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# THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE WELLAND CANAL AS TOURISM RESOURCE

«A SILK PURSE FROM A SOW'S EAR-IS IT POSSIBLE»

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## BACKGROUND

*When cargo carrying ships were first able to by-pass Niagara Falls in the year 1829, the Great Lakes were suddenly transformed from a series of obstacles into the world's greatest inland waterway. Locks by-passing some of the rapids on the St. Lawrence River had been completed a few years earlier. When the falls on the St. Marys River near Sault Ste. Marie were skirted by a canal in 1855 Lake Superior became accessible. The entire 4000 km network was complete. The Welland Canal was the heart of this system. With a lift of over 100 meters needed to carry ships around Niagara Falls it was a canal without equal in the world.*

There were still problems, bottle-neck and limitation of course. Much of the bulk cargo such as grain was transported through the upper lakes in large ships then broken into smaller loads to be carried from Prescott on the St. Lawrence River down to Montreal. There it was reloaded into larger vessels for its trip across the ocean. Passenger vessels often ran the rapids, an operation that sometimes proved disastrous. Nevertheless, it was possible for a smaller ocean going sailing vessel from Liverpool, or any other European port, to deliver a cargo of tools to Chicago, load hundreds of barrels of apples in Ontario and return to the old world. Similarly a schooner built on the banks of a creek running into Georgian Bay, could be loaded with lumber and sailed directly to Europe where both cargo and vessel would fetch good prices. The phenomenal growth and extraordinary prosperity that occurred in the St. Lawrence Valley, Southern Ontario and the states bordering on the Great

Lakes, was largely a result of this wonderful water-based transportation system. Human ingenuity in the form of engineering works, innovative ship design and the judicious use of financial and political capital was able to take advantage of natural potential provided by the lakes and rivers by overcoming the formidable obstacles that were also part of the landscape. The efforts to improve the system did not stop with the first successes in connecting the vast waterways. The original canal structures were relatively small and in some cases poorly constructed. The first Welland Canal locks were timber. Frost and flood played havoc with them. A whole replacement set of locks was completed in the 1840s both along the St. Lawrence and in the Niagara region. The new locks were stone and were much larger but no sooner were they in operation before plans for yet another canal were started. By the late 1880s the third version of the Welland Canal was finished with complementary locks of the

same size having been built on the St. Lawrence. The transportation function of the canals was only part of the equation. The enormous quantities of water required to operate the canal could also be used to power industry. Among the original investors who built the Welland Canal the need to secure water for their mills had been the primary objective. The shipping canal was a kind of bonus. Once the canal was finished the villages and cross roads that were located along its length inexorably grew into towns and then cities. The initial canal construction drew hungry workers from the United States, Ireland and from all over the Canadian colonies. When the canal, or navigation works as they were called, were done the mills grew. That provided stable employment and in turn attracted even more people. The earliest mills produced flour and lumber but by the 1860s there was textile production, paper, ship building and tool making. These industries were eventually joined by factories processing rubber, chemicals and numerous other products.

## THE TOURISM CONNECTION

While heavy industry and canal transportation were the economic mainstays in the communities of Port Dalhousie, St. Catharines, Merriton, Thorold, Port Robinson, Welland and Port Colbourne, there has also been a strong regional tradition in the area of tourism. Niagara Falls, it goes without saying, owes much of its growth and prosperity to the great natural wonder that has attracted visitors from the very earliest days of European



settlement. But St. Catharines was once the home of three grand hotels catering to those who came to the city for the curative powers of its mineral springs. In the 1860s these hotels were the height of fashion for wealthy patrons from the United States. Port Dalhousie, the northern terminus of the Welland Canal, boasted an amusement park that was frequented by Torontonians who crossed Lake Ontario in droves on smart steamers. In the 1920s and 30s there were several sailings a day on two ships that could each carry hundreds of passengers.

It wasn't surprising, therefore, that when the present Welland Canal was being planned, during the early part of this century, that some provision for addressing the tourist potential of the waterway was made. The fourth Welland Canal was a complete departure from the earlier versions. The locks were to be eight times the size of the original ones built in the 1820s and three times larger than the ones then being used. Instead of using dozens of locks along a channel that wound its way up the Niagara Escarpment the new canal would have only eight locks and it would go straight up and over the height of land. The landscape would be completely remade. A Canadian Department of Railways and Canals spokesman wrote a series of articles in the journal *Engineering* in the early 1930s. In one of these he said that while so large an engineering project unavoidably disfigured the natural state of the country it was intended that a full program be carried out, "to make the Canal limits something of a park, with woods and tended gardens at the locks, definite park areas, the pondage and other water areas turned into lakes and sown with wild rice and the whole zone turned into a bird sanctuary."

