



The Canal Crosses the Passaic
River on an Aqueduct

But the State Assemblymen, in whose hands the fate of the canal rested in 1924, thought otherwise. During the countless hearings that took place, they heard the old canal referred to as "an open sewer" and "a man-made octopus sapping northern New Jersey of its water." And so it was that the old Morris Canal, doomed from its birth, was finally abandoned officially.

The canal is now dead, a ditch dried, its towpaths overgrown with brush and weeds, its locks, planes and bridges obliterated. Only here and there remain shallow stretches of stagnant water.

There are many who remember it in its day of good service when the panting mules tugged and pulled the clumsy barges, when man and beast rested while a spinning water wheel dragged the boat and cargo uphill to the next level, when the air resounded with shouts and cracking whips.

Mules were driven not by lines but by shouted commands. "Gee" meant go to the right, "Haw," left. Those words were and are still used in driving oxen. But another, doubtless of French origin, "petitwhoa," meant, in mule, not to "whoa" at all but to "dig in our toes." This was used when a boat loaded with 70 tons of coal or ore had to be started out of a lock. A too sudden surge or yank would break the towline. This would have meant an outburst of profanity and possibly a beating up with the huge blacksnake whips that the drivers always carried. So the mules soon learned that "petitwhoa" meant just that--"whoa, a little."

When an old mule had outlived his usefulness, he went to his reward. He was led to the nearest canal mule cemetery, knocked over the head with the dull end of an axe and buried in a shallow grave. One of these canal-mule burying grounds is a part of the seventh hole of Rockaway River Golf Course at Denville.

Canal boats had to be steered, otherwise they would run "spang" into the bank as the mules towed them along. The boatman, usually the captain, did the steering while his hand drove the mules.

One of the few pieces of poetry originating on the Morris Canal was sung to the tune of "Climbing Up the Golden Stairs." A verse went something like this:

Old Bill Miller
Ridin' on the tiller
Steering 'round the Browertown Bend;
Old Davy Ross
With a ten dollar hoss
Comin' up the Pompton Plane