

History-Rich Celilo Canal to Close at Midnight Monday

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The curtain will be rung down at midnight Monday on one of the best shows in Pacific Northwest maritime history. It will mark the closing of the 41-year-old The Dalles-Celilo canal to through navigation by tugs and barges after some 75,000 passages had been made through the eight-mile waterway.

Contractors building the \$260,000,000 The Dalles dam have been instructed to lock the gates in the Big Eddy lock at the west end of the canal Monday night, and to begin the last extension of the new dam across the old channel.

River towboats and barges will be cut off from moving the length of the Columbia river channel for three months while the new huge lock in The Dalles dam is completed and water is raised in the pool behind the dam.

LOCK READY APRIL 1

For two months, barging companies will pump petroleum cargoes from barges tied up below the lock through three pipelines to barges in the canal basin above the former Big Eddy lock. Then at the end of March, even this will be halted, and the canal will be prepared for flooding by the new reservoir. About April 1, traffic is to be resumed but this time through the new lock at the Washington end of the new dam.

It was a good show, that 41-year run of Celilo canal. It marked the transition from clumsy wooden sternwheelers to smaller, noisier and more powerful diesel towboats pushing barges that carry many times the cargo of a river steamer. It was a step into a modern age.

The Dalles-Celilo canal was officially opened to operation May 6, 1915, but only after 36 years of fiddling around by congress to order surveys and appropriate funds, and ten years for construction.

No doubt the Indians who occupied the area long before Lewis and Clark came down the Columbia river, saw the need for a waterway to bypass the treacherous rapids of Celilo and Big Eddy, but it fell to early day navigators to put up the first holler for a canal.

Steamboat navigation above Celilo began in 1859 when R. R. Thompson and E. D. Coe built the 110-foot steamer Colonel Wright at the mouth of the Deschutes river. They held a government contract to transport freight, soldiers and mail on the upper Columbia river and they needed the boat. It paid off handsomely and was followed by other moneymakers.

more

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TWO PORTAGES REQUIRED

Steamers from Portland ran as far as the Cascades, three miles above the present Bonneville dam, where their freight and passengers were portaged to steamers on the middle river section. The second fleet ran from the Cascades to The Dalles, and from there passengers were forced to walk or ride a bumpy wagon road to and beyond Celilo to board the Colonel Wright and other vessels.

To bridge the gap, the recently organized Oregon Steam Navigation company sent its manager at The Dalles, Capt. Lawrence Coe, to New York to procure iron rails and other materials for a portage railroad. Coe purchased the bark W. A. Banks, loaded her with materials and two locomotives, and sent her around Cape Horn to Portland.

UNION PACIFIC FORESHADOWED

The portage railroad became the first unit in the present Union Pacific system east of Portland. It served well and profitably for its owners until the railroad was completed in 1882, putting most of the steamboats out of business.

While the boats were still running, however, congress was asked for funds to make a survey for a proposed canal, but nothing was done. Repeated requests were turned down until 1903 when the secretary of war approved a plan for a survey and construction.

The state of Oregon supported the move by appropriating \$100,000 for purchase of right-of-way lands, which were deeded to the United States. And then the state put up another \$165,000, for construction of a new portage railway to transfer cargo around the rapids until the canal was completed and to carry materials for construction of the canal and its locks.

WORK STARTED IN '04

The first contract was let in 1904 for preliminary channel work and the second contract was let in 1905 for first actual work on the canal. During the next ten years congress pinched out appropriations and the work continued by jerks and starts.

It involved the removal of 1,400,000 cubic yards of solid rock and 1,800,000 cubic yards of gravel and other materials, and the use of 1,000,000 pounds of dynamite. Two hundred thousand yards of concrete were put in to run the canal through patches of gravel and soft earth on the sides of the river bank. The canal was made $8\frac{1}{2}$ miles long, 65 feet wide and eight feet deep.