At the time many people called not only for beautification and flower plantings but a scenic driving route along the canal as well. The notion that the canal had a function as a recreational area and a tourist attraction had been seen for the first time.

## THE ASPIRATION

When the canal opened officially for traffic in 1932, however, the depression was ravaging the economies of North

America. In some instances governments were forward looking in spite of the difficult times. Some projects undertaken at that time were designed to stimulate the economy immediately but also had important ramifications for future growth. Public works such as the many improvements on the Niagara Parkway and the preservation of historic sites such as old fortifications laid the groundwork for tourism for years to come. It was the renovated citadels in Halifax and Quebec City and the beautiful gardens around Niagara Falls that attracted the people who would stimulate the visitor industries in those places for decades afterwards.

That was not to be the case with the Welland Canals area. The constraints on government spending prevented the realization of the original plan to turn the waterway and its environs into parkland. The spoil heaps where earth excavated for the canal had been dumped were simply abandoned. The handsome old stone structures of the previous canals were either allowed to fall into ruin or in some cases were willfully destroyed by government engineers. What might have been a public amenity with the potential for economic benefit was ignored and wild grass and scruffy bush allowed to grow over it.

World War II and then the boom years of the 1950s diverted attention away from the margins of the Welland Canal. People were first preoccupied with survival and then they were seduced by prosperity. It was not until the 1960s and 70s that the concept of the canal as tourist draw and a recreation corridor was again put forward. The nature of industry began to change. Some community leaders could see that the growth that had traditionally been generated by local manufacturing would not continue forever. They could see that the time would come when other types of industry would have to augment the auto plants and paper mills. Already in the 1960s the number of ships moving through the canal was beginning to decline.

The 1960s was a time when citizen action was on the rise. More and more people were coming to the realization that they not only could take charge of what was happening in their communities but that it was their responsibility to do so. A group

calling itself the Welland Canals Preservation Association was formed. Initially it undertook to transform some of the abandoned sections of the older canals in Niagara into walking paths and parks. The linear nature of the old canals lent themselves to this approach. Especially in the old harbour area of Port Dalhousie, by then part of the growing city of St. Catharines, this movement to create parkland was paralleled by the revitalization of many old buildings which were converted into shops and restaurants. The building renovation was undertaken by private sector entrepreneurs but they acknowledged the importance of community efforts to revitalize the old canal lands. Many businesses supported the work of the Welland Canals Preservation Association.

The idea of tourism as an industry with potential economic benefits was central to this drive. The idea of preserving historic sites and making them accessible to visitors was well understood by at least some of the citizens and community leaders as being the basis for creating the ambience necessary to attract tourists. There was, however, a good deal of scepticism as well as some out and out opposition. Traditionally tourist attractions have been thought of as sites of natural beauty such as Niagara Falls and the Rocky Mountains or historic structures such as Fort Henry in Kingston and the shrine at St. Ann de Beaupré. The concept of old industrial and transportation remnants as attractors was not at all easy for some members of the Niagara citizenry to accept. After all much of the land was polluted by industrial waste, the water in parts of the old canals was little more than paper mill effluent and the buildings along the waterways represented to many the poor working conditions of the past and the growing number of business failures of the present. Some were torn down while mysterious fires claimed others. In some cases the existing industries were still using the structures for increasingly out-dated manufacturing processes or as storage. The last thing they wanted was tourists and tour related businesses demanding environmental clean-up and refurbishing.

In other places in North America and Europe the work on converting old industrial lands and buildings was encourag-



ing. The Rideau Canal had been built in the 1830s, shortly after the first Welland and St. Lawrence locks. The Trent Canal was completed around the turn of the century. The Erie Canal through New York State had been finished just before the Welland but was only a narrow barge channel. It had been enlarged early in this century to form the New York State Barge Canal. The New York canal connected the Hudson River to Lakes Erie and Ontario but the Hudson River was also joined to Lake Champlain and through additional canals at Chambley and St. Ours, Quebec, with the St. Lawrence River between Montreal and Quebec City. All of those waterways had made the successful transformation from commercial or military to totally recreational canals. Millions of government dollars in both countries had been spent and continued to be spent on their maintenance and upgrading as tourist attractions.

