With each step along the 96-mile Illinois and Michigan Canal, visitors retrace a significant path in Illinois' history.

A Ribbon of Progress

(Photo courtesy Ronilyn Mussared, www.photosbyroni.com.)

Part Two: recreational resources and travel from Seneca to LaSalle

I&M Canal visitors may explore remnant aqueducts, including the Nettle Creek aqueduct at Gebhard Woods State Park (top) and locks, such as Lock 14 at LaSalle (above).

Story By Kathy Andrews
Photos By Adele Hodde

The peace and relaxation the Illinois and Michigan (I&M) Canal provides is interrupted only by the occasional whirr of a passing bicyclist, the excited shout of a youngster winning the battle against a fighting bluegill, a mournful call of a river barge or the hum of a snowmobile gliding down a snowy trail.

"The I&M Canal is a great recreational destination," claims Dan Bell, Department of Natural Resources' (DNR) superintendent of the I&M Canal State Trail. "Whether it is a family with young children looking for a day trip with picnic grounds and easy hiking, an angler looking to pass an afternoon sitting on the tree-lined banks, a bicyclist looking for a long-distance trail with nearby camping or someone interested in observing wildlife, you can find it along the 96-mile canal."

But its wasn't always this way.

It was the late 1830s and a young Abraham Lincoln rode horseback surveying vast segments of the prairie frontier. Men toiled from sunup to sundown—earning $1 and a gill of whiskey for a 15-hour day—with pick, shovel, wheelbarrow and brawn to convert the marshy stretch of land into a transportation corridor connecting Lake Michigan to the Gulf of Mexico via the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers. When bedrock reached up into the 60-foot-wide by 6-foot-deep channel, explosive blasts of blackpowder filled the air. Axes rang in nearby woodlots as timbers were felled for bridges and aqueducts.

Hogan Grain Elevator remains as a reminder of the canal's importance in regional agriculture.

After the canal opened for commerce on April 10, 1848, a new set of sights and sounds emanated from the corridor.

Barges laden with passengers and goods slipped down the prism-shaped canal, passing through the 15 locks between Lockport and LaSalle that adjusted for the 141-foot change in elevation and stopping at developing communities. Wooden aqueducts carried boats across two rivers and two streams. Warehouses and grain elevators, called "cathedrals of the prairie," sprung up along the corridor to hold merchandise and crops.

(Photo By Kathy Andrews.)

A walkway at Aux Sable provides visitors an overview of the lock.

Mule tenders walked the single towpath, guiding mules tethered to the barge by a 100-foot rope. When barges met, a carefully choreographed routine ensued, the downstream tender dropping his ropes into the water and moving his mules off the towpath while the upstream crew negotiated passage.

In good weather, packet boat passengers reclined on deck, marveling at the prairie landscape, starlit nights, dust-free mode of transport and speed of travel—passage from Chicago to St. Louis took an amazingly short 40 hours. But the weather wasn't always good. Delays took place when mules or passengers slipped into the canal and drowned. Swarming mosquitos brought the threat of malaria. Air became stagnant in the cramped

Lock 14 at LaSalle was reconstructed in the 1970s. Remnants of Lock 15, and the Illinois River, appear beyond the lock.

Warehouses and grain elevators, where called "cathedrals of the prairie."

Workers blasted through the sandstone and dolomite Split Rock, creating passage for the canal, and later the railroad.

Where water once flowed through the 464-foot Fox River aqueduct at Ottawa, bikers and hikers now traverse.

"The I&M Canal corridor is an amazing natural, cultural and historical resource . . ."

