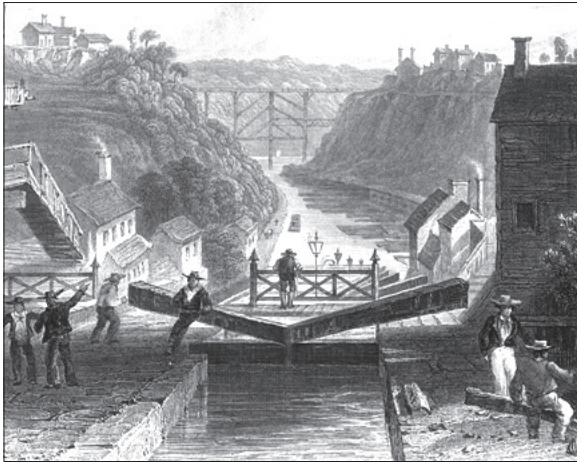


# The Erie Canal

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Royal Fireworks Press  
Unionville, New York

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## **An Unusual Field Trip**

Tom Lenhart glared angrily at the two boys. He stood apart from his fourth grade classmates, who had gathered in a group next to the schoolbus. It was a sunny and warm November day, perfect for the first field trip of the school year. Tom didn't feel sunny and warm though. He wanted to hit somebody and he knew the perfect choices, Danny Watson and Jason Reilly. They had kicked the back of his seat for what seemed like the whole bus ride.

Mrs. Ferguson, their teacher, was waiting for the roar of an airplane passing overhead to stop so that she could give instructions. Danny and Jason stared back at Tom. "As you know, we are visiting this park so that you can see what the old Erie Canal was like," began Mrs. Ferguson.

"We've been studying the canal in class, but it's more interesting if you see it for yourself. Does anyone remember how big the canal was?"

"It was 40 feet wide and four feet deep," answered Sandy Jenkins, the class brain.

"Right, Sandy. If you look behind me you can see for yourselves the actual size of the canal. Not very big for such an important achievement, is it? Okay, there's two things to do before lunch. You can go down the path to the right with Mrs. Crawford, our homeroom mother. That path leads to an old dry dock where they used to repair canalboats. The other choice is to follow me up the path to the left and visit an old lock. Keep safety in mind and be back here at 11:30 so that we can eat lunch. Lock visitors, follow me." Most

of the class walked behind Mrs. Ferguson as she started up the grass-covered path. A few kids followed Mrs. Crawford.

“What are you gonna do now, Tom?” asked Jason. Most of the time, Jason, Danny and Tom were good friends. For some reason they felt like hassling him today.

“No way I’m going with you. You guys banged my seat the whole bus ride, even after I asked you to stop. I’m going by myself,” said Tom, who zipped up his New York Giants jacket and stomped away from them.

“We didn’t mean anything. We promise not to bang your seat on the hike,” called Jason.

“I guess you just want to walk with your girlfriend, Sandy Jenkins,” teased Danny. Sandy was walking ahead of Tom down the path toward the drydock, straggling behind Mrs. Crawford’s group. Sandy had entered Rosendale School only a few weeks ago, and she was having trouble making friends.

Tom spun around. “That does it. You two are dead meat. Keep out of my way so that I don’t do permanent injury to your faces.” Tom charged toward them, fists clenched. Jason pushed him away.

“No problem. As far as we’re concerned, you don’t exist. Come on, Danny,” said Jason. The two of them hurried to catch up with Mrs. Ferguson.

Tom bent over and picked up a stick that was lying on the path. Mules and horses had once walked along this towpath, pulling the canalboats. He knew that in most of New York State, the canal was filled in and replaced by modern streets and roads. Here though, the canal was still filled with water and looked much the same as it might have 150 years ago, except for the trees. Tom figured that they wouldn’t have been growing here long ago because the path had to be clear

for the towrope. He walked over to one of the trees and began hitting it angrily with the stick.

“Take it easy,” yelled Sandy. “This is a nature preserve.”

“Shut up. I’ll hit this stupid tree if I want to. You’re not my boss.” Tom gave an extra hard whack, which sent half of the stick into the canal. He looked back at Sandy, who wore a red buffalo-plaid shirt, blue jeans, and hiking boots. She preferred playing kickball with the boys to joining the girls for jumprope. Her short brown hair added to her boyish appearance. She was very smart, but not well-liked. Tom hadn’t paid any attention to her before this moment. She reached down and picked up something. Tom walked over to check it out.

“What’s that?” he asked. She was holding a green, gallon-sized bottle. A woven basket was wrapped around it.

“It looks like one of those bottles that hold candles in Italian restaurants,” replied Sandy.

“Give it to me.”

“Why should I? I found it.”

Tom reached over and grabbed for the bottle. Sandy pulled it away at the same time, so that Tom only caught the cork, which popped out of the bottle.