In England about three thousand miles of old narrow commercial canals had also been taken over by holiday boats while their parklike corridors were used by hikers, anglers and campers. The pubs and village shops along Britain's canals were prospering. Many complexes of former canal-side warehouse buildings and factories in cities such as Gloucester and Manchester were being successfully converted by the late 1970s. The city of Lowell, just outside Boston, Massachusetts, provided a model closer to home. In the 1970s the United States Federal Parks Service made the old water powered textile mills of Lowell their first urban national park. Some of the buildings housed exhibits about industrial heritage and some were used for government administrative offices. The breakthrough in Lowell came when a major computer company moved into another former cotton factory and a huge hotel chain built a new facility designed to blend into the 19th century townscape. In the first few years of operation hundreds of thousands of people visited Lowell.

## THE ATTEMPTS

Encouraged by a degree of local success in Port Dalhousie as well as the models of development they saw in the US and England many people worked for years to raise private donations, obtain govern-

ment grant money and to have the local municipalities recognize the potential of the Welland Canal lands for tourism and recreation. The Welland Canals Preservation Association was guided by a volunteer board made up of local business and political leaders. They were able to obtain funds to hire students to work summers clearing paths, building park benches, signs and simple foot bridges. The business men and women on the Preservation Association board used their considerable influence to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars that were poured into the project. A local quarry donated all the crushed stone needed for the trails. One private foundation alone donated \$100,000 in cash. Eventually the group was able to hire a full-time fund raiser.

While the actual work of creating parks was important the leaders of the canal preservation movement realized that three vital ingredients were necessary before the project could really take off. The first of these was a plan or blueprint of what to do. The second was a mandated agency supplied with funds and the authority to undertake the work. In order to have these two things there would also need to be genuine government support at all levels.

Serious planning began when the province of Ontario assigned some key staff from its Ministry of Culture to complete an inventory of heritage resources along the new and old Welland Canals and to recommend a strategy for future development. In 1979 this group reported and suggested essentially that the Welland Canals Preservation Association be augmented by the appointment of some political representatives and empowered to plan and implement a park system along the canals. This canal agency would have been modelled on the very successful Niagara Parks Commission. Just as this recommendation was to be announced, however, the province decided not to go ahead.

Undaunted, the canals preservation groups forged on. By the mid-1980s the group had enlarged and added representatives from local and regional governments, chambers of commerce, the St. Lawrence Seaway authority (operator of the present canal) and various other recreational and interest groups. The enlarged

body, still directed by a volunteer board, was called the Welland Canals Society. In 1985 a government grant of over \$700,000 was secured to support a staff of a dozen people working to develop the Welland Canal. A major historic building was renovated, picnic pavilions were built, a huge archaeological excavation was undertaken and trail building continued until a hiking path joined Lake Ontario and Lake Erie.

In 1987 the Regional and Provincial governments put up \$150,000 to hire a major international tourism consulting firm to complete a study that would set out a concept for development. The Welland Canals Development Guide was finished in 1988. The approach was clear and bold. It proposed to connect the already popular Niagara Parkway with a canal drive to create a circular route. It was designed to encourage some of the 14 million or so visitors that come to Niagara Falls to linger in the region and see other things. Typically Falls visitors stay less than a day.

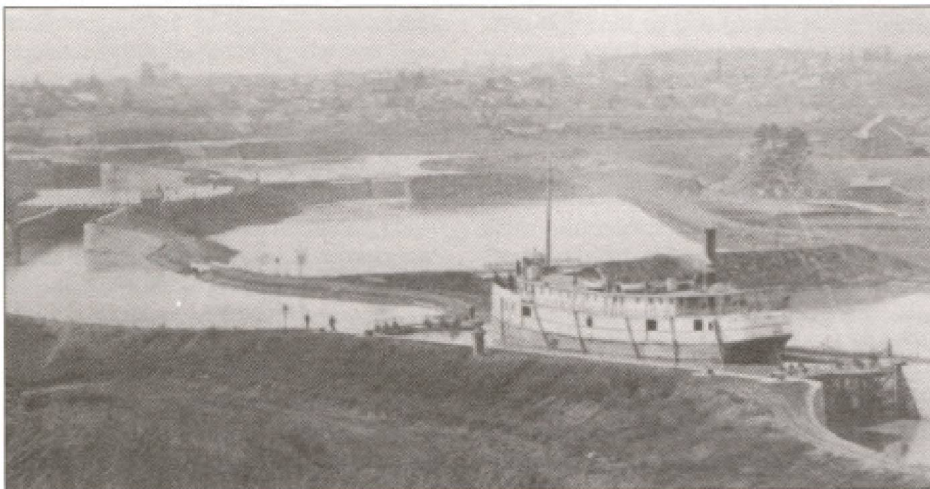
The plan called for the development of old neighbourhoods and business districts along the canal in St. Catharines, Thorold, Welland and Port Colborne. The concept was to invest a limited amount of public funds in organization, marketing and infrastructure. That was intended to provide the base for private sector business opportunities.

