

Erie Canal Readers' Theater presents:

I've got a Mule and her Name is Sal-  
200 Years of the Erie Canal  
Written by Janet Conners

Parts:

Narrators 1- 32

Dewitt Clinton

Judge Richardson

Benjamin Wright

Canvass White

Digger 1

Digger 2

Digger 3

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**Narrator 1** - Our readers' theater play is called, "I've got a mule and her name is Sal- 200 years of the Erie Canal"

**All:** Sing the first verse of the Erie Canal Song

*(Note that the original lyric was: 15 years, not miles)*

I've got a mule,  
Her name is Sal,  
Fifteen years on the Erie Canal.  
She's a good old worker  
And a good old pal,  
Fifteen years on the Erie Canal.  
We've hauled some barges in our day  
Filled with lumber, coal and hay  
And ev'ry inch of the way I know  
From Albany to Buffalo.

Low Bridge, ev'rybody down,  
For it's Low Bridge,  
We're coming to a town!  
You can always tell your neighbor,  
You can always tell your pal,  
If you've ever navigated  
On the Erie Canal.

**N1-** For centuries, the Haudenosaunee (**hoe duh nuh show knee**), or Iroquois, had used the waterways of New York State to travel through their land as they traveled to trade with other Native Americans to obtain natural resources that were not available to them in their area. One important resource was ocean shells used to make wampum beads.

**N2-** One Haudenosaunee (**hoe duh nuh show knee**) route was along the Mohawk River and then the Hudson River used when trading with the Algonquians. When returning from trading, the men canoed the water trail of the Hudson River to the Mohawk River by present day Rome. Then the men would portage, which means carry, their canoes and goods over land called the Great Carry until they reached Wood Creek. Now, the men could paddle again to reach Oneida Lake. Then they continued north or west or south using other rivers and eventually ended up at their home villages alongside water such as Lake Ontario or Lake Erie or Onondaga Lake.

**N3-** Of course, the Haudenosaunee (**hoe duh nuh show knee**) called all these lakes and rivers by different names. When the first Europeans arrived in the area of New York, they followed these same waterways to explore this territory that was new to them. Many of these waterways were then named for the explorers such as Lake Champlain and the Hudson River.

**N4-** More Europeans started to arrive in the area and settlements were started along waterways that were used for transportation, fishing and mills. Most of these Dutch, French and English settlements grew along the Hudson and Mohawk Rivers. Soon, some settlers started moving west to start new settlements. The Haudenosaunee (**hoe** duh nuh **show** knee) were not happy that settlers were moving onto their land.

**N5-** In the year 1779, during the American Revolution, George Washington ordered Generals Clinton and Sullivan as well as Colonel Von Schaick to attack the Mohawk, Onondaga, Seneca, and Cayuga villages to destroy all the crops and homes as revenge for the British and Haudenosaunee attacks on Patriot settlers and the Continental Army. The Oneida and Tuscarora were allies of the Americans.

**N6-** Most of the Haudenosaunee people of the burned villages escaped to Fort Niagara in Canada where many of them died from cold, disease and starvation. Because of the great loss of population, after the war, few new villages were built to replace the destroyed ones. This allowed new settlers to easily move onto the Haudenosaunee (**hoe** duh nuh **show** knee) lands that were then purchased through various treaties such as the Treaty of Canandaigua, and the Treaty of Big Tree.

**N7-** During the American Revolution, the new country and New York State had little money to pay the salary of the soldiers. Many of these soldiers had traveled through the lands of the Haudenosaunee (**hoe** duh nuh **show** knee) and liked what they saw. There was rich fertile land for crops, many wild animals for food, and plenty of water filled with fish. New York State created the military tract from former Haudenosaunee land and gave soldiers

sections of this land in central New York instead of money as payment for fighting in the American Revolution.

**N8-** After the war, important government people of NY traveled along the Haudenosaunee (**hoe** duh nuh **show** knee) waterways and thought how wonderful it would be to make an artificial river, or canal, from the Hudson River to Lake Erie. This canal would allow settlers to live and travel across New York, and would allow natural resources and farm goods to travel from the west to the east of the state as well as manufactured goods that would travel from the east to the west.