A large hand clamped over Tom’s mouth and a muscular arm wrapped around his waist. The man lifted Tom over his hard-muscled shoulder. He pounded his fists on the man’s back, but the arm around his waist just got tighter. Tom’s captor smelled of tobacco and old sweat, as if he hadn’t washed for days, maybe even weeks.

“Let me go,” Tom screamed. The man ignored him and started walking. Tom heard Sandy’s muffled cries behind him. In anger, he sank his teeth into the man’s other arm.

The man cried out and threw Tom into the air. Tom tensed his body as he was thrown into the canal. Sputtering, he began to tread water. He found that he could just barely stand up, his mouth level with the water surface.

Tom rubbed the water out of his eyes and looked around, trying to make sense out of what had just happened. A team of two mules stood a little to the right of the men on the towpath. A rope ran from the rear mule's harness to an old Erie canalboat. Tom recognized the boat from pictures in a filmstrip that Mrs. Ferguson had shown in school.

Not only did the place look different, it also felt quite different. There was a strange quietness. The constant roar of the airplanes approaching the airport had disappeared. A moment before he had been arguing with Sandy. Now he was in the water and Sandy was draped over the shoulder of a man dressed in old-fashioned clothes.

Another man was standing beside Sandy's captor, holding his arm and cursing Tom. The water felt cold and slimy, so Tom decided to risk swimming back to Sandy and the two waiting men. As soon as he reached the side of the canal, one of the men reached out and hauled Tom out of the water by his shirt collar.

"You bite me again you little devil and I'll throw you into the woods next time. By dang, I'll not have any such behavior while you're working on my boat."

"What do you mean? I'm not working on your boat. I'm on a field trip with my class back there."

"Jeepers creepers, a school kid," said Ned, who was Sandy's captor. "There ain't any time for school during canal season, boy. You're just lyin' runaways."

“We didn’t run away,” said Tom. “We’re here on a field trip with our fourth grade class. Let us go and we’ll give you all our money.”

Both men roared with laughter. The man holding Sandy was more plump than the other, and just as strong. His round face and blond hair made him appear friendly. He put Sandy down and she shook her short hair.

“You’d better not hurt me. I know karate,” she said as she tensed her body and held her hands out in the karate position.

“You ain’t gonna get hurt iff’n you do as you’re told,” said the Captain, whose long black beard and hair made him look rather fierce.

“Who are you?” asked Sandy.

“I’m Reuben McWilliams, captain of the ‘Annie Lenore.’ You call me Captain. This here’s Ned, my mate. You two schoolboys will find out soon enough what real work is. Git on board.”

*No way, thought Tom. If I can get back to the schoolbus, the driver can get help. Then these awful men will leave us alone.* His water-soaked boots felt like stones, but he ran for his life up the towpath.

“Git back here you son of a...” The words were covered by a new sound, the sound of hoofbeats.

Tom looked back and saw Ned riding after him on a mule. His fear became a whip that pushed him faster. *The schoolbus should be just ahead,* Tom thought.

“Just a little farther.” He gasped the words to keep up his courage.

“Around this curve and...oh no!”

Tom stopped running. Ahead of him lay a straight line of towpath, with no sign of his class, the schoolbus, or even the picnic area. Ned caught up to him. He grabbed Tom roughly by the arm, pulled him onto the mule, and laid him over his lap like a sack of potatoes.

“Don’t try that again, or I’ll thrash you like your Pa never did before,” said Ned. “Lay there quiet like and you won’t get hurt.”

Tom followed Ned’s advice and they rode back to the boat. *Where’s the class?* Tom thought.

“We’ve got a live one here, Captain.”

“So I see,” said the Captain. “There’s a lock up ahead. We’d better stow these hoggees for awhile. I don’t want any trouble.”

“I’ll mind the hayburners. I been doin’ it since those other hoggees lit out, I guess another few miles won’t kill me.” Tom noticed that Ned stooped over and picked up the bottle after he tied up the two mules.

“What’s a hoggee?” asked Tom.

“Where’d you boys come from, anyways? Everbody knows that hoggees drive the mules that pull the canalboats on the Grand Erie Canal. Now git below, young’uns. We’ll see if the Missus has any dry clothes for you,” said the Captain.



## All Dressed Up

Tom looked over the “Annie Lenore” as he stepped on board. There was a square cabin at each end of the boat. The canalboat had been painted white a long time ago, and had green-shuttered windows spaced evenly on the sides of the cabins. A wooden bridge was lying on the roof of the front cabin. As Tom walked toward the rear of the boat, he passed two large wooden hatches that covered the cargo hold. The rear cabin was similar to the front one. A sooty metal chimney was spreading smoke on the laundry that was hanging between two poles on the roof.