## THE DISAPPOINTMENT

By 1991, however, the Welland Canal Society, which had hoped to become the designated canal development agency, was out of business. The funds were gone, the staff laid off and the concept plan was collecting dust with previous schemes on the shelves of local planning offices.

It is true that over the preceding years some things had been accomplished. There is the hiking trail that runs along the old canal routes through all four cities. Partly as a result of the canal preservationists efforts the City of St. Catharines has relocated its museum to a viewing site next to the operating canal where people can see the ships pass. Some businesses are flourishing in his-





*Welland canal.*

toric canal buildings. A driving route along existing roads is marked by distinctive signs. There are brochures and guide books and a reasonably high level of awareness among local citizens that the canal is an important and interesting feature in their physical and cultural landscape. But the major breakthrough in tourist development has not occurred.

## THE REASONS

What, one might ask, went wrong? Are there any lessons that can be learned from the Welland Canal experience? Looking back it is possible to analyse some of the problems that have prevented a realization of the full potential of the canal as a tourist attraction. Some of the lessons inherent in such an analysis might be transferable to other situations and are therefore worthwhile considering.

To be fair, some of the problems were beyond local control. During many of the last thirty years, when the development of the old canal lands might have taken place, the economy has been troubled. In the last five to eight years the tourist traffic even in Niagara Falls has been decreasing. There are two major areas, however, where many of the barriers to tourism development were unnecessary. The first of these concerns government policy and what we might call corporate culture. The second has to do with local organizational factors.

Several policies, programs and actions of the various levels of government have been counter-productive. To begin with

many of the physical remains of the earlier canals, locks, wiers, locktenders houses and so on, were wantonly destroyed. Whole sections of canal were buried, turned into parking lots or built over. A trained historical eye can look at the cityscapes and trace the line of the former canals in the pattern of long narrow lots. Without such interpretation the presence of the old canals in many places is completely lost to the average person

This situation came about largely in the 1960s when the federal government finally turned over much of the old canal lands to the local municipalities. With the land came federal grants. Each community along the canal, and there were more of them before municipal reorganization, did different things with the land and money. Some towns spent the funds to bury the old waterway. Others left the channel semi-intact and used the grants for other purposes. Although unused by regular traffic for decades many sections of the canal were still in existence and operational until they came into municipal control. No one can now remember why sections of beautiful old stonework were bulldozed in what now appear to be random acts of official vandalism. Nor did the destruction stop then. As late as the mid-1980s one of the oldest stone houses in St. Catharines, a lock-keeper's residence built in the 1840s, was pulled down to make way for a strip plaza.

Most of this activity was justified in the name of economic development. For many local politicians and bureaucrats economic growth was understood only in terms of attracting the heavy industry that

was traditionally the mainstay of the region. Clearing land to make it available for new manufacturing facilities was their prime growth strategy. A corollary of this approach was that any commercial or residential developer should also have free rein to build. The local representatives and officials for the most part did not realize the potential importance of the old structures, and buildings as a resource. In the language of industrial development, if we stop and consider tourism as an industry, the resource was largely destroyed. It would be like burning down the trees before realizing that you could have started a forestry business.

If new building was given a priority, so too was keeping old industries happy. But all too often existing local industries in Niagara have used the old canals as sewers. There has been little pressure to change for fear alienating them. Demanding that paper mills, foundries and abrasive manufacturers undertake the expense of treating their waste, it was argued, would simply cause them to close down and move away. By accepting the continued pollution of the old canals and the natural waterways connected to them the local community violated one of the prime pre-requisites for tourist development. An area must be pleasant and clean for the enjoyment of its own residents before they can expect it to attract visitors.