**N9-** Canal Commissioner DeWitt Clinton pushed the idea of the canal but many people laughed at him. No one had ever built such a large and long canal in the United States. Later as Governor, Clinton had to convince New Yorkers to help pay for the cost of building the canal which would be around 7 million dollars. He also sent Canvass White to Europe to study canal building techniques. Two lawyers surveyed New York State to find the best route.

**N10-** Finally, on July 4, 1817, the canal was ready to be started in Rome. This location in the middle of the canal route was chosen because the digging was easy in this section and the land was level so no locks would be needed. Let's join the celebration, as we imagine a conversation between Dewitt Clinton and Judge Richardson as they get ready to dig the first shovelfuls of dirt.

**Dewitt Clinton-** Listen to the cannons booming and the band playing. We are about to start the impossible. We are going to dig an artificial river 363 miles long, forty feet wide and four feet deep. Boats filled with people, goods, and natural resources will be able to travel easily across New York State from the Hudson River to Lake Erie and back.

**Judge Richardson-** Governor, you have worked hard to get this canal started. New Yorkers will work hard and will soon successfully complete this section of the canal from Utica to Syracuse so that boats may carry cargo and people easily and cheaply.

**Dewitt Clinton-** Your laborers look strong and ready to take on the task. Will you do the honor of digging the first shovel of dirt?

**Judge Richardson -** I am truly honored Governor. "By this great highway, unborn millions will easily transport their surplus productions to the shores of the Atlantic, procure their supplies and hold a useful and profitable trade with all the marine nations of the world." I will now take a shovelful of dirt.

**All-** Yeah! Hip, hip hooray! Huzza! Huzza! Huzza!

**N11-** After Judge Richardson dug a shovelful of dirt, all the famous people and citizens also dug up some dirt. Many people doubted that the canal could be built so many people called it Clinton's Ditch or Clinton's Folly instead of the Grand Erie Canal.

**N12-** Imagine digging the canal by hand using only shovels, scrapers and plows. It was very tough going. The laborers were mostly local people who lived along the canal route. Many of these laborers tried to come up with easier ways to help with the digging. One difficulty was moving dirt. Someone invented a special time- saving wheelbarrow that helped to move the dirt away from the ditch and could be easily dumped from every direction.

**N13-** One of the problems was how to get rid of all the trees that were in the way of the route of the canal. It took too long to chop them down with an ax and then the stumps that were left had to be dug up and chopped out. A worker came up with the idea of pulling the trees over using a winch until the tree snapped towards the base of the trunk. Horses, mules or oxen dragged the tree out of the way.

**N14-** That still left the stump. Someone invented the stump puller. It was a huge machine with 2 wheels about 3-4 times as tall as a man, connected by an axle. There was another smaller wheel attached to the center of the axle. The outside wheels were pegged to the ground and a rope was wound around the middle wheel and then attached to a team of mules, oxen or horses. A chain attached to the axle was wrapped around the stump. The horse pulled the rope turning the axle, and then the chain wound around the axle and pulled the stump out of the ground. What a wonderful simple machine that saved lots of work!

**N15-** Benjamin Wright became the Head Engineer of the canal. One of his important engineers was Canvass White. Since there were no colleges that taught engineers the skills to build the canal, locks, aqueducts and other parts of the canal, engineers learned on the job. Here is an imagined conversation between the men as they discuss locks, an important structure of the canal.

**Benjamin Wright-** We've got a problem with this canal because the canal changes its elevation or height above sea level from 4 feet at Albany to 573 feet at Buffalo. If we just dig the canal as a 363-mile ditch, all the water from Lake Erie will flow downhill to the Hudson River. We've got to make locks to divide the canal into sections to keep the water level.

**Canvass White-** We will need lots of locks so that when a boat goes through the lock, we will be able to raise or lower the water level so the boat can be at the same water level as the next section of the canal. Also, if the canal bank collapses, only one section of the canal will lose water.

**Benjamin Wright-** In looking at the survey of the route, I think we will need about 83 locks. We have a problem at the Niagara Escarpment at Lockport as the elevation change is too much for one lock.

**Canvass White-** I agree. We've started building the first lock using limestone blocks, but we are having a hard time keeping the water in the lock chamber as it leaks out between the blocks.

