

Along the Towpath, A Journalist Rediscovered the Ohio & Erie Canal. By Al Simpson. (Akron, OH: The University of Akron Libraries, 2003. 248 pp. \$29.95, ISBN 0-9743507-0-2.

Along the Towpath, A Journalist Rediscovered the Ohio & Erie Canal is an interesting read in that it documents the development of the Ohio and Erie Canal Corridor from its embryonic stages until the canal lands were “saved” by local government units when the state of Ohio chose to divest itself of the responsibility for these historic lands. The story could easily be dismissed as an esoteric bonding of two men who shared a passion for the preservation of the Ohio and Lake Erie Canal in Stark County, Ohio. Their mission started innocently enough when a local politician invited a reporter from the Canton Repository to join him on a hike from Canal Fulton to Navarre along the banks of the canal in Stark County. The rest is history.

The local politician was Ralph Regula, Navarre, Ohio, Village Solicitor, who progressed from the local level to the state legislature and ultimately into the United States Congress as a Representative for Stark County. At each of these political levels, Regula was able to nurture his dream for the preservation and restoration of the Ohio and Lake Erie Canal. Without the help of an able propagandist, Regula’s dream could well have withered on the vine with the morning sun. His hiking companion, who was soon to become this propagandist, was Canton Repository reporter Al Simpson.

In a sense, Regula patterned his hike along the Ohio and Lake Erie Canal after one taken a few years earlier by United States Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas who sought to prevent the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal from falling victim to the interstate highway system. Douglas almost single-handedly prevented the C & O Canal from passing into oblivion.

Reporter Simpson, a man with more than twenty years of journalistic experience, obviously felt Regula’s intense passion to preserve and protect the Ohio & Lake Erie Canal lands from commercial development by private parties. From the outset, Regula had a vision of a park with the canal as its central element that would cater to a wide range of interests - hiking, biking, canoeing, horseback riding, fishing, providing a place for family picnics, and educating a young public to the importance of the canal in the lives of earlier generations of Ohioans. The spark ignited on that rainy day would gradually spread from Lake Erie’s southern shore to the Ohio River’s northern bank.

In the Prologue Simpson writes, "Stark County was where it all began . . . and the man who . . . shepherded his dream from conception to birth is Congressman Ralph Regula . . . In my first article about the canal, I wrote these words about Ralph: 'He looks beyond the borders of Stark County and envisions a continuous 309-mile hiking trail along a restored towpath from Lake Erie to the Ohio River.' Today, such a trail is well advanced due to the work of volunteers and local governments from north to south."

When the state decided to divest itself of the canal lands which it had owned since 1825, the law stipulated that those lands must first be offered to the municipalities, townships or counties where the land was situated. If any of these entities requested title to the canal lands, the state was obligated to transfer the land at no cost to the receiving governmental entity. When no governmental unit requested the land the state was free to sell that land to private individuals.

Navarre, Canal Fulton and Massillon were the first governmental units to request title to the canal lands. Gradually, other entities also applied, and all of the canal lands in Stark County were kept in public hands, even though most entities did not have the money to do anything with their newly acquired property. Hundreds of meetings were held and plans were drawn up for future development of the recreational and educational potential of these public lands.

Simpson's columns provide a form of layman's education on canals and their importance. His first column prompted the *Canton Repository* to editorialize about the validity of canal preservation: "saving the Ohio & Erie Canal as a strip of park land, perhaps all the way from Lake Erie to the Ohio River . . ." His articles frequently feature restoration work on other canals around the country, and mentioned which governmental unit was undertaking the work. There was little uniformity. His last "Along the Towpath" column appeared on March 29, 1970, just before his retirement from the newspaper.

Along the Towpath does not pretend to be a serious work of history, yet it chronicles the efforts to preserve and develop the canal over the years between 1964 and early 1970. Editor Russ Musarra of the *Akron Beacon Journal* selected columns written by Simpson published in the *Canton Repository* for inclusion in the book. Musarra organized the book so that each chapter is a presentation of the most important Simpson "Towpath" columns for that year. Chuck Ayers, an illustrator with the *Akron Beacon Journal*, provided the cover art and smaller graphics interspersed among the text. Design and layout of the book was done by Stephen Paschen of the University of Akron Libraries Archives.

Critics of *Along the Towpath* are quick to decry the absence of either an introduction or several chapters of background on the canal era written by an historian with expertise on the canals of Ohio. This definitely would have enhanced the value of the book, but it also should not be viewed as a fatal flaw. As a journalist, the author had the charge of writing in a manner that would appeal to his readers, while providing them with nuggets of information and, as a columnist, the freedom of urging his readers to take action. It seems to this reviewer that the existence of the Ohio & Erie Canal Corridor is testimony to the vision and the hard work of two very different individuals - Representative Ralph Regula and his press aide Al Simpson.

The author occupies a rather unique position. After his retirement from the *Canton Repository*, Simpson became Congressman Regula's press aide in 1975. In 1974, Congress passed legislation creating the 33,000 acre Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area, which was sponsored in the House by Akron Congressman John Seiberling and in the Senate by Howard Metzenbaum of Cleveland. This area was designated a National Historic Corridor nearly thirty years later in a bill sponsored by Representative Regula.

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