The Captain escorted them down some steps into the rear, or aft, cabin, which served as the living quarters for the crew. The Captain’s wife, Grizzy, and their daughter, Rebecca, were cooking lunch. Grizzy and Rebecca were suntanned and wore clean, if a little threadbare, clothes. Rebecca stared at them, and then mumbled a greeting. Her mother, Grizzy, just grunted and turned the fish that she was cooking on the woodstove.

“I brought two new boys to help with the mules, Ma. This here one got a bit wet. Have you any dry clothes for ’im?” asked Captain Reuben.

“Should be one of Rebecca’s dresses in the cuddy,” replied Grizzy. “He can wear that until his clothes dry.”

“Not my other dress,” protested Rebecca.

“Don’t worry,” said Tom. “I’m not gonna wear a dress.”

“No sass, boy,” said the Captain. “Git in there and do as your told. You go with him.” He pointed to a small doorway on the back wall.

“I’m not going to wear a dress and that’s final.”

“What?” The Captain’s eyes blazed and he lunged at Tom, barely missing him. Tom slipped through the blanket that served as a door to the sleeping room. Sandy meekly followed him.

“Now you git some dry clothes on, or I’ll beat the daylight out of you,” yelled the Captain. “I ain’t gonna have no sick hoggees. There’s work to be done.”

The room was a dingy yellow, like the faded sunflowers along the towpath. It was divided into two parts by another blanket. They identified Rebecca’s side by the rag doll lying on her bunk. Tom went to a small trunk and pulled out a red-checked dress.

“Very attractive, Tom. It matches your eyes.”

“Shut up. What are we going to do?” asked Tom.

“Beats me. They think I’m a boy,” said Sandy.

“Well, I guess I can help you better if they think that we’re both boys.”

“Help me? What makes you think that I need your help? I’ve watched you in class. You’re always picking on girls. My mom says it’s because you’re immature. Maybe I’m going to have to help you.”

“Me? Immature?” yelled Tom. “Your mom doesn’t even know me. Besides, I have friends, which is more than I can say for you.”

“You pig,” Sandy shouted. “I had lots of friends at my old school. Everybody at this school’s a bunch of snobs.”

“Stop calling me names,” warned Tom. “We’ll have to stick together if we’re ever going to get out of this mess. So how about it? Can you pretend that you’re a boy for awhile?”

“I guess so, but you’d better be nicer.”

“Okay, I will. Do you really know karate?”

“No,” replied Sandy. “I just started the class.”

“Too bad, it might have come in handy,” said Tom.

“You’d better get that dress on. The Captain seems mean.”

“You promise you won’t tell the kids at school?”

“Look, Tom. Even if we see the kids again, they’ll never believe us,” said Sandy.

“Okay, I don’t want a beating. Turn around, please. I have to get changed. See, I’m being nice.”

Sandy turned and looked into the room on the other side of the blanket. It was the same dirty yellow color, and had a larger bed in the middle and two chests against the wall.

Above the chests was a stained map of New York State, with the route of the Erie Canal traced in red crayon. Below it was a calendar.

“Tom, there’s a calendar on this wall.”

“So?”

“It says 1829.”

“Well,” said Tom. “These people look like antiques, maybe they collect them too. Could you help me with this?”

Sandy turned around and laughed when she saw Tom struggling with the dress. “No wonder. You have it on backwards. This cute little ruffle goes in the front.”

“Since when do you know about dresses? I’ve never seen you wear one. You’re such a tomboy.”

“My mom makes me wear a dress when we go out to a fancy restaurant. I have two at home, but I hate to wear them. I don’t look as cute in dresses as you do.”

Tom made a face at her. He pulled his hands out of the arms and they both turned it around his waist. He put his arms back into the sleeves and Sandy helped button up the back. “I guess I’m ready. Let’s go out and get some answers.”

Back in the main part of the cabin, Ned and the Captain were finishing their meal.

“Well, don’t you look darlin’,” said the Captain. Tom glared at him, but said nothing.

“Listen, sir,” said Sandy, “We would like to know what’s going on.” She searched for a spark of kindness in his eyes, but was met by a cold stare.

“It’s simple. You two are a goin’ to work with them mules. We caught you stealin’ Ned’s bottle, so you must be runaways or something. Now you’re workin’ for me.”

Ned and the Captain gave their empty plates to Rebecca and started up the steps. “When you’ve eaten, come up on deck,” he called through the doorway.

“Sit.” Grizzly motioned to a small table across the cabin from the wood-burning stove. Tom and Sandy sat on the small chairs and watched Rebecca as she served them each a plate of fried fish and potatoes. Then she went to an upright, wooden chest with four doors on the front. She opened one, pulled out a metal pail, and poured milk into three glasses. The old-fashioned milk pail looked like one that Tom had seen in an antique store that his mother had dragged him to one Saturday. Tom was thirsty and gulped down half a