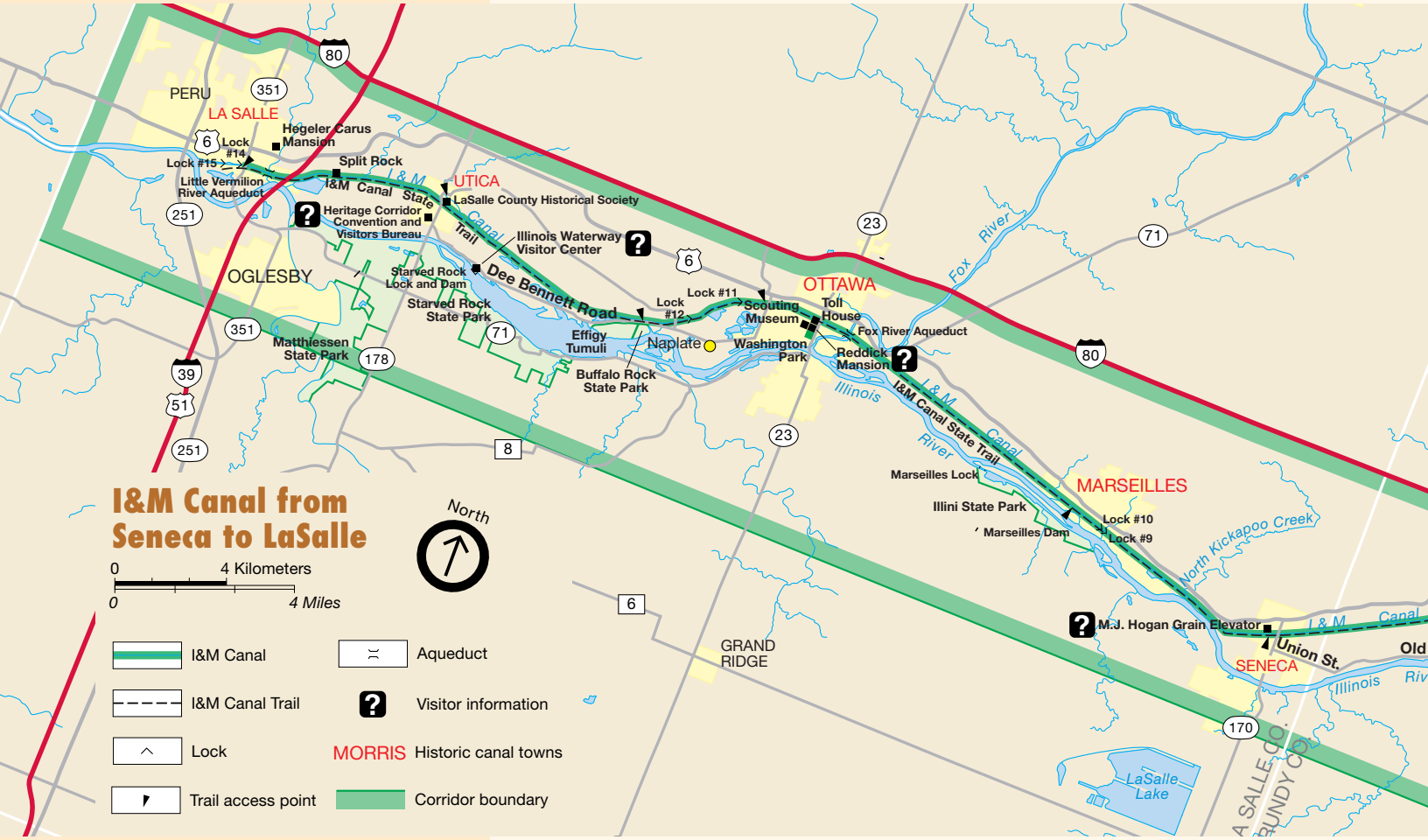
communal sleeping quarters. Failure to heed the call of "low bridge" meant being knocked senseless. At each of the 15 locks, locktenders—paid $300 a year and on call 24 hours a day—refereed fights between boat captains vying for position through the "water ladders."

As the boat neared canal-side towns, travelers met the hustle and bustle associated with commerce. Shipments north from New Orleans brought sugar, molasses, coffee, oranges and lemons. The latest fashions from the East Coast traveled with lumber, stoves and wagons toward the Gulf. Mills drew water from the canal to process crops harvested from the rich prairie soils. Progress also meant posting policemen at canal landings to ward off thieves, pickpockets, prostitutes and con men.

(Photo By Kathy Andrews.)

The most complete lock structure is at Aux Sable, where bicyclists and hikers can cross an aqueduct and pass a lock tenders house.

Where trees once would have impeded traffic, they now shelter visitors. The green space once traversed by humans and mules a portion of the year (trans-



(Map courtesy the National Park Service.)

Volunteers cleared and rewatered parts of the canal in the 1970s. Anglers of all ages now enjoy fishing the I&M Canal.

portation halted when the canal froze) is now covered in limestone screenings, providing full-season use.

