois River. Each of the little settlements in this area had its advocates. One of them was Chicago, at the mouth of the Chicago River.

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<sup>8</sup> Cronon, William: Nature's Metropolis  
1991, W W Norton & Co., New York



In 1823 the Philadelphia naturalist William Hypolitus Keating came through the region on a journey which ultimately led him to the Great Slave Lake in Canada.<sup>9</sup> He and his party had been commissioned by John Calhoun, Secretary of War, to find the source of the Minnesota River. Here's what he had to say about the country at the southern end of Lake Michigan.

- "In the afternoon of the fifth of June 1823 we reached Fort Dearborn (Chicago), after having been engaged eight days in travelling a distance of two hundred and sixteen miles (from Fort Wayne). ..... Fort Dearborn is situated in the State of Illinois, on the south bank, and near to the mouth of the Chicago river. The post at Chicago was abandoned a few months after the party visited it. Its establishment had been found necessary to intimidate the hostile and still very powerful tribes of Indians that inhabit this part of the country; but the rapid extension of the white population to the west, the establishment along the Mississippi of a chain of military posts which encloses them, and at the same time convinces them of the vigilance of the government, and of the inevitable destruction which

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<sup>9</sup> Keating, William H. Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of St. Peter's River, etc.

London, G B Whittaker, 1825



they would bring upon themselves by the most trifling act of hostility on their part, have, it is thought, rendered the continuance of a military force at Fort Dearborn unnecessary. ``

- Professor Keating continued with a few remarks about the settlement around the fort: "We were much disappointed at the appearance of Chicago and its vicinity.....The village presents no cheering prospect, as, notwithstanding its antiquity, it consists of but few huts, inhabited by a miserable race of men, scarcely equal to the Indians from whom they are descended. ....As a place of business, it offers no inducement to the settler."

Keating's curiosity led him, however, to explore the south branch of the Chicago River and its potential junction with the Mississippi River system:

" The south fork of Chicago-river takes its rise, almost six miles from the fort, in a swamp which communicates also with the DesPlaines, one of the head branches of the Illinois. .... We determined to ascend the Chicago river in order to observe this interesting division of waters. We accordingly left the fort on the 7th of July. in a boat which, after having ascended the river about four miles, we exchanged for a narrow pirogue that drew less water; the stream we were ascending was very



narrow, rapid, and crooked, presenting a great fall; it continued so for about three miles, when we reached a sort of swamp designated by the Canadian voyagers under the name of le petit lac. Our course through this swamp, which extended for three miles, was very much impeded by the grass, weeds, etc. through which our pirogue passed with difficulty. We landed on the north bank, and continued our course along the edge of the swamp for about three miles, until we reached the place where the old portage road meets the current, which was here very distinct towards the south. We were delighted at beholding for the first time.... the division of waters starting from the same source, and running in two different directions, so as to become the feeders of streams that discharge themselves into the ocean at immense distances apart.

- Then Keating went on to make a statement which reminds one of Jolliet's, made one hundred and fifty years earlier: "It is apparent that an expenditure, trifling in comparison to the importance of the object (in other words a canal) , would again render Lake Michigan a tributary of the Mexican gulf. Impressed with the importance of this object, the legislature of Illinois has already caused some observations to be made upon the possibility of establishing this communication."



So this little frontier mudhole called Fort Dearborn or Chicago had one asset which lifted it above the other Lake Michigan settlements and ultimately above St. Louis in the struggle to serve as gateway to the West. It had the Chicago River, which was close enough to the Illinois River so that a canal might be dug between them and a waterway established from New York to the Mississippi River.

We all have received the most enticing travel brochures, which hold out to us the vision of travel by boat through the canals of Europe. The prospect offers lazy sunlit winedrenched days moving across the French countryside at four miles an hour through locks and past small rural villages. These European canals are legacies from the great age of canal building, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, before the introduction of the railroads, at a time when shipment by canal boat seemed the most logical and up to date way to move people and goods across the countryside.

This same impulse operated in the United States.<sup>10</sup> The Erie Canal, 363 miles long with 82 locks, was built between 1817 and 1825. It ran between Albany on the Hudson and Buffalo on Lake Erie and was

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<sup>10</sup>Encyclopedia Britannica: Canals and Inland Waterways  
pp. 347-356



immediately successful. The agricultural products from the Northwest could be shipped east to be exchanged for manufactured goods from the East Coast. Trade flowing along the Erie Canal system allowed New York City to achieve a commercial dominance over other ports along the Atlantic seaboard.

Even after the opening of the Erie Canal goods shipped from the East could only travel as far as the Midwest harbors, to Detroit, to Milwaukee, and finally as far as the little settlement at Chicago. Illinois politicians, with their customary prescience, had already noted that something must be done. The first governor of Illinois, Shadrach Bond, sent to the Legislature a strong recommendation in favor of the Illinois and Michigan Canal.<sup>11</sup> This, of course, was to be a canal following the old portage route between the Chicago River and branches of the Illinois.

