

# My Life on the Erie Canal

by  
Sharon Behnke

OK, this is just a week in my life on the Erie Canal, but it was a tour that had significance in many stages of my life. Participating in the New York Parks and Trails "Bicycling the Erie Canal" was an event I had been considering for several years. Many of my cycling friends had done it in past years. It was not for the faint of heart since it was 400 miles in 8 days with no day of rest along the way; averaging 50 miles a day.

It had been more than ten years since my last long distance cycling accomplishment, completing a century ride or two. I definitely needed to work up to this event by riding with the 5BBC; starting with a few easy 20-30 mile day trips, then tackling a few 40-50 mile ones. Once I registered for the ride, I knew there was no turning back. I was on a mission. Little did I think my mission involved revisiting my past.

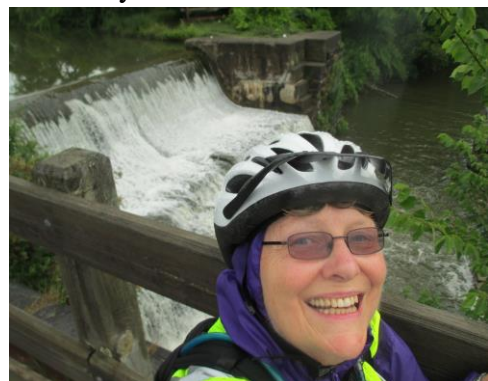


Yes, I wasn't always a girl from da Bronx, I grew up in upstate New York. However, my passion for cycling didn't really take off until I relocated to the City. It was the way I learned my way around the city and found a circle of friends who welcomed me into the two-wheeled fold. It was truly eye-opening to discover the Erie Canal the same way. In spite of growing up, living and working only a stone's throw from the canal for 50 years, I was amazed at the ease with which I could cycle from Buffalo to Albany with barely an hour on any given day sharing the road with automobiles.

But I promised a story of my life on the Erie Canal. So here it is: I was born on June 6, 1947, in North Tonawanda, New York; the first town we cycled through on Day One. I honestly don't remember much about that town since my parents packed us up, sold our house and bought a trailer and hit the road when my sister and I were about 2 & 3 yrs old.



Day Two, we cycled in the rain halfway from Medina to Pittsford, just South of Rochester. A friend I hadn't seen in 25 years but reconnected with on Facebook came to our campsite for a visit.





Day Three, we cycled from Pittsford to Seneca Falls. This was an extremely reminiscent segment of the tour. I grew up in Seneca Falls from 1950 to 1965, excluding a short stretch in Chittenango (but more about that later). As I approached Seneca Falls by bicycle, I kept thinking, I know where I am; I used to

bike here as a kid; but I was surprised how little I knew of the back roads into town. I have a brother and sister still living there. Our campground was at Mynderse Academy that night where I graduated high school in 1965. It is also the place where one of my brothers, Duncan Jensen, earned fame for being on a winning basketball team. I got to spend that night at another brother's house. It was a pleasure to see my brother, Stewart Jensen, and his family since I was going to miss the Jensen family reunion that week because of this tour.



Day Four, we cycled through Jordan-Elbridge where my sister lived for a few years. I made it a point to visit the local museum and again appreciated the hidden wonder of the Erie Canalway that wended through town. Day Four concluded in Syracuse, where I started my 40 year career as a New York State employee, working for the Department of Labor, continued with various state offices and finally with the Dept of Correctional Services from 1965 to 1997. (It was in '97 that I relocated to the Bronx and continued working for the State until 2005.)

We camped at Burnet Park in Syracuse adjacent to the Rosamond Gifford Zoo. My cousin, Sue Wanner, paid me a visit at our campground and I showed her around my "mobile" home. Before leaving Syracuse, we stopped at the Canal Museum downtown. I am ashamed to admit, it was the first time I had visited. It is a marvelous museum. This marked the halfway point in the tour.



Day Five, we passed through the little hamlet of Chittenango, where I lived with my family for two

glorious years, 1960-1961. It was the era of discovery for a 13 year old, need I say more? At 20 miles in, we had a rest stop at the Chittenango Landing Canal Boat Museum. At mile 27, we stopped for lunch in Canastota where we were graciously invited to tour their modest Canal Town Museum on Canal Street. There, behind the counter, was a familiar face, my daughter's former mother-in-law. Total 49.2 miles from Syracuse to Rome.

Day Six, we cycled 62.3 miles from Rome to Canajoharie. Not a lot of extra touring done on this day, but had a great lunch in Ilion. I met a real celebrity along the canal; his



name was Peter Dudfield and he was on a real mission to raise money for charity; a native of England, he was nearing the end of his epic cycling trip across several continents. See

<http://peterpedals.wordpress.com/>

Day Seven, Canajoharie to Niskayuna. I texted my old boss from Lincoln Correctional Facility when I arrived at our campsite because I knew he lived in town. This was another person for whom Facebook made it possible to reconnect. He totally surprised me by finding me among the 500+

campers that evening!



Day Eight was a short 27.6 mile day; arriving in Albany before 12:30pm. I loved the part where we cycled under the twin bridges that take you over the Hudson River on the Northway, because I drive that route every time I go visit my daughters in Glens Falls.

My daughters and their respective children were on hand to congratulate me on my arrival at the finish line for a rewarding trip through history.

