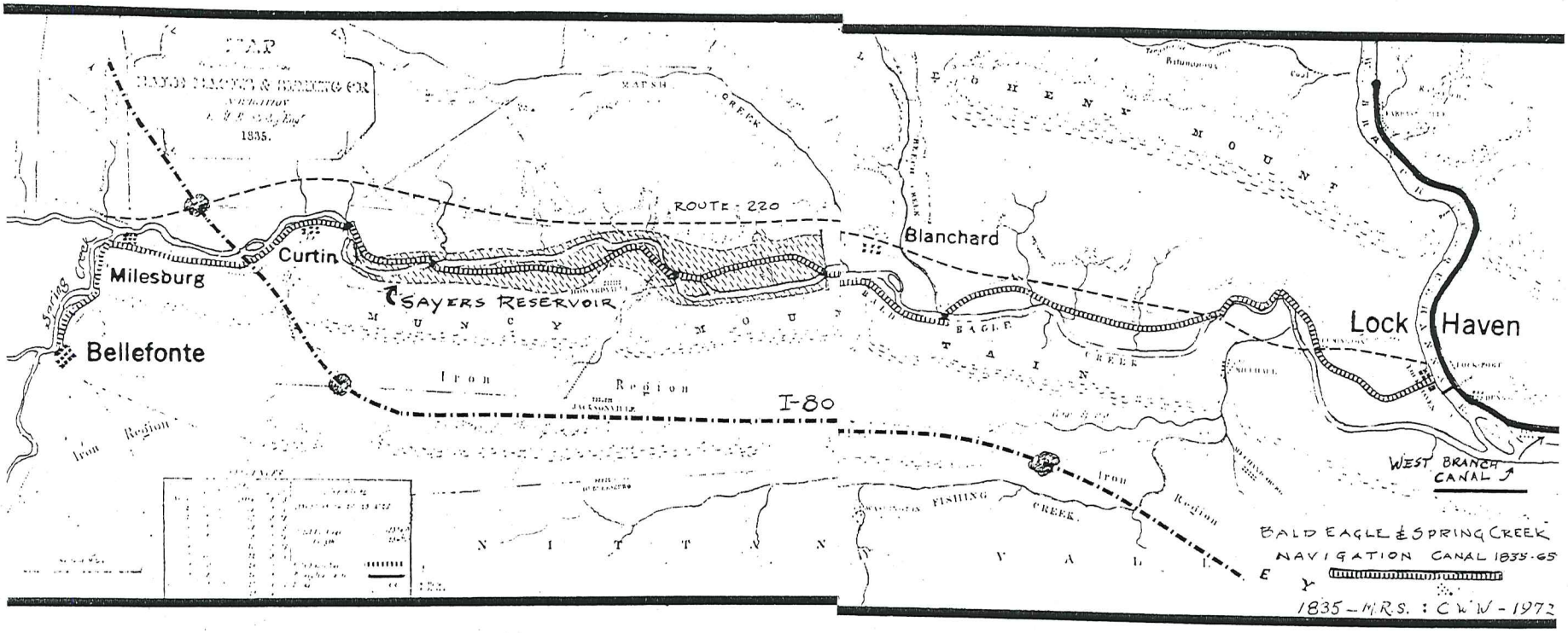


The route of the Bald Eagle Spring Creek Canal is shown with its modern counterparts.

# Centre County CANAL

by Janet Brennan

"What's so interesting about an old ditch with no water in it?" Mrs. Ernest Coleman of State College has been known to remark. Well, plenty! according to her husband Dr. Coleman and other canal buffs like him. Dr. Coleman, a retired State College physician, is one of a growing number of people currently reviving interest in the historic epidemic known as "canal fever," which struck Centre County and all of Pennsylvania in the early 1800s.

The story of Pennsylvania's canal system can be traced back to the country's earliest days. In the 1680s William Penn envisioned a canal network much like the one he knew so well in Holland, but Penn never acted on his plans. Some years later, George Washington as a young surveyor traveled through the Allegheny Mountains, surveying the land for canal potential. But is was not until the first quarter of the 19th century that the dream of a statewide canal network became reality.

