

# Newton Baker Keeps Interest in Canal Days

## Espy Man Has Memories of Days When

### Cumbersome Boats Were Used

**Editor's Note:** The following article appeared in *The Morning Press* on February 22, 1938, relating to an interview with George Newton Baker of Espy about his experiences as a canal boatman. At an early age, he began working on his father's canal boat and followed this kind of employment until the North Branch Canal, which paralleled the Susquehanna River, discontinued operation in 1901. In the account Baker tells about building canal boats at Espy, length of canal boating season, daily distance of canal boat travel, locks on the canal, and a trip to Penn Van, New York, a few miles west of Dresden on Seneca Lake.

When the canal ceased to operate, Baker took a job at the American Car and Foundry Company in Berwick. After working there for thirty-nine years, he retired in 1939 at the age of eighty. He lived to be ninety and died on June 1, 1949, and was survived by three sons: Dr. L. E. Baker, Wilbur Baker, and Paul Baker.

In his obituary, it mentioned that he often wrote articles of a historic nature about Pennsylvania's growth that appeared in area newspapers. In the article that follows, Baker mentioned that he kept a diary to record his canal experiences from the fall of 1888 until 1900. Undoubtedly, it would be a real find and a special treat to read from this diary if it were still in existence after all of these years.

A very good source for information about the North Branch Canal is *Anthracite and Slackwater: The North Branch Canal 1828-1901* by F. Charles Petrillo, published in 1986 by the Center for Canal History and Technology, Easton, Pennsylvania.



The cabin of his boat, for some years turned into a chicken pen, reunions, memories and some papers are all that Newton Baker, of Espy, has in exchange of his years of experience as a canal man.

Canal men, those who navigated the cumbersome boats over the shallow canals to all eastern sections, are gradually dwindling in number, but a large roster remains of those who as youngsters played on the flat-bottom boats and went on trips during the summer months.

Boatmen, who still like to meet each year at the reunion and renew friendships and swap tales, include John Hummel, Isaiah Heckman, Charles Carson, Wilbur Baker, of Espy; George Bittenbender, Henry Boone, Myron Boone, of Lime Ridge; L. O. Heckard, L. S. Lamey, of Berwick; Norman Mottern and Isaac Rauch, of Danville; C. R. Nagle, George Shultz, John Swank and Sam Weller, of Bloomsburg, and Charles Pressler, of Berwick.

## **Boated in Summer**

"Yes, we boated in the summer and saved up for the winter months," the veteran mused as he sat on a table upon which had been spread his record book of some years ago.

"I started boating myself on June 2, 1885, on boats of the Pennsylvania Canal Company. The numbers of the boats are 287 and 288; I kept a diary until the fall of 1888 in which I entered many of my experiences, and I operated boats until the fall of 1900.

I had just returned from Columbia and had loaded for a trip to Bloomsburg, when the canal froze over before I could get the boat unloaded. I never did get the boats back home.

"Captain Nevil's boat also froze fast at Espy, so we just traded boats. He dismantled my boats and I did the same with his. Captain Cooper's boats also froze before he could get them out of the canal at Rupert.

"We didn't know it then, but that was the end of the Pennsylvania Canal. In 1901 the canal company sold a couple of pairs of boats for service on the Schuylkill. They ran water into the Pennsylvania canal long enough to get those boats out and that was the end of our boating days on that ditch.

"We had four docks here at Espy and four outfits could dock at a time.

## **Made Boats There**

"Yes, they used to make boats here," the canal man continued. "There would be as many as six under way at one time, and I imagine they could put out about eight in a summer.

"The cost for a canal boat would vary. If an individual wanted one, it would cost about \$1200, but if the company made them and supplied the material the cost would have been around \$800.

"They were about eighty-one feet long and fifteen feet wide, and there was a place for the extra team of mules on the bow.

"Each captain had two boats and two hands, the driver and boatswain. One drove the team and the other cooked. The captain, of course, steered.

Reflecting, the captain continued, "We could average about twenty-four miles a day loaded and from thirty-eight to forty light. It was about four o'clock in the morning when we started out, and the captain and the boatswain would eat first and then spell over the driver. The driver would stay on deck long enough to eat and do the dishes before getting off and being with the mules.

