

The Miami and Erie Canal
by Russ Franzen

chorus: From Lake Erie down to the Ohio River

Pulled along by two mules at four miles an hour.

Bringing commerce and settlers to the Western frontier
On the Miami and Erie Canal.

We'd been on the canal for two days or three

Going up to Lake Erie from Cincinnati.

We paid three cents a mile for the ride and some eats

While the mules rested midships in their very own suite.

We were told of the navvies who worked with shovels and
picks For thirty cents a day to dig that broad ditch.

They ate corn bread and beans, washed down with some
whiskey,

And they lay down to sleep in their small wooden shanties.

They dug that canal, it was forty feet wide,

And cleared out the towpath, ten feet on each side.

There were 105 locks that took the boats up and down

And they were pulled by two mules, who just poked along.

At the Providence lock, local farmers came by

Selling fresh produce for our dinner that night.

At Waterville our boat pulled up to the dock

And we went into Rupp's Canal Store with money to shop.

Just a six-hour ride from Waterville home.

The night has come on and we see the full moon

Shining down on this great Ohio waterway

In our green and white packet on the way to Lake Erie.

Dance With the Tiller

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It was just after supper and the passengers danced

On top of the boat they were swayin.

But the fiddle and squeezebox and dancing all stopped

When the low bridge horn started blowin'

The mules started pulling us out of the lock.

We were headed South to Piqua.

I just started my watch on the overnight shift

Steering the boat with its big, black tiller.

Chorus: The soft swishing of the water as the bow cuts
through

I hear the passengers snoring as the old boat moves on.

We hear the mules clomping by the light of the moon

And I'll dance with the tiller til dawn.

In the day light the locks were alive

With farmers selling produce and townsfolk swapping news

But at night it's near empty. All the folks have gone home

With just the lockmaster locking us through.

We were guided from the bow by the lantern's light

As we glided through Ohio in the dark of the night

And I think of my sweetheart waiting back home

As I dance with the tiller til dawn.

The Navvies on the Canal

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chorus: Huzzah! Ye Navvies! We dug this Big
Ditch

From Toledo to the Ohio River

With laborer's wages we'd never get rich

But our work will love on forever.

I'm Paddy O'Rourke. From Dublin I came To dig
this canal in Ohio.

There were thousands just like me. We were

promised good pay

And a better life on the morrow.

What we found was a place called the Great Black
Swamp

T'was land like I'd ne'er seen before.

A thick cover of forest. The ground wet or damp

In the shadow of the Maumee River.

We slogged through the swamp with shovels and
picks

The wheelbarrows hauled the muck out.

My back was sore from the heavy digging

And wet soil ate leather from my boots.

Every day we toiled for a thirty cent wage

And a jigger of whiskey to drink

When we asked about payday, the boss
said, "Next week"

And he said it with a wink.

We lived in small shanties in the worker's camp

We dug from sunup to sundown.

Mosquitoes brought death in the heat and the damp

And burials made the canal sacred ground.

When our work on the canal was over and done

And mules pulled canal boats along.

We saw pioneers and villages that made our country
strong And saw the progress our hard work had won.

Old Blue Nell

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Old Blue Nell was a canal boat cook

She worked once on our crew.

She was old as the canal, far as anyone knew,

And she always wore a dress of blue.

Chorus: Her stews were the stuff of legends,

Her pies so good you'd cry.

But she took no orders from any man

And she'd spit in the Captain's eye.

Old Blue Nell signed onto our boat For a Cincinnati run.

She cut lumber from our load to feed her stove, And the captain,
he stayed mum.

We dined the first day on beefsteak, The next day, Muskrat
Stew.

I gained five pounds by the Loramie Summit, When at
Lockington we went thru.

Old Blue Nell hopped off the boat When we entered at Lock
One.

It took six hours to get locked through And at Lock 6 she came
on the run.

She spent the day at the tavern, Drinking whiskey and playing
cards

And when she hopped on the boat with her whiskey bottle,
She went to bed and slept real hard.

When she woke, she didn't feel like cooking, So I prepared the
food

And the captain kicked her off at Piqua When she called him
something rude.

The Boatman's Tin Horn

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The day passed in peace. The tilling was easy.
The canal was in a good mood.
Folks rode topside and enjoyed the quiet journey
As they watched Ohio glide by.

Another boat passed on its way to Toledo
Its mules looked tired and forlorn.
But the birds' cheerful songs were soon drowned out
When the boatman blew his tin horn.

Chorus: There's a low bridge a comin'! Get the chairs back on deck.
And lay down low so you don't break your neck.
And the lockmaster listens from evening til morn
For the boatman to blow his tin horn.