**Benjamin Wright-** When you were in Europe, how did they solve the problem?

**Canvass White-** Europeans use underwater cement that seals the rocks. The only problem is that it's too expensive to import from Europe. I think I found some of the minerals I need to make the cement by the Chittenango area. I will experiment with the materials to see if I can find the right mixture to make cement that will dry underwater to seal the blocks to keep the water inside the lock.

**N16-** Canvass White was successful at making underwater cement. The engineers, German stonemasons, and laborers went on to build the 83 locks. The last lock to be built was the most spectacular. At Lockport, a double set of 5 locks were built together like giant steps that allowed the boats to get up and down from the level of Lake Erie at the Niagara Escarpment.

**N17-** The engineers also had to build aqueducts over Montezuma Swamp and over natural rivers. Aqueducts were like bridges of water that took the canal over the rivers. Once again, the underwater cement was very important. Eighteen aqueducts were built. One aqueduct went right through the city of Rochester.

**N18-** Montezuma Swamp was a very difficult area to construct the canal because the diggers would sink up to their chest in the mud and as they dug, water filled the holes. The worst problem was the mosquitoes that bit the men and gave them diseases. Often the sick men died. Finally, the work at Montezuma was done during the winter months so there were no mosquitoes and the mud was frozen. Meet some of the future diggers at the swamp for an imagined conversation.

**Digger 1-** Did you see how much they will pay you to dig that ditch all the way from Albany to Buffalo?

**Digger 2-** This poster says I can earn \$1 a day, get three meals a day and have a bed in a tent for sleeping. I'm going to sign on.

**Digger 1-** I think I'll write to me brother in Ireland and tell him to come to New York as there's plenty of work for all, good money to make, and lots of food to eat.

**Digger 2-** The potatoes still aren't growing and me family there is still starving. I'm going to save me wages to send for me wife and children to come over here to join me. Me oldest can work here digging and maybe me wife can sign up to be a cook.

**Digger 1-** I'm saving me money so I can buy me a boat to travel on this canal bringing goods from one end of the state to the other. Then I will be rich.



**Digger 2-** Let's listen to the song those diggers are singing as we sign up to be one of them.

**Digger 3-** We are digging the ditch through the mire;  
Through the mud and slime and the mire by heck!  
And the mud is our principal hire;  
Up our pants, in our shirts, down our neck, by heck!  
We are digging the ditch through the gravel,  
So the people and freight can travel!

**N19-** Laborers were often the local people who lived along the canal route such as farmers, shopkeepers, and Haudenosaunee (**hoe** duh nuh **show** knee), as well as German, Irish and other European immigrants.

**N20-** The canal opened each section as soon as it was completed. Along the canal, weighlock buildings were built where the boats would go to weigh the cargo in order to charge tolls. The canal took over 7 million dollars to build, but was paid for by tolls within 9 years. By 1883, when tolls were stopped, 121 million dollars had been collected.

**N21-** Finally on October 26, 1825, the Grand Erie Canal was ready to open the whole 363 miles from Albany to Buffalo. There was to be a special celebration. In Buffalo, Dewitt Clinton, his wife, and special guests were on a packet boat called the *Seneca Chief* that was decorated for the special trip to Albany and then on to New York City. Governor Clinton had 2 barrels of Lake Erie water loaded onto the *Seneca Chief* to be used in a special ceremony in New York City.

**N22-** The second boat was called *Noah's Ark* and contained two specimens of many of the wild animals of the state including 2 bear cubs, as well as two Seneca boys dressed in their regalia. The third boat was called *Young Lion of the West* and its cargo was produce such as flour, butter, and apples, products such as wooden pails, brooms, and other wild animals such as wolves, foxes and raccoons. The final boat, *Niagara of Black Rock*, had many other important people.

**N23-** As the fancy white horses started pulling the *Seneca Chief*, a cannon was fired. All the way along the route, cannons were located within hearing distance and they kept firing in order along the canal route so the people in Albany and then New York City knew that the parade of boats had started. It took only an hour and a half for the signal to reach New York City.