"The footprint of the canal remains on the landscape, but time has taken its toll and much of it is dry today," Bell said. "The only sections where permanent open water exist are from Channahon to 2.5 miles west of Gebhard Woods State Park and again from Utica to LaSalle."

Those sections receive heavy use by canoeists, kayakers and anglers. Bass, crappie, bluegill, carp, catfish and bullhead are pulled from the canal, and a catchable trout release provides additional opportunities in the Utica section of the canal. Each June, the communities of LaSalle and Peru join DNR and the Better Fishing Association to host the Lock #14 Kids Fishing Rodeo on the canal.

"The I&M Canal corridor is an amazing natural, cultural and historical resource," Bell summarized. "Whether a visitor is interested in industrial history, a student of architectural styles or looking for a quiet place to camp or watch bald eagles or barges, you can find it along the canal."

Only one's imagination can limit the purpose and motivation for visiting the canal corridor. Each and every trip can be an opportunity to explore another facet of Illinois' ribbon of progress.

(Photo By Kathy Andrews.)

The Aux Sable spillway provides a visual clue of how water moved around the locks when gates were closed.

I&M Canal Partners

- The Department of Natural Resources owns and manages the I&M Canal and the various state parks within the Heritage Corridor. Call (815) 942-0796 or visit www.dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/parks/i&m/main.htm.
- The Canal Corridor Association is a private, not-for-profit organization dedicated to community economic development, historic preservation and conservation within the Heritage Corridor. Phone (815) 588-1100 or visit www.canalcor.org.
- The Heritage Corridor Convention & Visitors Bureau is the certified Convention and Visitors Bureau for the Heritage Corridor, and all of Will, Grundy and LaSalle counties. Phone (815) 727-2323 or visit www.heritagecorridorcvb.com.
- The Illinois and Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor Civic Center Authority is a state agency committed to the historic, recreational and economic development of several communities in the Heritage Corridor. For information on the Corridor or Santa Fe Prairie Nature Preserve, call (708) 937-0009 or visit www.civiccenterauthority.org.
- The purpose of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Illinois Waterway Visitors Center is to provide visitors the opportunity to watch the operation of the lock and dam and learn more about the waterway as a part of our national water highway system. The center is located off Interstate 80 at exit 81, then south on Route 178 to Dee Bennett Road. Call (815) 667-4054 or visit www.mvr.usace.army.mil/Brochures/IllinoisWaterwayVisitorCenter.asp for information.

Places to See and Things to Do

To learn more about the natural and historic resources located along the I&M Canal, and associated recreational activities, visit www.dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/PARKS/I&M/Main.htm or www.canalcor.org. Both sites offer virtual tours of some of the canal structures. Highlights of offerings are listed below.

Natural

- Geology: Split Rock, Starved Rock State Park, Matthiessen State Park.

Historic

- Canal locks: Marseilles, Ottawa, LaSalle-Peru (reconstructed by DNR with simulated wooden gates at both ends and a concrete dam).
- Canal tollhouse: Ottawa.
- Canal aqueduct: Ottawa, LaSalle.
- Swinging bridge: Marseilles.
- Civilian Conservation Corp structures: Illini State Park, Ottawa, Starved Rock State Park.
- Rural structures: Hogan Grain Elevator (tours may be organized by contacting Gebhard Woods State Park, Seneca), Sulphur Springs Stage Coach Stop (Utica).
- Museums: LaSalle County Historical Society (Utica).
- Memorials: Pere Marquette (Utica).
- Interpretive centers/features: Gebhard Woods State Park, Illinois Waterway Visitors Center (Utica), Starved Rock State Park, Split Rock (west of Utica).
- Historic, industrial sites: Former Nabisco box building and power plant (Marseilles).

Recreation

Recreational opportunities available on the I&M Canal State Trail and the state and county facilities in proximity to the trail include picnicking, camping, hiking, bicycling, hunting, fishing, canoeing, kayaking, boating, snowmobiling (when 4 or more inches of snow is present on the canal trail), wildlife observation, nature photography and more.

For detailed information on programs offered at state sites (Illini State Park, Marseilles State Fish and Wildlife Area, Buffalo Rock State Park, Starved Rock State Park and Matthiessen State Park) visit www.dnr.state.il.us/lands.