

Interview with Miss Mary N. Sawyer - 11/14/1979
Conducted by RICHARD VAIR
Tape 2

(Richard Vair - "When were you first aware of the canal and its importance to Palmyra's livelihood?")

"Of course, I was aware of it from the time I was a very little girl, but I think, probably, I was not aware of it as something important until I was actually in my teens. I knew there was travel and commerce on the canal. I knew there was coal brought into the village on the canal, but as for its being of any importance to the community or its development. I'm sure that I was completely ignorant of that. Except, as I say, as I grew older and began to understand a little bit of what this is all about."

"We traveled over canal bridges when we went from this side of the community over to the North side so that I was aware of it. I knew that the canal was there, that sort of thing. But another thing that impressed me was the fact that I was not allowed to go near the canal. Some of my friends used to fish there and go skating in the winter, and some adults and children, too, use it for swimming. But since I did not swim and I did not skate, that did not affect me. And there was a very definite understanding that I was not to go and play near the canal."

(Richard Vair - "Do you have an amusing or interesting antidote concerning the canal or canal life?")

"No, I never did. I never took any boat trips on the canal. I understand from my parents that there was travel, recreation travel, in fact, I heard my father say that there was a member of a group of boys and young men who had a boat and traveled up and down the canal on it."

"Once in a great while, we would see, well, a sort of yacht going up and down the canal, if we were down in the area. But as for traveling on it myself, I never have. I've often thought during Canaltown Days when they have the boat trips that I would like to take one of these. They say it was really very, very nice and a great deal of beauty on it. But I have never had the experience myself."

(Richard Vair - "You were mentioning before about coal and commerce. Maybe you could tell me what sort of business was conducted on the canal.")

"I think, not only was coal brought into the community, but the farmers in the area transported their produce on the canal. That started very early in the canal days. Shipping potatoes, wheat, and such grains as they grew, that kind of thing. And in turn, again I'm going way, way, way back, many things were brought into the community for the various merchants and storekeepers. Their stocks of goods were brought in on the canal. Of course, after the railroad came through, I think probably the produce coming in was even less on the canal than it was originally."

“ I remember reading a few years ago when I Was preparing an article for one of the so-called “book reviews” that iron was brought into the community on the canal and the very early days. It was very active in those days. Commerce coming in and commerce going out.”

(Richard Vair -“Can you recall descriptions of parents’ or grandparents ‘of the canal or early can a life?”

“Not for my own parents, but in the library files somewhere, there is or was a diary of a girl who made a trip on the canal. I never read it, but I talked with one or two people, Mrs. Ziegler particularly, who was in charge of the historical collection years ago, said that it was really a very interesting article, on the life of the canal in those very early days, using what they called the packet boats, of course. I knew that my grandfather Sawyer made at least one trip on the canal, from Buffalo here. And somewhere in Buffalo possibly in Detroit where he had been visiting, he bought a clock and brought it back to Palmyra on one of the canal packets. I think very likely that he might have made more than one trip, but I do know of that one trip definitely. My father told me of that. This was long before my father was born. My grandfather carried the clock from Palmyra to Walworth, where they were living at the time, on his shoulders cross-country.”

(Richard Vair - “In your estimation, how has Palmyra benefited if, in fact, it has, from its association with the Erie and Barge Canals?”

“Well, certainly the canal led to the growth of the village. It would seem to me that there is no question of that. The transportation of goods at one time or another in and out of the community gave the merchants and farmers round about an outlet for their products and manufacturers.”

“Another thing that was sent out of here in the early day was potash. It was all weeded and the weeds as they were cut and burned, the ashes were collected. There was quite a thriving ashery here. It prepared the potash and that, I have read, was shipped out from here.”

“The iron which was brought in made it possible for the development of factories, as well as the development of the general growth and development of the community.”

(Richard Vair -Do you have any recollections of Canal Street?)

“Yes. When I was a child, it was the slum of the community. I'd heard from my father particularly, who was born and brought up here (he was born in 1858) during the time of the canal. He knew from older people that in the early days the street of the town. And if you go down the street, down toward the East End, you will see two quite large houses. Brick houses. They are fine-looking houses with beautiful architecture. They are side by side. They must have been built in the early days during the time that the street was a fine residential street. There were two hotels there. One about where the present telephone building is and there was one farther to the West in the next block. And they were good, substantial hotels.”

“By the time I had first heard of it, it had run down very much. You see, the canal traffic, the canal people were of lower class, roust-a-bouts, so that the whole tone of the street deteriorated. It was until a comparatively few years ago that the street turned around again. I think probably that it was after the barge canal went through and took the traffic away from the village itself. There wasn't the coming and going of produce. The port's, as you might call them, we're at other spots, so that the street was pretty much stagnant, as you may say. And then the houses gradually were brought by the tenants. They were able to put them into condition. They straightened up the porches and painted the exterior doors and really made a nice-looking street of it. And of course the few of the ramshackle buildings which were left or gone. We've got the fine-looking Towpath Manor (the senior citizens building) and now on the other side of the street are the two new apartment buildings which have gone up just this summer. So that is really a fine-looking street. The chances are there may be other good-looking places being built. Not mansions, to be sure, but good substantial residences to put it back into condition.

