

At Delphi, Volunteers show what energy and teamwork can accomplish: a unique network of walking trails and the revitalization of the longest remaining section of the Wabash & Erie Canal. They call it

# CANAL PARK

**T**HE WATER WAS TROPICAL-LAGOON CLEAR, THE SETTING IDYLIC, AND EVEN THE WEATHER WORE ITS BEST DRESS THE DAY WE WALKED THE DRAPER NORTH END TRAIL UP TO FOUNDERS POINT.

It was a setting to be proud of, this serpentine site surrounding what was once the Wabash and Erie Canal, what was and is Delphi's "slice of canal history."

This particular day, it was a history told by Dan McCain, chairman of Delphi Historic Trails and a member of the Indiana State Museum Foundation Board of Directors. McCain is just one of many local residents who form a core of volunteers eager to bring their city's past back to life through a works-in-progress called Delphi Historic Trails and its centerpiece, Canal Park.

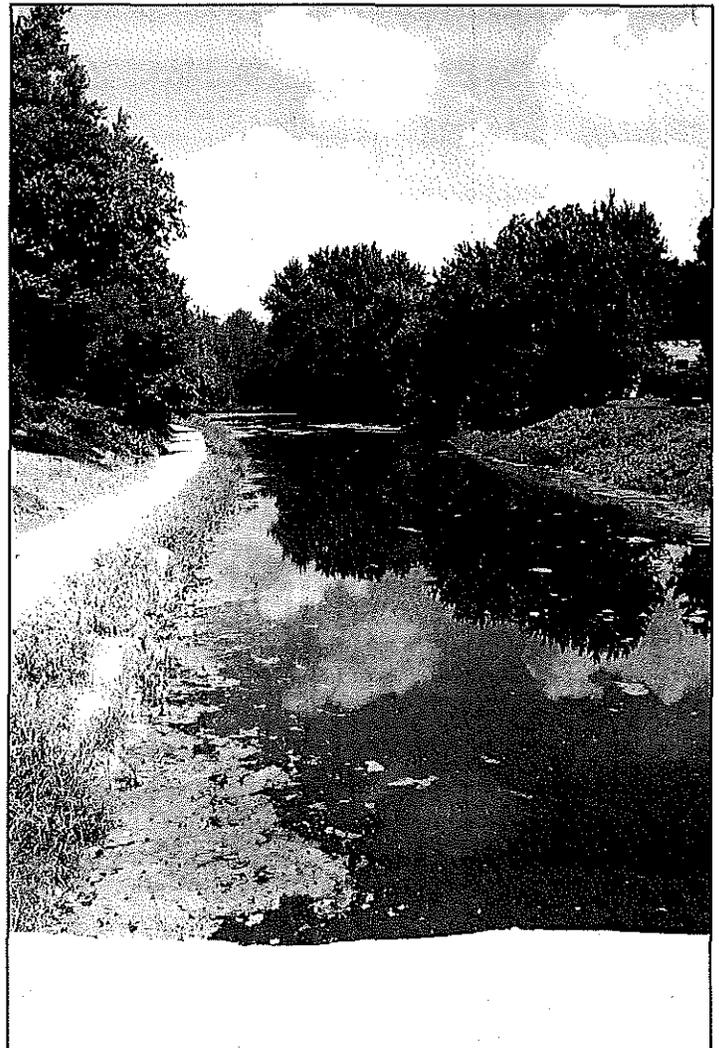
But perhaps McCain's links to this history are stronger than most, since his great-grandfather, Daniel McCain, was general manager of the Delphi Lime Co., an enterprise fed by the canal.

There are, too, other spiritual links to the Wabash and Erie Canal, as McCain remembers his childhood when he would crawl on hands and knees across a railroad trestle that was perhaps 20 feet above the water, "but I was scared; I thought we were a hundred feet in the air."

Such childhood memories bring a warm smile to McCain's face, and are told with glee, although the canal was hardly a Delphi landmark in those days.

