

DIGGER GALLAGHER, THE CANALER

Program

Original Character, Narrative, Music Created by
Foster Brown

for the 1997 Western Reserve Studies Symposium
“Lifelines of the Western Reserve”

Introduction: Enter singing about my journey westward to Cleveland, Ohio.

Song — “My Name is Digger Gallagher”

A. Cleveland in the early days

1. Landscape
2. Demography
3. Mills

B. Digging of the Canal

1. People
2. Tools
3. Adversities
4. Song “Hail to the Men”

C. Workers of the Canal

1. Captain and his crew
2. Mules
 - a. Song — “Simon Slick”
3. Deck boats of all kinds

D. Canal from Akron to Cleveland

1. The growth of Cleveland and Akron
2. Prosperity and commerce
3. Inns and locks
4. Fiddle tune: “Tinkers Creek Dance”

Conclusion: Song — “Let’s go Down to the Ohio & Erie Canal”

Questions from audience

Exit playing “My name is Digger Gallagher”

Digger Gallagher, the Canaler

With a name such as this, I am sure one expects an explanation why. Let me tell you my story.

With hard times plaguing Ireland in the early 1800s, my father felt it best to move his family westward to America where he heard of great opportunity. With my mom and two siblings, we boarded a ship and sailed for America. I was a scrapping teenage boy of 17. As we approached the shore of New York City, my father overheard some gentlemen speaking of work on the new canal system. At the prospect of earning thirty cents a day, my father and I were certain that we could prove our hard work ethics by joining the digging crew.

We reached New York Harbor on June 17, 1821, and directly searched out a canal contractor. With eager eyes and empty bellies we quickly took employment digging the Erie Canal. The next day we caught the earliest boat up the Hudson River to Albany, New York. There we met up with our assigned crew sev-

eral miles west of the city. The contract company generously offered us room for my parents and siblings, while my father and I worked from sunup till sundown, digging and carting off soil to carve out the big ditch.

Just as expected, my father proved his abilities and tireless fortitude, and within several months rose to being a foreman. As winter came on, we were forced to find jobs anywhere we could. Father cleaned stables while I split wood and ran errands for the well-to-do in Albany. We were all happy when warm weather broke and the diggin' once again began.

On the first day of June, 1823, after nearly two years of being in the new land, my father was approached by his canal contractor, and asked if he and his family would move on to Buffalo to start digging on the west side of the state. My father, eager to please and ready for new opportunity (and a slight wage increase) packed up his family and trudged his way through heavily wooded areas with nothing more than a path to find our way. Several Irish families made the journey with us, and within two months we dug our first shovel-full of dirt to help join the west to the East.

By 1825, the Erie Canal was complete, and my father stayed on as an engineer to help maintain the canal. In my estimation there was no man who knew the canal and its construction better than my father.

Word got around that construction of a new canal in the state of Ohio was to begin soon. With my experience, maybe I could be hired on as a foreman, I thought. So by midsummer I packed up my family. (Oh, yes, I met a pretty lassie by the name of Molly Callahan, and before you could blink your eye, we had two children by our sides.)

Much like my parents two years before, I led my family through the wilderness from Buffalo to Erie, Pennsylvania, and then on to Cleveland, Ohio. Great misfortune overtook us along the way.

We were caught in a week-long rainstorm, which flooded the creeks and streams and made the poor roadways even more miserable with ruts, rocks and mud to push through. Luckily, our cart held together, and our ox seemed to not mind the long journey. Along with the rain came the mosquitoes; nearly driving us crazy. But, within several days' walk of Cleveland, the weather turned cheery and our spirits grew hopeful that we were doing the will of God.

As we entered the village of Cleveland, Molly and I noticed a sense of expectancy in the eyes of the dwellers. The news of a canal running through town, bringing in goods from the interior of Ohio, and the potential of shipping those goods from Lake Erie to bigger cities, brought many fortune-seekers and visionaries to this insect-infested place. I soon located Patrick Muldoon, my contact to join the Ohio digging crew.

On August 13, 1825, I worked alongside other Irishmen and German immigrants as we cleared trees and removed muck from a swamp located nearly two miles south of Lake Erie. I was no stranger to the hard work of digging the big ditch. But the numbers of mosquitoes and rattlesnakes we dealt with daily began to take a toll on us diggers.

Several men died of ague and or lost many days of work because of snake bites. It was only a matter of time 'till I was stricken with malaria myself, but by the grace of God I pulled through. Shortly after my recovery I was bitten by a rattlesnake. But with my family near hunger, I pushed through and stayed on the job. I guess with my stubborn disposition and out of sheer necessity, I was determined to keep digging. The other men in the crew began to call me Digger Gallagher" after the snake bite incident.

On July 4, 1827, the Ohio and Erie Canal opened for commerce from Akron to Cleveland. I soon joined a canal boat crew and began driving the mules down the towpath. We transported grains and lumber from Akron to Lake Erie to then be loaded on a ship on its way to New York City.

Through the years, I worked as a bowman and sternsman on several deck boats. Nowadays, I manage a mercantile near Lock 37 close to Tinker's Creek. On certain occasions the nearby inns invite me to share my songs and stories of my days digging the Ohio & Erie Canal.

Despite those backbreaking years working on the canal, I am proud to tell newcomers about how I helped create this modern mode of transportation, and to see the fruit of my labors still in full swing as of this year, 1850.

Digger Gallahger

My name is Digger Gallagher
A canaler, I be.
I've never met a man, any happier than me.
With every step I've taken
on the towpath long.
And with every dig I've dug
Aah, my joy it still grows strong.
Ay, diggety di-dee-day, uh diggety di-dee do.

Now with me wife and family, we made the journey West
With ox and cart we trudges through the wilderness.
From Albany to Erie, the weather it turned bad
But when we reach Cleveland, joy chased away the sad.
Ay, diggety di-dee-day, uh diggety di-dee do.

Prior to me comin', to the Buckeye state.
I was happily employed with an Erie canalers wage.
But when that ditch was dug, there was nothin' much to do
So I took the hard road West to join the Ohio diggin' crew.
Ay, diggety di-dee-day, uh diggety di-dee do.

(Instrumental)

The year was 1825 I arrived upon the scene
with a shovel in me hands and wheelbarrow at me knees.
With blisters on me hands and mosquitoes round me head
At days end I grew quite weary, but slept well upon me bed.
Ay, diggety di-dee-day, uh diggety di-dee do.

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I've never met a man, any happier than me.
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Aah, my joy it still grows strong.
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