A real boost to the project of the Illinois and Michigan Canal was given by the United States Congress in 1827, when it passed a law "granting to the state the alternate sections of land in a 5-mile strip along either side of the proposed canal for the purpose of aiding in its

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<sup>11</sup>Gov. Thomas Ford: History of Illinois,  
Chicago, The Lakeside Press, 1945 vol 1, p. 19



construction.”<sup>12,13</sup> Two years later, the State Legislature created a Canal Commission of three members. These commissioners proceeded to lay out two towns at either end of the canal, Chicago and Ottawa. In the summer of 1830 the lots at Chicago were offered for public sale. The town plat was filed for record on August 4, 1830. This date marks the real birth date of the city of Chicago.<sup>14</sup>

It wasn't until six years later that actual work on the project started. By that time new commissioners, including Colonel William Archer, and a new engineer, William Gooding, had been appointed. On July 4, 1836, the ground was broken in Bridgeport.. In its eastern portion the canal would have to be cut through or be lifted over the 13 foot high divide between Lake Michigan and the DesPlaines - the barrier which had blocked the explorers of the seventeenth century. Thereafter it would have to descend 141 feet to its junction with the Illinois River at LaSalle. This descent was to be controlled by 15 locks. LaSalle was located at the head of navigation of the Illinois River.

Private contractors undertook to see that the ditch was dug and

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<sup>12</sup> Ford, *ibid.* p. 97

<sup>13</sup> Conzen, *ibid.* p. 7

<sup>14</sup>Ford, *ibid.* p. 277



the locks constructed. Of course all the work was by hand, with pick and shovel. The work was hard. Laborers, mainly Irish, were recruited along the east coast, shipped west, and housed in jerry built camps, which were periodically devastated by epidemics of cholera and malaria<sup>15</sup> By way of payment these Irish workers received a dollar, supplemented with a gill of whiskey, for each 14 to 15 hour day, ,

Some of you may have heard from your grandparents of the financial panics which swept over the United States in the nineteenth century, destroying bank credit and ending manic speculation. One of these periodic panics broke out in 1837, a year after work on the canal had started. The State Bank of Illinois, which held the canal's assets, stopped meeting its obligations in May 1837<sup>16</sup>. (Those of you who believe in the sanctity of municipal bonds should remember that in 1841-2 the State of Illinois failed to pay interest on its debentures.<sup>17</sup>) The laborers and contractors working on the Canal were paid in script, which gave them

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<sup>15</sup>John Lamb: A corridor in Time, Romeoville IL, Lewis University, 1987

<sup>16</sup>Cronon: Nature's Metropolis  
New York, W W Norton, 1991 p. 64

<sup>17</sup>Onahan, Wm J.: Irish Settlements in Illinois  
Catholic World vol 33. (May 1881) pp. 157-162



corresponding property rights to the farm land along the Canal. This peculiar payment mechanism, which must have seemed a burden at the time, afterwards turned into a boon. The farm land in the Illinois Valley was of good quality, and the workers who redeemed their script for land later prospered. The large number of Irish families who have farmed successfully in the hinterlands behind the river towns of Morris, Ottawa, and LaSalle are a testimony to the financial problems of the State in the 1840's and their ultimate solution by the issuance of script.

The Canal finally opened for business in April 1848. From Bridgeport, at the eastern end, it was only five and a half miles via the Chicago River to Lake Michigan. Trade was carried in canal boats, which were about one hundred feet long and no more than 17 1/2 feet wide. The boats were pulled by mules, which walked along a towpath. The canal boats were not allowed to go more than 5 miles an hour. A higher speed would cause a wake and erode the banks. Packet boats carried passengers, who preferred this mode of travel to the dusty, bumpy stage travel of the period. These passenger boats left Chicago three times a day. The ride seems to have been a charming experience for many, but it had its discomforts. The windows were sealed at night to ward off malaria. Ninety people sat, ate, and slept in a cabin fifty feet long by nine



wide and seven high. Only a thin curtain at night ensured the privacy of the ladies. The trip from Chicago to LaSalle took 22 hours<sup>18,19</sup> Such was life on board the prairie navy.

After the Canal opened, business in Chicago boomed. During the first year of operation corn shipments from Chicago to the East increased eight fold<sup>20</sup>. Over 90% of the new corn shipments came to Chicago over the Canal. The farmers in Northern Illinois no longer had to contend with muddy roads and inefficient wheeled transportation. In return, manufactured goods from the East flowed down the Canal to customers in the western hinterland. "Lumber receipts at Chicago from the forests of Michigan and Wisconsin nearly doubled in 1848, and one fourth of this wood moved south down the canal, to be used for houses, fences, and farm buildings on the Illinois prairie. The canal almost instantly expanded Chicago's hinterland southward along the Mississippi to just above St.

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<sup>18</sup>Historical Map & Guide to the Illinois & Michigan National Heritage Corridor. 1993 The Canal Corridor Association.