"When I grew up here, it was always full of waste," he said as he stood within a couple of rock's throws away from his family home. Even the kids didn't swim in the long-abandoned canal, which was in those days more of a quagmire than a waterway.

"The water was terrible. There was sewage, snakes, rats. It wasn't very attractive," he remembered. "The people here turned their back on it." And why not the canal was decrepit, and after



Delphi's canal, looking from the north end of Canal Park toward Founder's Point.



Dan McCain points out remnants of the lime kilns that were operated by his own ancestors, not far from where he grew up.

all had bankrupted the state. People remembered. "The canal was taboo. It was not a pride of Delphi."

But that was then, and this is now. Canal Park is an oasis, and more people are beginning to learn what McCain has always known that the canal was an integral part of Carroll County.

"In spite of its short history, the Wabash and Erie Canal was a catalyst for Indiana's economic development," McCain said. He understands what the canal brought to the Delphi area when it was constructed here from 1838 to 1840, and he understands what the area lost when the canal was closed in 1875.

McCain – who retired as an agronomist with the U.S. Soil Conservation Service so he could spend more time on the project – is hardly the first to embrace the canal. He is, in fact, part of what he called "the second generation of volunteers." The credit, he said, goes to the "founders," people who in 1971 created the Carroll County Wabash and Erie Canal, Inc., and the same people who are honored by Founders Point. "Most of them are no longer with us," McCain said, "but they're the ones who had the guts to stick it out when nobody else saw their vision."

**A** VISION, INDEED. WHAT HAS emerged in this small Hoosier county seat community is a Brigadoon of greenways and trails. Seven miles of trails, in fact, much of it alongside the canal itself, and over 100 acres of land.

The community effort truly began in 1973 with a gift of rocky land from the

local Peters Revington furniture factory. The next several years was spent securing easements, with real change beginning to come into focus by 1989.

McCain remembers when a local resident, Lloyd VanScoy, donated a one-mile strip of land near Deer Creek that was once part of the canal's towpath. That October, VanScoy attended the trail's dedication ceremony, and was apparently impressed. "At the time," McCain said, "we didn't know what a friend we had made."

Indeed. When VanScoy died, he left 26 acres to the Carroll County Wabash and Erie Canal, Inc., plus \$100,000. The land and money transformed the canal effort. "Then we had something we could work with," McCain said. "Up until then, it was a nickel-and-dime deal."

VanScoy's name now adorns the tow-path trail that runs from U.S. 421 south to Sunset Point, the southernmost leg of the trail system, just as the northernmost trail is dedicated to Bill and Pat Draper, who are tireless volunteers. There are other such tributes, but many more volunteers who have made this sizable project a success in a community of just 2,500 people.

"Volunteers are the real strength of this project," McCain said, looking at well-kept documentation revealing that 178 volunteers have put in over 4,600 hours in the last year and a half alone. Many of those folks have logged hundreds of hours.

"We have many creative people," he said. And while he knows that coordina-



**MOST** of the Founders, the folks who got the Canal Park project rolling, are no longer with us, Dan McCain said, "but they're the ones who had the guts to stick it out when nobody else saw their vision."



The development of Delphi's Canal Park stands as a tribute to the community's volunteer spirit and creativity.

tion of effort hasn't always been the movement's strength, he also knows that the eager volunteers "have created a synergy" that has made the vision a reality.

While work may occur at any time, much of the effort is focused on "Third Saturdays," which are well-organized work days, weather permitting. In April of each year, the effort also becomes an Earth Day event that attracts many Scouts, 4-H'ers and others.

About five miles of the seven-mile trail system are finished. "But we have every linear foot platted," McCain said, "and we've not had to buy one foot. Adjacent owners gave us back the towpath, and others gave us creek frontage or abandoned rail right-of-way."