Night falls on the canal. The lantern were lit.
Ladies in forward cabins. The men in the back.
They passed 'round the bottle. Tall tales got steep.
Then the card game started when the Captain's asleep.
The salt pork and biscuits for breakfast were fine
And I hoped that today I'd get a fish on the line.
At the lock, Captain was beaten out of his turn
After the boatman blew his tin horn.

It was a long, long journey through country and town
The men with their cussing. The ladies in their gowns.
We entered the last lock after six days of travel
On the Miami and Erie Canal.

Smell the Roses © 2016 by Russ Franzen

The old man stood at the lock, watching the boat go through
There was lots of cursing and complaining from the boat's exhausted crew.
One crewman stopped and asked, "What're you smilin' at, old man?"
He said, "When I was captain of my own canal boat, I was ornery as an old
wet hen.

He said, "Canallin's not an easy life," and took a draw on his old clay pipe.
"There was bone-weary work, hard drinkin' and gamblin' and I did it for
most of my life.
But as I got older, the fightin' got harder and I lost more than I won.
Then one day the boat passed a field of flowers and I knew my days of
fightin' were done."

Chorus: You gotta be thankful for the roses you pass along the way
And the lilacs and the wild flowers the boat passes every day.
You'll smell mule apples and dead fish as life's canal boat moseys on,
But remember those lovely roses will once again come along.

The old captain stood there puffin on his pipe. "Canallin's a great life," he
said.
"There are lots of hardships but it all evens out, and you have to get that into
your head.
This Ohio country is beautiful, with forests and flowers and fields of grain
And you want to try to remember the good. You may never see it again."

The crewman said, "Thanks, Old Timer, I'll see you the next time through."
And he hopped on the boat as the mules started pullin', and he gave the old
man a salute.
A short time later, they passed a field where the flowers were in full bloom.
And he picked up his banjo and after a while, he'd written this little tune.

Sally and Molly © 2016 by Russ Franzen

Sally and Molly greeted the day
Smelling coffee, johnny cakes and a bale of hay;
They're rested and ready and full of pep
Cincinnati gets closer step by step.

chorus: Hitch 'em up. Let 'em go.
Those good old mules walk real slow
But they'll get you where you want to go
On this O-Hi-O Canal.

You gotta speak their language or they won't go
Or they'll walk too fast for a canal boat tow.
They walk with the hogee along the path
And after six hours they can take a nap.

They're Pure Bred Mules, You can tell by the
face
The Mange is cut. Every hair in place
They're the prettiest mules on this canal
At least as far as I can tell.

They could be pulling plows in a farmers' field
And breaking up Ohio clay
But they'd rather be pulling our old canal boat
Because walking beats working all day.

My Ordinary Days

© 2018 by Ruth and Russ Franzen

Thank you, friend, for blessing all my ordinary days.
I think of you in summer and through the winter haze,
When the canal is frozen over and the year's flowed to
an end,
I will see you in the spring time And will set to work
again.

Chorus: Along this silver ribbon,
with the Sun our only clock
I'll live my ordinary life
'tween the level and the lock.

As the sun beats down upon us, the years do not erase
All these days of peace and toil and the lines upon my
face.

I have gathered up the riches those of wealth would
scorn to take,
But if they knew the sweetness here, the yearning and
the ache.

They might ask me for my stories of my ordinary life,
Aboard this old canal boat with my children and my
wife,
And I'll smile and tip my hat to those who know not
what I give,
For in all this world of wonder, there's no other way I'd
live.

A Canal Boat Christmas © 2016 by Russ Franzen

We were riding on the old canal. The hold was filled with coal
The leaves had long been off the trees. The December winds
were cold.

Near Canal Dover, the skies were dark, At the dock the boat
turned in

But when morning came we saw Our boat was all iced in.

chorus: Our canal boat stuck at Christmas
Where the ice won't let us leave.
But Santy knows just where we are,
And he'll be here Christmas Eve.

Christmas Eve dawned cold as ice. The snow was on the ground.
Seven families stranded in their boats. The cook stoves kept us
warm.

After supper, Pop went out to tend the mules in the barn,

And I wished that I was warm and cozy at my Granny's in
Bolivar.

We were playing cards in the aft cabin. I was sitting on the
bottom step.
When we heard some clatter topside upon the Tiller deck.
Then the hatch above me opened. I looked above and saw
A bearded man in a bright red suit. It was good ol' Santy Claus!
He dropped down candy and some nuts, Then hollered "Ho, Ho,
Ho!"

Then he touched his finger to his nose and turned around to go.

We thought he'd take the catwalk. But he dropped down on
the gunwale.

As he walked along the side of the boat he slipped and fell in
the canal.

We flew topside and Santy Was splashin' in the old canal.
The hat and beard sat on the ice. We saw it was the neighbor gal.

The adults came running and fished her out. She was soaked
from skin to coat.

My Mom brought her a blanket. And she sloshed back to her
boat.