<sup>19</sup>Cozen, MP and Carr, KJ: The Illinois and Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor: A guide to its History and Sources  
DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1988

<sup>20</sup>Cronon, *ibid.* p. 64



Louis.”<sup>21</sup>

The growth of commerce in Chicago following the opening of the Canal was mirrored by a growth in population. In 1845 the town had 12,000 inhabitants. A few months after the Canal started to accept business in 1848 the population had risen to 20,000. By 1850 the total number of inhabitants was 28,000, and it had risen to 74,000 four years later, at the time when the first rail competition appeared.<sup>22</sup>

The coming of the railroads in 1854 spelled the end of the Canal as a transport system for people. After that year travel between Chicago and the river towns was cheaper and quicker by rail. But the Canal retained its efficiency as a transporter of heavy goods well into the second half of the nineteenth century. The largest tonnage carried on the Canal was in 1882, when over a million tons were recorded.<sup>23</sup>

Ultimately the Illinois and Michigan Canal became outmoded. The upper part of the Canal was superseded in 1900 by the much larger and more modern Sanitary and Ship Canal between Chicago and Joliet. The

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<sup>21</sup>ibid. p. 65

<sup>22</sup>Conzen and Carr p. 13

<sup>23</sup>Lamb, j: A Corridor in Time  
Romeoville, IL: Lewis University, 1987. p.



lower part was closed in 1933.

It is tempting to think that our city and region are ahistorical - without any discernable past. But in fact evidences of our history lie all around us. The shores of Lake Michigan are the same shores which were first seen by Europeans in the mid sixteen hundreds, and our Chicago River is the river down which Jolliet and Marquette paddled in 1673. Any driver going east on Interstate 80 will cross the St. Joseph River, which served as a waterway for LaSalle in his great trip to the Mississippi and the Gulf. With a little imagination it's possible to visualize the canoes moving upstream in December of 1679. The site of the Chicago Portage between the Chicago River and the DesPlaines is still to be found at Portage Park, at the foot of Harlem Avenue just north of the Stevenson Expressway. It is marked by an impressive statue memorializing the early travellers: an Indian, a French voyageur, and a Missionary Father. Portage Creek, leading to the DesPlaines, is just beyond. Finally, large sections of the Illinois and Michigan Canal have been preserved. The first few miles, within the City of Chicago, were paved over in the construction of the Stevenson Expressway, but from Summit south to LaSalle the Canal is easily visible as a permanent feature of the landscape. One might visit the Gaylord Building at Lockport, built in 1838 by the Canal Commissioners as a place



in which to store canal construction equipment. It was later acquired for use as a store by the merchant George Gaylord. Mr. Gaylord had settled in Lockport because he was convinced that this town would become the metropolis of Northern Illinois, and that Chicago would remain a rural outpost.<sup>24</sup> Next to the Gaylord building is lock number one, at the point at which the descent to the level of the Illinois River begins. For miles along the Canal, from its crossing by Interstate 55 near Channahon all the way to LaSalle, one can walk the old tow path and visualize the packet boats and barges of the 1840's as they moved up and down this waterway. At LaSalle a complete lock with gates is still visible, and beyond the lock the turning basin, end of the line for the canal boats, and beyond this one can see the Illinois River, which flows to the Mississippi and ultimately the Gulf.

We have personal stories of life on the Canal from those whom we could reach out and touch. Here is the way an old man remembered being a boy on the Canal in 1851, in the years before the coming of the railroads. He and his father and mother and eight brothers and sisters were Irish immigrants. The father, while still in Ireland, had bought farm land near Ottawa, Illinois. The family had been shipwrecked on Long Island at

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<sup>24</sup>Personal communication, Gaylord Donnelley



the end of the long sailing voyage to the New World and had lost most of their possessions. They had painfully made their way up the Hudson River, then across the Great Lakes to Chicago. Eighty years later he is writing to his grandchildren from his home on Greenwood Avenue in Hyde Park.:

" Then we took passage in a canal boat upon the Illinois and Michigan Canal to Ottawa, Illinois, our destination, reaching there in September of 1851, having been from two to three months upon our journey to destination. Crossing one ocean, sailing upon one great river to its head of navigation, crossing two of the Great Lakes, floating down about 100 miles of one of the great canal systems of our country, viewing from its banks the waving prairie grasses intermingled with glowing yellow rosinweed flower, with bumble bees drowsing in its cups, while wild game, winging its way from one feeding ground to another, sailed overhead or fluttered short distances at our approach. Wild geese, ducks, sandhill cranes, prairie chickens, quail, plover, snipe and wild turkeys were plentiful, as were deer and wolves in the country the canal passed through."<sup>25</sup>

The wolves and prairie chickens have disappeared. The numbers of

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<sup>25</sup> Laurence Arthur Carton to Eugenia Carton January 31, 1932.



wild turkeys and ducks are reduced. But the Canal with its surroundings remains. A visit to it allows us direct access to the natural beauty of Northern Illinois and to the history of our city and state

Note: Gerald W. Adelman, President of the Canal Corridor Association, greatly aided the author in the preparation of this paper by making available to him a fine bibliographic source, Conzen & Carr's "The Illinois & Michigan Canal: A Guide to its History and Sources."

R W Carton  
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