Industry, too, has jumped on board. Delphi Limestone Co., now owned by U.S. Aggregates, provides free stone, plus land and pipe, and also loaned some pumping equipment to the project. McCain gives credit, too, to Delphi Mayor Sam Deiwert, who has backed the project wholeheartedly, including adopting a canal-



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based logo for the city.

McCain knows the appropriateness of that action.

"The canals have a social story to tell," he said. "It helps you understand the building of Indiana. A lot of our rural areas – Delphi, for example – grew to prominence because of the canal."

**D**ELPHI, INDEED, WAS A KEY ELEMENT in the 468-mile Wabash and Erie Canal, the world's second-longest canal, partly because the community lies midway between the canal's endpoints at Toledo and Evansville.

A major work camp was located at Sunset Point, where Deer Creek converges with the Wabash River, and where from 300 to 600 Irish immigrant workers were housed in a shantytown that archeologists are only now beginning to understand. But those workers didn't spend the bulk of their time digging a canal here because the glaciers of an ancient age had already done much of their work for them. Instead, they were building a lock and dam to convey the boats on to Lafayette.

With a natural sluice known as "the bayou of Delphi" through

which the canal water could flow, most of the labor went into constructing two dams, one just north of Founders Point at Pittsburg to create the Lake of the Wabash, and the other at Sunset Point on Deer Creek. Backwater from those lakes provided the water for the canal itself.

During its heyday, Delphi was a busy place, indeed. At times, boats were backed up for a mile waiting to pass through the canal's only lock through the Delphi segment, a wooden crib lock located along the VanScoy Towpath Trail.

The canal supported the six high lime kilns that were a huge part of the lives of McCain's forebears, the slaked lime being used for plaster, mortar and whitening products. Shipping by canal opened up markets as far away as New York City and south via river steamer beyond Evansville. Water from the canal also supported two large paper mills via a millrace. And while lime, now processed as crushed stone, is still a major enterprise in Delphi, the paper mills were scuttled by an 1881 incident when a dam across the Wabash River at Pittsburg was dynamited by group of vigilantes because it flooded cropland. The Deer Creek dam had earlier collapsed in 1872, cutting off mill water used by rival businesses downstream at Lafayette.

The Wabash and Erie Canal, of course, was already history by the time of that colorful incident, following what had been halcyon days for not only Delphi but its cross-river rival town.