I'll ne'er forget that Christmas. What I story I can tell
Of Christmas Eve stuck on our boat And Santy fallin' in the
old canal.

Christmas at the Mill

© 2015 by Russ Franzen

A light snow had fallen in Providence. The canal was
covered with ice.

But Isaac Ludwig's Mill was still open And the
Christmas Eve weather was nice.

There were stacks of cut wood in the workshop For the
furniture Isaac would make

And the millers were tying up bags of flour That would
become Christmas puddings and cakes.

Chorus: The bell at St. Patrick's was ringing
It sounded over river and canal
It rang out the arrival of Christmas Day
At the Isaac Ludwig's Mill.

Isaac finished the gifts for his grandchildren, The hand
made wooden toys and boats

While at home, his wife made the young girls dolls And
beautiful new winter coats.

The smell of gingerbread filled the air, A tin star sat
atop the little spruce tree.

As she waited for the family to gather At their home on
Christmas Day.

A worker took some of the flour
And delivered it to the village's poor
While another oiled the equipment
and swept the flour dust from the floor.
Then Isaac poured his workers a cup of cider,
A toast to Christmas Day
Then they put out the lights and locked the front door
As the sun set across the Maumee.

The Grand Rapids of the Maumee

© 2017 by Russ Franzen

- 1) Before the canal, boats loaded with cargo
At the rapids' foot would unload.

On the shallow Grand Rapids the boats could not float
They put cargo on wagons to Providence then to Fort
Wayne on boats.

chorus: It's 20 miles of natural beauty so fair
With fishes and birds in the water and air,
It's a place of wonder, part of our history,
It's the Grand Rapids of the Maumee.

- 2) Villages like Miltonville and Otsego are gone
And villages the Odawa once called home.
They're part of our past that we no more can see
On the Grand Rapids of the Maumee.
Past Missionary Island where Pontiac once lived,
And Sacred Roche de Bout and the Interurban Bridge,
They live on in signs and in history told
And canoes that glide down as they did long ago.
- 3) Eagles and Egrets and Herons standing tall
And Canada Geese, til they leave in the fall,
Water means life as it runs clean and free
On the Grand Rapids of the Maumee.

From when the Sun winks Good Morning and tucks the
Moon in to sleep

You hear the rush of the rapids as they roll to the sea,
The beauty of nature all around us you see

On the Grand Rapids of the Maumee.

Thanks to the River
© 2014 by Russ Franzen

Here on the river it's quiet today
The water flows slowly by
And the hectic pace of this workaday life
flows away with a contented sigh.
I imagine the natives just passing by,
Gliding silently past this place
As they fished in these waters with nets and with spears
At a determined, patient pace.

Chorus: The river means freedom, the river means peace,
Our history flows past her banks.
And I like to sit here whenever I can
And sing her a song of thanks.

Villages and cities once grew by her shores.
She gave their mills power, you see.
She helped them build houses. She helped them make bread
As she journeyed on down to the sea.
Today on the river, we still can canoe.
There'll be fish for our dinner tonight.
And a day on the river makes me feel new
And makes even hectic days right.

The Ballparks of our Minds ©2015 by Russ Franzen

He sat alone at the bar. When I saw him, I knew his name.
The last time I saw him was at a baseball park.
Hitting homers brought him fame.
I asked if I could join him.
He said, "If Jim Beam joins us, too"
So we traded buying drinks and, like baseballs,
the stories flew.
He told about the long balls.
Some of the farthest I'd ever seen.
Of facing legendary pitchers
and swings that brought him to his knees.
And about the old ball parks that history's left behind.
But I still see the Big Guy in the batter's box
in the ballparks of my mind.

Chorus: They were some young child's hero
for what they did with a bat and ball
They brought joy to our springs and summers
and sometimes into fall.
But the ballplayers get old
and the kids grow up in kind
But our heroes stand tall in the batters box
in the ballparks of our minds.

I stopped for a cup of coffee.
There were donuts in the case.
His workday nearly over when I came in at lunchtime late
He poured himself a coffee and greeted all of us inside
And the donuts were as good as the baseball talk.
My trip was worth the ride.
My boyhood hero standing there.
Telling stories, he was wired.
He wore flour up to the elbow
that once threw balls of fire.
His playing days long over, But none of us forget
His blazing fastball, the scary curve
and his heroics with his bat.

He steps into the batter's box like a thousand times before
He's an old man playing a young man's game, wearing
minor league décor.
He played a few years in the majors where the pitchers
showed no fear
But in the Minors he can hit the long ball. He's a home
town hero here.
The fans come out to see him
but the scouts don't give him looks
He can still hit the ball out of the park,
His name a'top the record books
And one day soon, he'll hang 'em up.
But he'll always have a story
For the grown up kids who watched him play.
Their hero he'll always be.