If the old canal areas failed to develop their tourism potential largely because of short-sightedness on the part of local governments the federal administration must also shoulder some responsibility. The Transport Canada officials charged with operating the present Welland Canal as part of the St. Lawrence Seaway have generally interpreted their mandate narrowly as the movement of ships. They have consistently refused to cooperate with local communities in developing the canal's recreational and tourist potential. Tourists have been viewed as an undesirable presence and an insurance liability. Large areas of old canal lands still under federal jurisdiction have been made off limits for recreational use on the grounds that they will be needed for the building of a future super-canal. No one has believed for years that the federal government ever intends to spend the fortune that another canal would cost but this has



served as a convenient excuse for inaction. Recreational boats are discouraged, though not prevented, from using the present canal ostensibly for safety reasons. When they are allowed to transit the canal they must do so in groups and they must make the passage in one day. That prevents any development of overnight or permanent marina facilities that would be a great attraction in the canal-side cities.

The inability of the local communities to effectively organize to make the dream of canal development come true has had many aspects. Consistently there has been squabbling and competition among municipalities. The last section of canal that was completed during the 1970s was intended to by-pass the downtown area of the City of Welland. Federal government grants allowed for extensive landscaping along Welland's portion of the canal that was abandoned at that time. That caused jealousy among the city's neighbours but the local committee, made up unashamedly of patronage appointees, refused to share its resources or even to cooperate with groups in adjacent cities. The result was an island of pleasant and expensive park not large enough in itself to attract visitors and unconnected with other canal lands. Tourist committees and chambers of commerce in different communities also competed thus preventing a coordinated development and marketing effort in the whole canal corridor. One self-appointed group of canal promoters was made up primarily of people whose firm worked on contract for the St. Lawrence Seaway Authority. By refusing to contribute to joint efforts and by criticizing the work of other groups they succeeded in preventing any significant progress. That in turn has had the effect of protecting the Seaway Authority from having to broaden its mandate to include tourism and recreation development.

Perhaps the most difficult and unpleasant of all impediments to the growth of tourism has been a series of the most petty and destructive personal rivalries. These stand-offs between politicians, leaders of citizen committees and local officials have been allowed to interfere with broader community efforts. Some of these rivalries have grown out of the professionalization of groups that began as volunteer efforts. It is not an uncommon phenomena that organizations set up

to accomplish specific goals often end up spending more time and effort perpetuating themselves. In this case groups such as the Welland Canals Society and the Welland Parkway Development Board were created to foster canal tourist facilities but once they had paid staff those people quickly turned their real efforts to protecting and extending their jobs. The volunteer directors of these organization began with the best of intentions but were not properly equipped or mandated to manage professional staffs.

The lessons are fairly clear. Where tourism is potentially based on the existence of artifacts such as buildings and certain landscape features like a canal, the integrity of the resource must be protected. Governments at all levels must have clear goals and a comprehensive plan. In the Welland Canals example at least two federal departments, Public Works and Labour, invested millions of dollars in a project which was systematically thwarted by another department, Transport Canada. The planning for a major project must be comprehensive and coordinated. That probably means creating an authority, in this case a Development Agency, with both the resources and authority to carry out the plan. The piecemeal approach to developing the Welland Canal has seen the expenditure of a great deal of money without the results that should have been expected.

What has been achieved for all the past effort? It has already been pointed out that many things such as hiking trails, a canal-side museum and an auto route have been accomplished. Probably the most important factor is the level of awareness among the citizens in the Niagara Region. Today the dream of celebrating the Welland Canals as a major historic network and seeing its tourist potential developed is still alive. The desire to accomplish this has recently been expressed in an amendment to the Regional Official Plan. The Region of Niagara is taking the lead in a design study aimed at implementing a parkway along a the present canal. That will include a dedicated driving route with subsidiary walking, bicycling and equestrian trails.

Recent studies have shown conclusively that tourism is one of the few growth industries in Canada. People of vision in the Niagara area understand that the canal corridor remains their major resource for future growth. One of the most exciting aspects of that growth potential is the way in which it connects many areas such as Ontario's Trent and Rideau waterways and the canals of Quebec and New York into a themed complex that together can be an extraordinary international attraction.

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