Lives lost
BUILDING THE WATERWAYS TOOK A HUGE TOLL IN HUMAN LIFE

BY ALLAN BENNER
Tribune Staff

Their graves can be found in cemeteries throughout Niagara.
And, "so the stories go," others who died while digging the
Welland Canal lie in unmarked graves along its banks, said historian John
Buntniaik.

But the truth of those stories may never be known.

There is, however, little doubt that building the waterway took a huge toll in
human life.

Considering the conditions thousands of canal workers faced, "it's a wonder
any of them survived," Buntniaik said.

During the building of the fourth Welland Canal alone, 115 to 118 people
lost their lives due to accidents. And that canal, which opened in 1932, was
largely dug with modern equipment.

As the S.S. Lenoyna passed through the newly opened Fourth Canal on Aug.
6, 1932, the death toll inspired Canada's minister of railways and canals, Dr.
Robert Manion, to call for the building of a monument to those fallen canal
workers. It took 70 years before that monument was built.

It's hard to envision the way Niagara looked in the early 1800s while the
construction of the canal was occurring.

It was a wilderness with more creeks and rivers than roads cutting through
dense brush.

Actor David MacKenzie has been playing the role of William Hamilton Merritt
for 25 years since adopting the role for the 150th anniversary of the canal.

Envisioning the Niagara Merritt lived in is a matter of finding one of the
peninsula's remaining traces of wilderness and "imagining it's all like this. You
have to see small pockets and say, 'It's all around.' Sample this and put it every
where. It's pretty scary stuff."

It was a land that was rife with mosquitoes, it was cold and wet, the ground
was thick with mud, and thousands of people spent 10 hours a day digging a
trench that would eventually extend for more than 30 kilometres from Lake Erie
to Lake Ontario.

Building the early canals would have employed a lot of workers before machinery
made the work less labour intensive, added Welland historian and
author Michael Power.

"We're talking picks and shovels and wheelbarrows. We're talking muck and
cold water, and horrendous conditions."

An unsigned reply to Robinson's
request is published in The Great Swell
Link, also by Styrand and Robert Taylor. In
the letter, the board agreed about the
need for adequate medical care, and
states the contractors will be required to
pay half a worker's medical expense.

There were also concerns about pools
of stagnant water created as a result of
the construction and the potential health
impacts on workers as well as the growing
number of people settling in Niagara. And
efforts were put in place to drain the area.

In the winter of 1880, the Thorous Post
reported that in Welland, "considerable
stagnant water remains in the vicinity of
the old canal," and "it would be well for
the Board of Health to see if it
removed before the warm weather comes
on."

Even during the construction of the
Fourth Canal in the 1920s workers were
hard hit by epidemics of typhoid at the
start of the decade and then smallpox as
the decade ended.

Adding to the dangerous working
conditions and disease, there were
labor uprisings and violent revolts that
tended to end in tragedy.

These revolts were often fueled by
alcoholism, despite prohibition laws.

"There were problems with alcoholism,
violece and a lack of moral order," Power said.

From 1892 to 1894, there were 47 riots
and 26 workers' strikes.

One riot was written about in the Dec.
22, 1842, edition of the St. Catharines
journal:

"We regret to learn that there has lately
been some further disturbances among
the labourers on the Footer of the
Welland Canal, in the vicinity of Beam
Creek," the paper reported.

"The troubles, however, do not appear
to have been extensive — unemployed
men who attempted to stop the progress
of the work, being so few in number, that
on the appearance of Baron de
Rottenburgh, the special Magistrate,
backed by the troops stationed at
Burnsville, the leaders were taken into
custody, and the rabble speedily
dispersed."

The uprisings came to a head with the
Battle of Slabtown which Power and Paul
Hutcheson wrote a book about to
commemorate the 150th anniversary of that
conflict.

It occurred in Merritton on July 12,
1849, when mounting tensions between
Protestant and Catholic Irish Workers
erupted in a shoot out that injured six or
seven people and claimed the lives of
two.

Despite the working conditions and
the dangers they faced, the canal workers
earned very little.

In 1906, a canal labourer earned $1.67
a day. The highest pay cheques went to
engineers who earned $100 a
month, plus board.

The rates hadn't changed much from
25 years earlier when a labourer earned
$1.25 to $1.50 a day — but at least they
were consistent.

Prior to fair wage schedules becoming
a mandatory part of all government
contracts in the early 1900s, Power said
sometimes employees were paid in goods
rather than wages.

"It was very bad."

But it wasn't until after the labour
force became organized in the 1920s that
conditions started to really improve,
Power said.

---

Melina's Service Centre
Dain City

"Automotive Service That Puts YOU First"

$20 off ANY SERVICE
Excluding Tires & Gas
Cupons per purchase
Exp Jan 3 2005

4 Kingsway, Welland
905-732-4946