"At noon again the boatswain would spell off the driver and we had lunch and then around four we had our last meal.

## Tied Up At 8 P.M.

It was generally about eight when we tied up for the night. If we went west the first stop was at the half way house below Danville, but of course in grass time it was harder for the mules and took a little longer.

"The next stop would be a McKees Half Falls, the next at Clark's Ferry, then at Buck Lock near Middletown, Mulletstown or Bridgeville, the state line between Pennsylvania and Maryland and then Havre de Grace. From here we could go either to Philadelphia or Baltimore.

"Well," the captain answered. "We carried from 268-270 tons a trip, and it was some job for mules. We used them rather than horses because they didn't sweat nearly so much in the sun.

"The mules would be stabled at each hook-up place along the canal. There were stalls and it would cost from twelve and a half cents to twenty cents a head. At Harrisburg it was twenty and here in Espy twelve and a half.

"And one thing we learned soon was that it didn't pay to oversleep. The first fellow to the dock got the best place. So we always left earlier than the rest. At least we tried to be first out.

"We got ninety cents a ton to haul coal from Nanticoke to New York. But of course we carried about everything imaginable.

"Yes, families did go along on lots of trips. My mother often went along. The women got to be good steerers and would tend to the cooking. It took a month to go to New York and back, and it meant being away from the family a long time.

## Sorrel Mules Best

"I always said I was a Dutch-Irish Yankee. My grandfather was a Yankee, my grandmother was Irish and my mother was Dutch. My grandfather located near Tilman Nagles, the steamboat man. I was three years old when my father moved from Afton to Campbell's Run. Afton has since been renamed Almedia, Pa. At an early age I always wanted to play at being a boatman. When I went to visit my grandmother I would get several trestles and line them up like a boat team. I was about 5 or 6 years old then. I played that the trestles my grandfather used in his carpenter work were a fine sorrel team. I had heard my father say that a sorrel mule was much tougher and could stand harder work than a mule of any other color. I even made rope harness for this make-believe 'team'. This 'team' never let any grass grow under their feet nor allowed any fish to nibble at the towline.

The first boat I remember my father having was the *Lady Franklin* and my father's brother had the *Lady Washington*. These two boats were built just alike. My father and Uncle Wesley Baker boated up the extension which ran from Pittston to Watkins. Father later got a boat called the *Amazon* and Uncle Wesley got one he called the *Cayuga*. In 1868 I made a trip to Penn Yan, N.Y. with my father. He had a man by the name of William Hagenbuch, better known as Badger, as his bowman. One day Badger raised one of the hatches and crawled down onto the wheat to take a snooze. I crawled down with him. It wasn't long before Badger was asleep and after a little while I got chilly so

to warm up a bit. I filled Badger's trousers and shirt full of wheat. I had him stuffed full from head to feet. When he awoke he got very angry when he saw what a predicament I had put him in. He wanted to whip me and that made my father cross. The air was very warm for awhile.

## **Drove at Ten**

"Again in 1869 I went along with my father on a trip to Penn Yan. I was ten years old then and I did all the driving in the day time and the bowman would drive at night. The boatmen up that way didn't think much of us Pennsylvanians and there were often fights. One time there was a fight at Horseheads and a fellow knocked by Uncle Wesley down the bank.

"From Horseheads to Watkins there were 44 locks. These all leaked very badly and we often had to put canvass down over the stern of our boat to keep the water from running in the stern window. All these locks were close together. At Watkins we would look out into Seneca Lake and there a steamboat would take us in town down the lake to Dresden, which was about 40 miles. This lake was very deep and would get very rough in stormy weather. It was so rough on one occasion that mother, who was along, got seasick. We would lock up in the canal to Penn Yan. This canal was 7 miles long and had 28 locks. Upon reaching Penn Yan we would look out into a lake that was as clear as crystal just like the Pennsylvania canal from Clarks Ferry to Harrisburg. The sulfur water that runs into the river at Millersburg made the water blue and reached nearly half way across at Clarks Ferry. It was a Penn Yan where I first caught a fish. It was a sunfish and mother fried it up nice and brown. I ate bone and all just like we used to eat herring down at Havre de Grace, Md. There was no use trying to pick bones out of a herring and when fried crisp they could be eaten bones and all. In that way you got your money's worth. However, at Havre de Grace, it did not cost us anything for fish."