In 1825, New York State opened its Erie Canal. The "Big Ditch" conclusively proved that canals could be a commercially successful means of transportation. In fact, the Erie Canal was so successful at opening trade lines to interior New York state that the port of Philadelphia lost much of its trade to New York City. It was not a situation which Philadelphians could tolerate passively.

The success of the Erie Canal precipitated a canal craze which flooded the country, and Pennsylvania got swept up in the current. Railroads had not yet been perfected. Dense forests, poor roads, and Pennsylvania's many mountains were

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The locktender's house at Curtin Village between Bellefonte and Milesburg may be slated for restoration. Ruins of several locks can be seen in the county.

effective obstacles to wagon trains. Canals seemed to be the only solution to the state's transportation problems. Beginning in 1826, the Pennsylvania legislature hurriedly passed bill after bill authorizing canal construction. The haste was due mainly to Philadelphia's anxiousness to regain its position as the nation's leading port. Thus began the "Canal Era," which culminated in a network of 4,400 miles of hand-dug canals in the eastern United States: 1,235 miles of canals in Pennsylvania alone.

Pennsylvania was to have more canals than any other state, and Centre County was by no means immune to the canal epidemic. Waterways had been an important means of transportation in this region since Indian days. Between 1771 and 1827 Bald Eagle Creek, Penn's Creek, Pine Creek, Moshannon Creek, and Spring Creek were declared "public highways" by the state. The county's early settlers sent iron, wheat, and flour to market on crude rafts, much being sent down the Susquehanna as far as Baltimore. When the canal era began in 1826, Centre County, an inland market already used to water transportation, was ready to accept the progress and prosperity that the technological wonder of man-made canals promised to bring.

In 1835 the West Branch Division of the Pennsylvania Canal was opened. The West Branch was a state-owned canal which covered 73 miles between Lock Haven and Northumberland, on the banks of the Susquehanna. From Northumberland, canal boats could journey down the Susquehanna Canal as far as Chesapeake Bay to Baltimore, or turn off into other canals to go to Philadelphia or many other major cities via the extensive Pennsylvania canal network.

In 1834, one year before the West Branch Division actually opened, a group of prominent Centre County men formed the Bald Eagle and Spring Creek Navigation Company. One of these founders was James Irvin, who donated the original lands on which part of Penn State now resides. Other members of the company's first board of managers became namesakes for local townships: Thomas Burnside, Roland Curtin, William Potter, Joseph Harris, and James Gregg. The Navigation Company was formed to construct and operate the privately owned Bald Eagle and Spring Creek (BESC) Canal, which ran from the corner of Lamb and Water streets in Bellefonte to Lock Haven, where it joined the West Branch Division Canal.

Building a 25-mile, hand-dug canal was no easy task. Work began on December 2, 1835, and was not finished until twelve years later. The canal was dug mostly by Irish immigrants, who, with the help of mules but no machines, could excavate one yard of canal per person per day. These hard-working canal diggers were paid approximately 84¢ for a twelve-hour day, and worked six days each week. On Sundays they "rested," but so many violent brawls ensued among the hard-drinking Irish that it was said "there's a dead Irishman for every mile of canal."

The "Lower Division," 12½ miles from Howard Furnace to the West Branch Canal at Lock Haven, was in operation in the fall of 1837. In 1847, the canal was ready only as far as Milesburg, and the Pennsylvania legislature was about to recommend that the canal be terminated there. But some resourceful Bellefonte citizens took advantage of a temporary high water situation on Spring Creek and hauled a flat boat upstream from Milesburg. They reported to the legislature, "Navigation opened to Bellefonte," thereby insuring Bellefonte's continuing position as county seat and local commercial center.

The "Upper Division," 12½ miles from Howard Furnace to Bellefonte, was opened in the fall of 1848. The Bald Eagle and Spring Creek Canal was now complete. The first boat to reach Bellefonte was the *George Crane,* entering the town on September 1, 1848, "amid hurrahs and the firing of cannon." Like the rest of the state, Centre County was now firmly entrenched in the Canal Era.