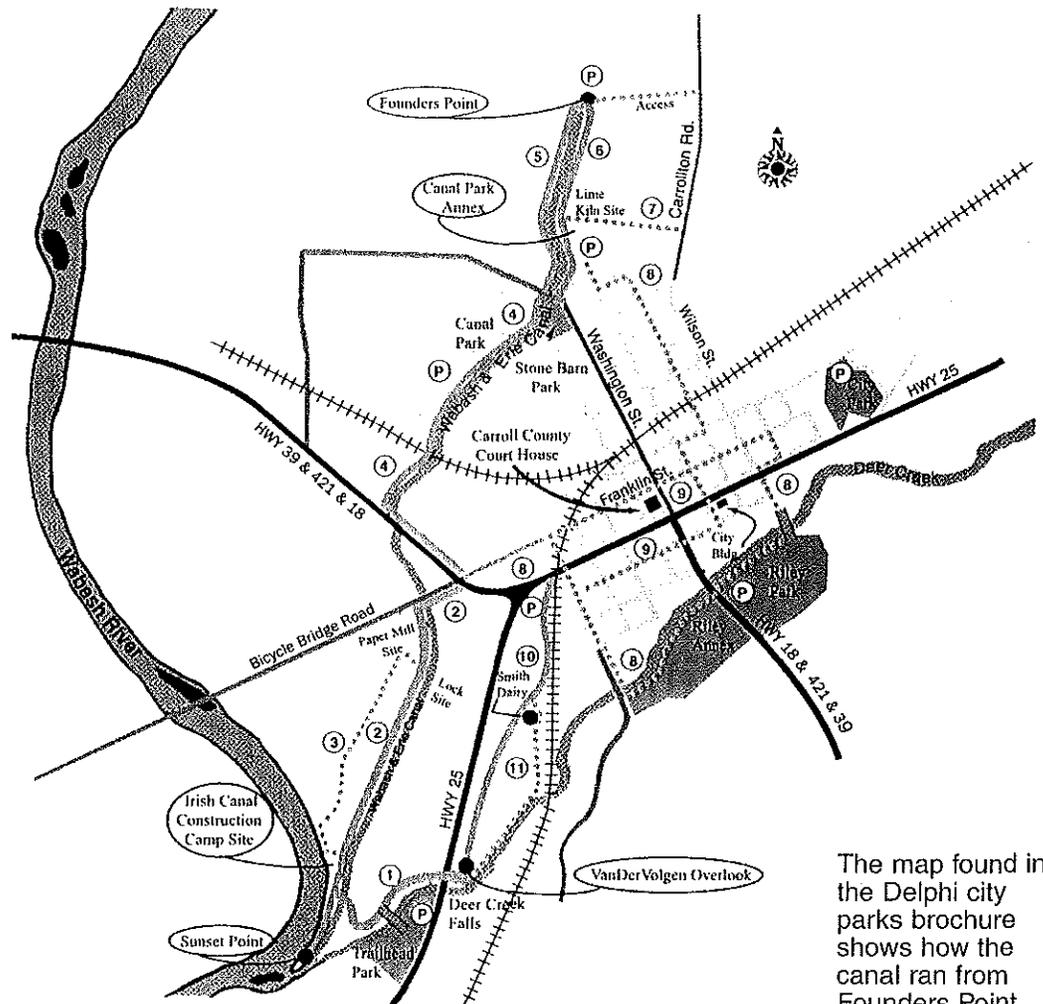
"Pittsburg enjoyed a rather thriving moment," McCain said. "That community had a lot of promise." Such as the memorable day when a steamboat reached Pittsburg, moving upriver through a lock in the dam that records show was used only that one time – apparently just so folks upriver could claim that the river was navigable above the Wabash lake. Conversely, canal boats crossed the Wabash regularly, about five miles above Pittsburg because of the still water created by the lake.

**S**UCH LOCAL HISTORY IS ONLY BEGINNING TO resurface, thanks to the ongoing efforts of Carroll County Wabash and Erie Canal, Inc. But thanks also go to a group of Purdue University horticultural landscape students, who first broached the idea of a trails system linked to the canal and its towpaths.

That idea was the genesis for Delphi Heritage Trails, which ultimately became an official section of the Wabash Heritage Corridor Trails. The trails have, in turn, nurtured Canal Park, which now serves as home for several relocated historic structures, including the two-story Reed Case House. Case was the construction superintendent for the canal, and an astute businessman in his own right.

The house dates to 1844, and now houses period furniture from McCain's own family, as well as from the related Harley and Hubbard families, who were also involved in the lime industry.

Canal Park also serves as home to two transplanted cabins



The map found in the Delphi city parks brochure shows how the canal ran from Founders Point (top) to the Wabash River at Sunset Point (bottom). The circled numbers mark the 11 trails, bearing such names as Underhill Towpath, Interurban Trail and Happy Jack's Loop.

which also serve as museums. One of them is an 1860 log structure which housed the Bowen Canal Store and Inn.

But McCain and his fellow volunteers hope to take the next step toward full interpretation when they construct several new buildings in Canal Park, an Interpretive and Visitors Center Building, a Community Building and another shop perhaps depicting the Delphi Wagon

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# DELPHI

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Works.

The interpretive center would feature, perhaps, a diorama to explain the flow system of the Delphi stretch of the Wabash and Erie Canal, plus exhibits pointing out the importance of the dams, locks lime kilns, paper mills and the canal construction camp.

McCain envisions the new structures being modeled after a canal-era warehouse, or perhaps a store or prominent Delphi building of that period. "We're looking for how much building we can get for the dollars."