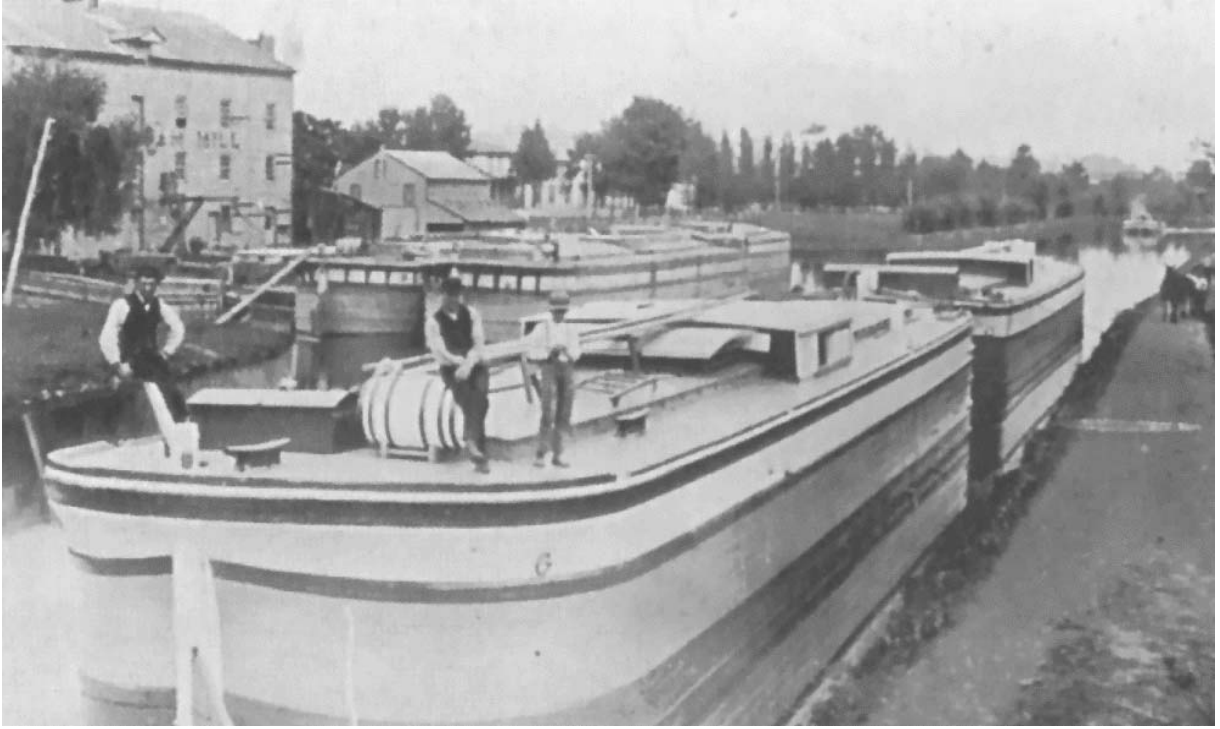
## **Tells of Levels**

A contribution to the Americana of canal boat days is the information that there were five locks between Nanticoke and Columbia. Locks and levels include: Nanticoke, one; Beach Haven, two; Shamokin Dam, three; inlet at Clarks, four; Hog Pen, five.

There were thirteen stop locks from Nanticoke to Columbia. A stop lock had only two gates. Mr. Baker explained, and was only used when the river was high, and overflowed the banks.

Locks and levels between Hunlocks Creek and Chickies Lock follow: One at Hunlocks, one at Iona, one at mile bridge below Berwick, one at Catawissa, one a mile below Danville lock, one at Hummels Wharf, one at the injunction below Amity Hall, one about Clark's Ferry about 200 yards, one about Twin Taverns (this lock had four gates), one at Dauphin Furnace, one a mile below Dauphin, one below Steelton, and one below Chickies Lock.

Mr. Baker, who was born April 11, 1859, and was reared on the canal and boated until he was past forty-one, is one of the few men still living who can recite the locks and levels in the various canals in this section.



**Canal boats at Espy Canal Boat Yard on the North Branch Canal**