The route of the BESC roughly paralleled Spring Creek from Bellefonte to Milesburg, and Bald Eagle Creek from Milesburg, through Curtin, passing near Howard and Blanchard to Lock Haven. The canal was 25 miles long, 20 of which were hand-dug, and included 28 locks and 5 dams. Water was provided by Spring and Bald Eagle Creeks and was probably drained in the


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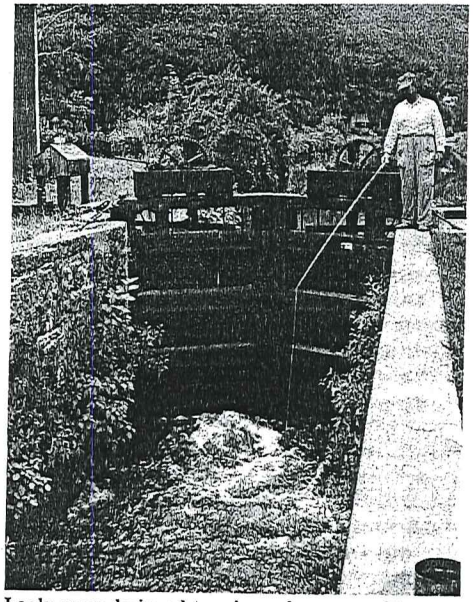

Locks were designed to raise or lower canal boats in steps to avoid rapids and other navigational hazards. The locktender's job left plenty of time for fishing.

winter, although Mrs. Harry Spearly of Patton Township reports that her grandfather, Robert Brennan, was at one time employed to break ice on the canal between Bellefonte and Milesburg. He waded upstream in water up to his waist, smashing the ice ahead of him with a club.

The canal provided the area with a very economical method of shipping, and business was brisk. Local shippers paid the boat owner 50¢ per hundred pounds to transport goods between Bellefonte and Lock Haven, or $1.50 per hundred pounds between Bellefonte and Philadelphia. Lime, limestone, and agricultural products were the major items shipped from this area to Lock Haven, Harrisburg, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. In return, Philadelphia and other eastern cities sent glass, hardware, ladies' clothing, and other manufactured articles into Centre County. There were no specially designed "passenger packets" on the BESC as there were on other canals, but many people did travel in the captains' cabins of the commercial boats. In addition, many of the county's newcomers brought their furniture and household goods to their new homes in the Centre County region via the canal.

Compared with today's high-speed trucks and noisy highways, canal travel was graceful, peaceful, but very slow. The boat "Beaver Mills" set a record in 1853 for the fastest round trip between Milesburg and Philadelphia – exactly ten weeks. This was a noteworthy accomplishment at the time, for most boats took several weeks longer to travel the approximately 600 miles. What canal transportation lacked in speed it made up for in charm; the sight of a mule ambling along a tree-shaded towpath, pulling a gaily painted wooden boat through the quiet water must have been picturesque indeed.

Unfortunately, this pleasant method of transportation in Centre County was short-lived. While twelve years were needed to complete the Bald Eagle and Spring Creek Canal, the entire canal was in operation a mere seventeen years. The first sign of its demise appeared in 1859 with the completion of the Bellefonte and Snow Show Railroad. In 1864 the Bald Eagle Valley Railroad was completed, its tracks paralleling the canal.

The final blow to the canal was dealt the following spring. The floods of 1865 destroyed all 28 locks and wreaked havoc on the canal's banks. Faced with the competition of the railroads, it was uneconomical to rebuild the locks, and so the canal was abandoned. The stockholders of the Bald Eagle and Spring Creek Navigation Company suffered a large loss. The same floods also destroyed most of the other state-owned canals, leaving Pennsylvania with a $40 million canal debt. And so the canal era ended quietly, amid the enthusiasm of the newly embraced railroad craze.

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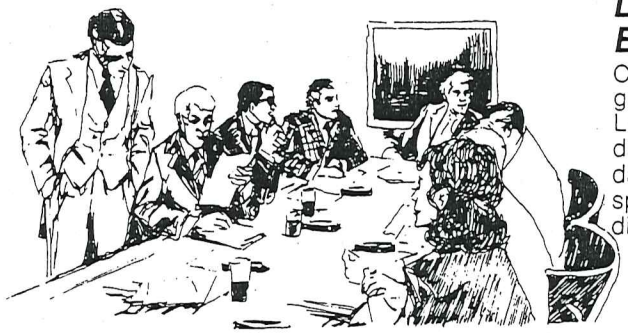