**N24-** At the port towns that were started or grew along the canal, parties and celebrations were held. It took 7 days for the boat parade to reach Albany. Then all the boats were hitched up to a new fangled steam ship to be pulled in 3 days all the way to New York City.

**N25-** In New York City, there was to be a special celebration. Clinton poured the kegs of water from Lake Erie into the Atlantic Ocean. There was also water from the large rivers of the world poured into the Atlantic Ocean to show that goods and people could be transported around the world. Then Clinton refilled the kegs with ocean water and on his return trip to Buffalo, Clinton poured the ocean water into Lake Erie. This ceremony was called the Wedding of the Waters.

**N26-** The Erie Canal stimulated the economy and population of New York to grow and gave the state the nickname of the Empire State. The effect of the Canal was immediate as settlers poured west. The explosion of trade predicted by Governor Clinton began. Canal freight rates from Buffalo to New York dropped to \$4- 10 per ton by canal, compared with \$100 per ton by road. In 1829, 3,640 bushels of wheat were transported down the canal from Buffalo. By 1837 the amount had increased to 500,000 bushels and four years later, one million bushels of wheat was shipped each year.

**N27-** Whole families lived on canal boats from April to November. Then during the winter, the family tied up along the canal and the children went to school. Most boats hired mule drivers, sometimes called hoggees, who were often young orphan boys. These mule drivers walked the mules 6 hours on the tow path and then had 6 hours off to care for the mules, eat and rest on the boat. Then it was back on the towpath for 6 more hours. The switch of the mules and mule drivers took place at the 1 and 7 o'clocks, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

**N28-** Soon, the canal was too small for all the goods and people. An enlarged canal was started in the 1830s that would end up 350 miles long, 70 feet wide and 7 feet deep with 72 double locks. Some parts used the old canal, but other parts of the route were dug brand new. Boats could be larger which meant more cargo and more profits.

**N29-** Many kinds of boats traveled the canal. Packet boats were used just for passengers and often had fancy horses to pull the boat. There were line boats that took poor passengers and cargo. Bullhead boats or lakers had only cargo and could go onto Lake Erie. There were boats for circuses, libraries, churches, and

medicine shows, as well as hurry up boats that fixed any leaks in the canal wall. There were speed limits on the canal so the banks would not be eroded.

**N30-** Eventually, the invention of the railroad hurt canal travel. Train tracks could be built more easily and cheaply than digging a canal. Also trains could be used in winter and the tracks could go anywhere. All these reasons made the Erie Canal less popular. Also, when the St. Lawrence Seaway was opened, larger boats could be used so the canal became even less popular for shipping.

**N31-** Today, the canal is called the NY State Barge Canal and its route uses rivers and lakes as well as artificial river sections. Most of the traffic is pleasure boats that travel from the Hudson River to Lake Ontario, or on other rivers or lakes running north and south. Recently, more natural resources and manufactured goods are being shipped again on the canal.

**N32-** The Erie Canal had a big impact on the economy and importance of New York State. It helped to develop New York City as an important port that it still is today. Without the dreams, ingenuity and hard work of New Yorkers and immigrants, the Erie Canal would not have been possible.

**All: Erie Canal Song (new version this time)**

I've got a mule,  
Her name is Sal,  
Fifteen miles on the Erie Canal  
She's a good old worker  
And a good old pal,  
Fifteen miles on the Erie Canal.  
We've hauled some barges in our day  
Filled with lumber, coal and hay

And ev'ry inch of the way I know  
From Albany to Buffalo.

Low Bridge, ev'rybody down,  
For it's Low Bridge,  
We're coming to a town!  
You can always tell your neighbor,  
You can always tell your pal,  
If you've ever navigated  
On the Erie Canal.

We better get along  
On our way, old gal,  
Fifteen miles on the Erie Canal.  
Because you bet your life  
I'd never part with Sal,  
Fifteen miles on the Erie Canal.  
Git up there, mule, here comes a lock;  
We'll make Rome 'bout six o'clock.  
One more trip and back we'll go  
Right back home to Buffalo.

Low Bridge, ev'rybody down,  
For it's Low Bridge,  
We're coming to a town!  
You can always tell your neighbor,  
You can always tell your pal,  
If you've ever navigated on the Erie Canal