Army engineers came and went, and it fell to the late Frederick C. Schubert to finish up the job in 1915 as engineer in charge of construction. Final cost was \$4,850,000.

more

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Then came the happy day when all of Oregon, and much of Washington and Idaho rejoiced at the beginning of a new era in river transportation. Every city and hamlet along the river celebrated, with the rejoicing focused on The Dalles, May 5, 1915.

Capt. William P. Gray, of Pasco, a veteran riverboat skipper with long gray whiskers, was appointed "admiral." The governors of three states, United States senators, congressmen, mayors, and leading citizens the length of the Columbia valley joined in. The president and vice president were invited but declined to come.

STEAMER MAKES JAUNT

To make the occasion more dramatic, the 150-foot steamer Undine, of Portland, built in 1888, was chartered from Harkins Transportation company to make the first through round trip from Portland to Lewiston, Ida., stopping at Big Eddy locks (there were two of them at the start) for the official dedication.

"Admiral" Gray was aboard. So were a host of dignitaries who boarded the vessel at Lewiston, Almota, Pasco, Wallula, Umatilla and Arlington.

Pasco-Kennewick community was joined by Walla Walla in celebrating the "marriage of Miss Columbia and Mr. Snake." Admiral Gray gave the bride away and 10,000 people cheered.

Samuel Hill, the good roads booster, staged a big celebration at Maryhill where his "mansion" was under construction.

As the Undine, accompanied by the steamers J. N. Teal, Joseph Kellogg and others, approached Celilo, The Oregonian's reporter covering the trip, Shad O. Krantz, wrote: "A tidal wave of western optimism is pressing against the lock gates of Celilo canal commanding them to be opened."

DIGNITARIES SPEAK

The Dalles had 20,000 people in town for the major celebration. A special train of 17 coaches brought 1250 from Portland. Others came in special trains, river boats, automobiles and wagons from communities all along the line.

There were speeches by governors and senators and army engineers, but it was Frederick C. Schubert who manipulated the controls that opened the gates that officially started river navigation through Celilo canal on a day-to-day basis.

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The convoy came on down to Portland, stopping at Vancouver, and some of the governors and senators went on to Oregon City where, as a sort of side attraction, the Willamette falls locks were transferred from private ownership by Portland Railway, Light & Power company to government ownership through the United States corps of engineers. Portland held a big river parade, a street parade, dinners and public meetings.

Then Admiral Gray and his party went on to Astoria for the annual convention of the Columbia and Snake River Waterways association, which he headed as president. And there was another celebration.

It took a whole week to put Celilo on the map.

CANAL TRAFFIC DROPS

But The Dalles-Celilo canal failed to function as forecast during its first few years. Traffic dropped off awkwardly.

During its first five years, the canal passed only 4020 tons of commercial cargo. During the next ten years it passed only 209 tons, and it looked like it had become Uncle Sam's longest and most costly white elephant.

Things began to pick up a little in 1931 when 987 tons passed, and two years later traffic jumped to 15,640 tons, mostly sacked wheat brought down to market by sternwheelers. Construction of Bonneville dam was undertaken in the middle '30s and the dam was opened in 1938. Celilo traffic picked up to 139,500 tons in 1939.

RIVER BOOM DEVELOPS

From that point on, the river boom grew, with Celilo canal getting busier and busier every year. It is finishing 1956 with its biggest haul of all, nearly 1,100,000 tons of cargo, all of it in barges. Wheat, petroleum, cement, anhydrous ammonia and building materials flowed in increasing quantities.

During the period 1930 to 1956, inclusive, the corps of engineers reports the passage of about 12,600,000 ton through Celilo canal.

It augurs well for the new-born babe over on the Washington shore. The main difference is that the new lock in The Dalles dam is 86 feet wide and 675 feet long, compared with Big Eddy's 45 feet by 265 feet. The Dalles lock will take a tug and two barges, whereas Big Eddy took only one vessel at a time.

Possibly it is high time for inadequate The Dalles-Celilo canal to bow out after all. But it had a good run in its later years.