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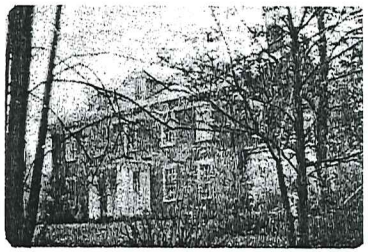

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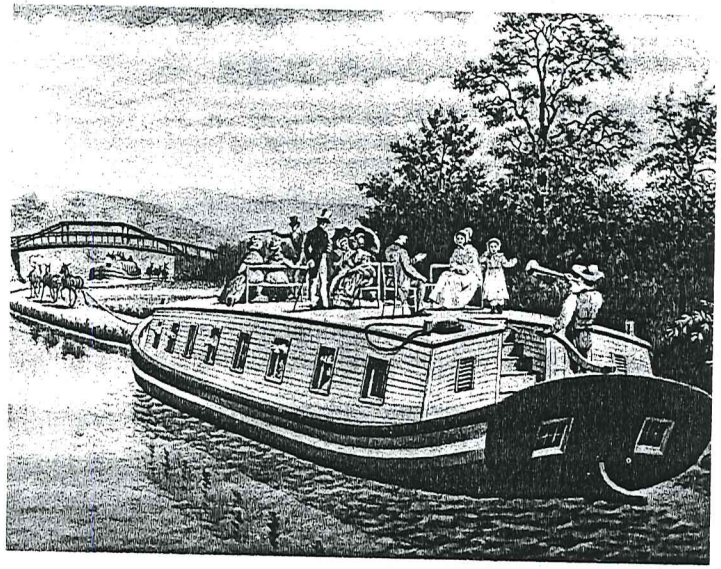

Canal boats were popular for for excursions and family outings. The steersman sounded a horn to warn passengers to duck for a low bridge.

Canals are gone but they are not forgotten, thanks to canal enthusiasts like Dr. Ernest Coleman, a 1927 graduate of Penn State. Dr. Coleman's first awareness of canals came in the summer of 1924. On recess after his freshman year at Penn State, he was visiting the site of a bridge which his father was in charge of erecting near Johnstown. Exploring the area, the young Coleman found an old, abandoned tunnel in the mountainside. No one living in the area at the time seemed to know what the tunnel had been built for. Intrigued by his find, he did some research and discovered that it had been the tunnel for the Allegheny Portage Railroad, abandoned in 1857. The Portage Railroad, part of the Main Line Canal, transported boats over the Allegheny Mountains on their way to Pittsburgh. Dr. Coleman's serendipitous find is now famous as the first railroad tunnel ever constructed in the United States.

Thus did Ernie Coleman learn about the Portage Railroad and the canal network it had been a part of. But his new-found interest in canals lay dormant until 1957, when he began working at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Altoona. His job entailed travel between Altoona and Harrisburg, coincidentally the route of the Main Line Canal. He also made frequent trips to his hometown of Johnstown, the western terminal of the Portage Railroad. Constant travel along these historic canal routes rekindled his interest; when asked how he got interested in canals, Dr. Coleman gives the stock answer "because they were there."

Dr. Coleman has been a permanent resident of State College since 1932, and like most area residents, he was totally unaware of the existence of the Bald Eagle and Spring Creek Canal. He found out about it the hard way. About seven years ago he was giving a lecture to the Bellefonte PTA about the Main Line Canal. During the question-and-answer period which followed, Hugh Manchester of Bellefonte, a local historian, brought up the topic of the BESC. Dr. Coleman had never heard of the canal; Mr. Manchester proceeded to give a little talk of his own. Embarrassed, Dr. Cole-

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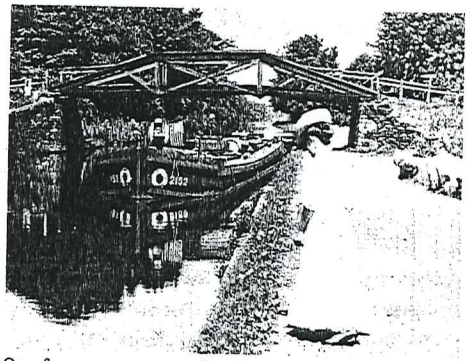

Our for a summer stroll, this lady stopped to watch a cargo barge ply its way up a canal.

man began his research of the local canal so he would not get caught with egg on his face again.