The project got a major boost from the Lilly Endowment, which came through with a \$220,000 grant. Carroll County Wabash and Erie Canal has also recently received a \$100,000 grant from the Department of Natural Resources. The fluid bank account created by

those funds and money from previous grants and sizable gifts poses a unique problem for the volunteer organization.

"It's a great big chunk of extra money," McCain said, pointing out that the group has set aside a myriad of plans for "someday." "Well, someday is now."

To ensure the best decision-making possible, the organization will conduct an intensive planning process this fall, with an offer of facilitation services by a National Park Service official.

**MEMBERS** of the Carroll County Wabash and Erie Canal, and for Delphi Historic Trails have been planning for "someday." Well, Dan McCain points out, "Someday is now."

**A**NOTHER CHALLENGE AWAITS this fall: the relocation of Camden iron bridge, probably the oldest standing iron bridge in Indiana. It now sits about 10 miles away on a recently abandoned road, but with good fortune should soon reside over the canal on the same spot where McCain used to crawl over the old railroad trestle.

There is historical precedent. The Camden bridge will be situated about a thousand feet north of old Pittsburg Road (now North Washington Street), where the bridge's twin used to be before being replaced with a stone arch bridge earlier this century.

If the anticipated money from the state's Hometown Indiana program is approved, the bridge will be moved by October. And it would represent the ongoing cooperation by such organizations as the Wabash River Heritage Corridor Commission, the Department of Natural Resources, the Delphi City Park Board and the National Park Service.

Such a team effort has been integral to the growth of the Delphi dream. That cooperation has extended to the ownership of the land itself. The Chamber of

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Commerce, when it discovered that it actually owned part of the abandoned canal, readily gave the property to Carroll County Wabash and Erie Canal, Inc. Later, when the volunteer canal developers discovered that grants were available, but only to public entities, deeded the land to the City of Delphi for use as part of the grant match.

Such continued cooperation will be essential as the volunteers begin to focus on the next steps.

Today, Canal Park is idle most of the time – open for strolling but nothing more. Some day, McCain hopes the park will be bustling with visitors, school groups and those who need a unique meeting place or wedding site.

Another key feature could even be an operating full-size canal boat.

“That’s a goal, down the road,” he said, “but after other things have to happen first.”

A canal boat – which won’t come cheap, by the way – would draw people, requiring regular operating hours, trained interpreters, better and more accessible restrooms.

And perhaps even an office, which the group doesn’t have. No office, not even a part-time staff – a limitation which makes the collective achievement even more amazing.

One of the more immediate goals of the

group is to place two kiosks at entrances to the trails and informational signs along the system. Trail-side displays will highlight the lime kilns, while another the paper mills, lock and Irish construction camp site.

Yet another display will put the construction of the canal in perspective: “A challenging task. Imagine digging a trench 40 feet wide, four feet deep and 468 miles long. Using only mule-powered scoops and hand tools, workers dug through a wilderness.”

**T**ODAY, A CENTURY AND A HALF later, the people of Delphi may be matching that achievement.

And this particular day, McCain was speaking for hundreds of other people when he stood at Founders Point, as he looked around at the pastoral site which not long ago showed 125 years of neglect, and as he thought of the myriad of problems – the algae, the sinkholes, the varmints, the cattails – that the volunteers have faced bringing the canal back to pristine life.

“This,” McCain said, giving Founders Point a loving look, “is a dream come true.”

Brooks is editor of *Hoosierisms Quarterly*.

## Canal program at ISM

**CANAL HISTORIAN** Bob Schmidt will be on hand at the Indiana State Museum on Saturday, Nov. 21, for a showing of his video, “Canals of Indiana.”

The event, sponsored by the Indiana State Museum Foundation, will also include a question-and-answer session.

The hour-long event begins at 2 p.m. in the Auditorium. A reception will be conducted after the session. ■

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