(Richard Vair - “Due to the relocation of the canal, the area has a chance of coming full circle to what it once was?”)

“That's my assessment of it. During my childhood and early years here, it was just not a nice place to be. You did not just go there unless you really had business there. There were businesses there, of course. Down the end of the street, there was a lumber yard. The old, old cobblestone building I believe Mr. Blazey owns that building now. And then the Sessions coal yard was there, which now is Mr. VanScott's building. He bought it from Mr. Sessions when he retired. And they have painted it again. The VanScotts, that is. The Sessions kept it up in good condition. It never looked run down. But it has been changed and repainted which always helps the appearance.”

(Richard Vair - “You were mentioning about Canal Street being the run-down area, and kind of slums. Could that be due to the taverns and the characters that frequent them?”)

“It may have had something to do with it, but I would say it was more the type of people that the canal brought in. Some of them gravitated to the taverns, no doubt. And made a little trouble and disturbance, but I don't believe from what I remember being said, that they were the cause of the deterioration. It could have been that it helped it along, but it was not the main reason. If the canal had been built further farther to the north, to start with, I think very likely the street would have lost its quality as it did. There again, I assume the canal was put right where it was, close to Canal Street, to make the village accessible, or it accessible to the village, the loading and unloading of the canal boats. Now that's more or less guesswork on my part. Having seen it change over the years, that would be my guess.”

“I think we've covered it pretty much so far as I have recollected. Looking back to what I have heard my father and mother speak of it is it was in their young days. Of course, they grew up here. My father was born here. My mother was not. She was very young when she came here so this was their home, you might say, all of their lives.”

SUBJECT: VAUDEVILLE

Rick: "Did Vaudeville and plays come to Palmyra? Comedians and things like that."

Mary: "Yes, I thought of that the other day after I left here that I really should have spoken of that when we were speaking of entertainment and going to Rochester to the Follies. And the early days, the theater was quite active. There were touring companies coming through. Sometimes they would be here several days getting the same play two or three times or maybe different plays. Uncle Tom's Cabin was the favorite play and everybody went out to that. I don't know how many times I saw that as a child and wept copiously when Little Eva died, carried off to heaven. I have heard my father say that back in his time, some of the actors and actresses who really became quite famous appeared here in the early days. I remember one he mentioned was Minnie Madeern Fisk. That name would mean nothing to you people, but when I was young she was still playing - she was an old woman but she was still on the stage occasionally and there were one or two others that he mentioned. But oh when a theater troupe was coming it was great. Everybody turned out to see it. They were minstrel shows. Of course, they'd be run out of town if they try to put on a minstrel show today, but many of these were home talent. There were many home Talent plays, straight drama as at were, and some musicals put on by townspeople as benefits for various organizations. The King's Daughter Society had several put on. We had some good actors and actresses at the time. Young people. Mostly my sister's contemporaries, but they were great so there was plenty of entertainment going on."

Nancy: "I seem to recall that Paul's parents talked about Bud Dohse's parents being in minstrels."

Mary: "I wouldn't be surprised. Bud's father was a violinist as I remember and his mother was a very fine pianist and she used to accompany."

Nancy: " Why don't we continue that next time. I think I have some programs downstairs that you might look over and I imagine they might bring back some memories."

SUBJECT: MOVIE THEATRES

Rick: "Do you recall the early movie theaters in Palmyra?"

Mary: "The earliest movie theater I recall was over here across the street where there was a building, just a frame building, where the dry cleaner is and where the bowling alley is, on that site. Originally it was a roller skating rink. Then a Mr. Averill took it over and fitted it up for a movie theater and as I recall the seats were just benches, but they put on the good movies of the day."

Rick: "Were they popular?"

Mary: "Yes they were very popular, very popular, it was always well filled. The very first movie I ever remember seeing was up in that lot on Canandaigua Street beyond Jackson over on the west side. There was a carnival sort of thing there and there was a section of it where a movie was shown. I remember my two older sisters taking me. Now that I must have been oh 1900, that long ago, but it was quite a while before this was organized over here. There were many movies shown here. Then, of course, it was probably outgrown over here and they needed a larger screen, and Mr. Averill, I suppose, rented the old Opera House and for years the movies were shown there."

Rick: "Did you go to the Opera House?"

Mary - "Yes. The screen was stretched across the front of the stage, you see, which gave it a good widescreen, nothing is it is today in the big movie houses, where you have comfortable seats to sit in and the sloped floor so that it was very easy to view the pictures."