The doctor was and still is active in perpetuating the memory of the canal era. He ferrets out old records and canal commissions at the Historical and Museum Commission in Harrisburg, as well as manifests of the BESC Navigation Company, in local libraries. Until ten years ago he did a good deal of hiking along old canal routes to uncover remnants of locks and other existing structures. He was one of the founding members of the Pennsylvania Canal Society, which now has more than 250 members. Each year society members tour an old canal in Pennsylvania, or join with another state's society to tour a canal in New York, Maryland, or Delaware. Dr. Coleman served as tour chairman for the Lower Juniata Canal (which ran from Lewistown to Harrisburg), and next year will assist the tour chairman of the West Branch Division Canal, leading a trek for society members from Farrandsville, nine miles above Lock Haven, to Northumberland. Dr. Coleman has published articles on the BESC in *Town & Gown* and *Canal Currents*, the magazine of the Pennsylvania Canal Society. Throughout the years he has presented talks to a variety of local groups, from PTAs to historical societies.


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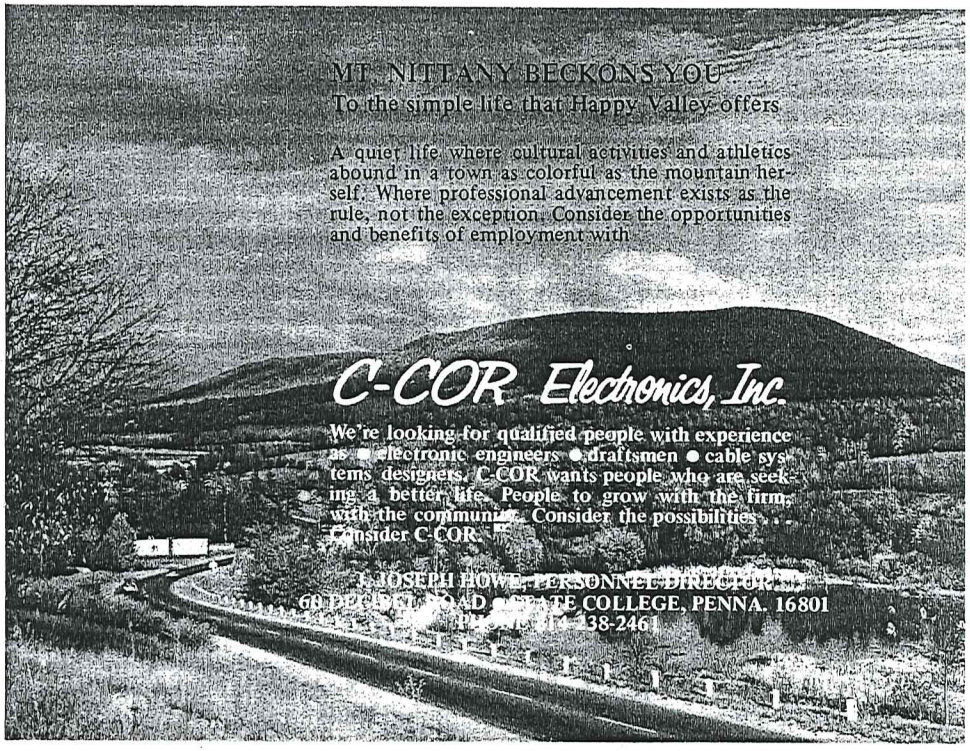
"I got a mule, her name is Sal . . ." immortalized one of the patient beasts which pulled canal boats in the 1840s. Most were replaced by railroads by the 1870s.

Unfortunately, much of the canal and many of its locks are now under water at Sayers Dam near Blanchard. But according to Dr. Coleman, those people willing to tramp through underbrush can still find some visible traces of Centre County's canal system. The shrewd observer can discover Lock No. 1 at Lamb Street in Bellefonte, Lock No. 4 in Harmony Forge, Lock No. 11 and the locktender's house at Curtin, and Lock No. 28 and locktender's house near Mill Hall. There is a possibility that the lock and locktender's house at Curtin will be restored as part of Curtin Village. But you must look sharply for these remaining traces of the canal era. For the most part, the Bald Eagle and Spring Creek Canal, drained and overgrown with weeds and brambles, now resembles nothing more than an "old ditch with no water in it."

*T&G*

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