

## *Hennepin Canal Parkway State Park*

# Unlocking the Secrets of this State Treasure



Canoes and kayaks are a common site along the Hennepin Canal, where barges once passed between the Great Lakes and the Mississippi River.

By Chris Linden, editorial assistant

**C**hances are, you haven't heard of the Hennepin Canal – at least, not as an Illinois state park.

It's neither the largest in Illinois, nor the most visited. For most of its life, this waterway in northwest Illinois has remained in the shadows, one of those best-kept secrets that locals know of and tourists enjoy discovering.

At 96 miles, this park is among the longest in the state, stretching across five counties between the Illinois and Rock rivers. No longer a functioning canal, the waterway is a hotspot for year-round recreation and historical tourism. More than a million visitors each year take in the sights, sounds and adventures at this unique, man-made canal.

"It's slow, it's quiet, with no motor boats passing you by because only boats up to 10 horsepower are allowed," says Cathy Brunner, director of Rock Falls Tourism. "It's serene, and how you enjoy the canal depends on what you like. Almost anybody can find something they like here."

Brunner is well aware of the treasures within the Hennepin. From Rock Falls, visitors find easy access to the canal and its waterside trails. A feeder canal brings water from the Rock River

to the towns of Mineral and Sheffield, where it flows into the main waterway. Visitors can launch their boats or begin their trail adventures at the point where the feeder meets the Rock River.

"You can do just about anything on this trail that you like – biking, boating, fishing, snowmobiling, cross-country skiing – you name it," says Steve Moser, retired superintendent of the park. Moser spent 28 years overseeing operations along the canal and improving recreational opportunities. "We've even seen dog sledding. We've seen a woman bring her dogs and go mushing on the trail."

Boaters find numerous launches throughout the canal. Although its 33 locks are no longer used, Hennepin's waterways provide plenty of space for boating and fishing. Those traveling by canoe or kayak often traverse the waterway's longer sections and can portage their way around the locks.

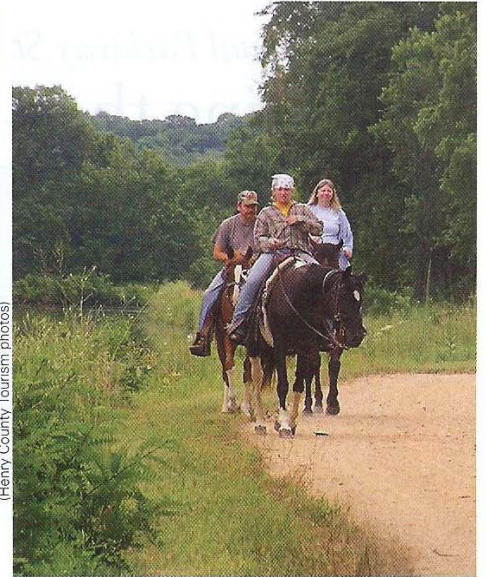
The canal's towpath, once used in the barge moving process, now serves as an excellent hiking, biking and equestrian trail. Much of it is paved with an oil and chip surface, similar to the pavement on remote country roads. The rest of the trail is a hard, compressed gravel surface.







The Hennepin boasts some 96 miles of waterways and waterside trails that make it an ideal spot for boating, fishing, horseback riding and bicycling.



(Henry County Tourism photos)

Because of the canal's length, visitors tend to travel individual sections at a time. The scenery varies from lock to lock, as the ground rises, falls and passes through dense forests and wide-open prairies. Dave Hahne, assistant superintendent, has spent 30 years traveling around the canal's many sections. He enjoys not only the scenery but also the unique architecture of the waterway.

"I really appreciate all the areas of the canal," says Hahne. "The feeder is much higher than the ground, and in some areas, you're actually higher. Even as you go west, there are sections where you're above ground. I try not to take any of it for granted."

Along with recreation lovers, the Hennepin attracts many history buffs, who come to learn about its past life as a transportation network. The canal once played an important role in the westward expansion of the nation.

The entire canal is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Built during the 1890s, the Hennepin was designed as a shortcut between the Illinois and Mississippi rivers, a solid water route from the Great Lakes to the Mississippi. Talk of its building circulated for some 60 years before Congress authorized the funding, selected a route and started construction.

Extreme elevation changes presented unique challenges to the canal's engineers. Between Mineral and Bureau, where the Hennepin meets the Illinois River, the land rises 196 feet. In order to get boats through the elevation rise, water needed to flow uphill. Workers built 21 locks between the two counties; another 12 follow the descent between Mineral and Coloma, where the canal meets the Rock River near the Mississippi River.

This was the first American canal built with concrete rather than stone cut facings, common to earlier canals. Some of the same construction and engineering techniques used on the



(Jack Hughes photo)

Hennepin later influenced construction of the Panama Canal.

"What's there today is a glimpse of what used to be," says Hahne. "We're now 103 years old, but the construction started in 1890. Things have changed a lot over time, and no matter where you go, it's a glimpse of how things used to be."

Despite its innovations, the canal never lived up to its potential. When it opened in 1907, it was too narrow and shallow for the newer, bigger barges on the water. Also, conditions were deteriorating at its sister canal, the Illinois & Michigan, which connected cargo traffic between the Great Lakes and the Hennepin. In addition, new forms of transportation were draining business from water transit routes. By 1951, when it finally was closed to cargo traffic, the canal had fallen into disrepair, its original purpose obsolete.

Today, the route contains only shadows of its early life. The locks are closed and only the stone and concrete foundations of





This footbridge in Rock Falls, Ill., is one of almost 90 access points for visitors at the canal, who come year-round for hiking and other adventures.

its historic buildings remain. After closing the canal, officials debated whether to drain it or repair it for recreation. In 1970, the Federal government transferred the land to the State of Illinois, which gave it a new life as a state park. After 70 years of operation, it was no secret to local residents that a great opportunity existed in their own backyards.

"Local people didn't want to lose the resource," says Moser, the former superintendent. "Of course, they already fished in it, went swimming in it and boated around it, so it was a recreational resource even before it opened as a recreation area."

The canal has undergone continual improvements since becoming a state park. Of the 33 locks, 32 are still visible. Five have been restored to working order, though they're not used.

Sections of the bike path were paved a few years ago, and the trail now connects to the Grand Illinois Trail, a 500-mile network of bike trails across Northern Illinois.

The canal offers numerous access points from end to end, throughout the small communities that border it and the many bridges that crisscross it. Weekend travelers find accommodations at campgrounds within the park and hotels in the adjacent communities.

"You have 96 consecutive miles of state park in which to pursue a number of recreational things," says Moser. "We have over 85 access points along the trail and most have parking, so even if you drive to one place and the parking is full, you can drive down the road to another place and there might not be any cars there."

One of the more popular entry points is near locks 21 and 22, where the feeder canal meets the main line. It has some of the most spacious campgrounds and lies in the middle of the canal. It's also close to the Sheffield-area visitors' center, another popular starting point. The visitor's center contains artifacts and information about the canal, including some of the handmade tools used to build it, exhibits of the plant and animal life along the waterway and even models of an aqueduct and a lock with a boat going through.

It also offers trail information and sits inside a 400-acre park complete with a five-mile hiking path and access to the canal trails.

The Rock Falls area also offers a convenient starting point. The canal bisects the town and runs past several major roads and parks. Its harbors along the canal and the adjacent Rock River fill up fast on a nice day, and there's talk of connecting local bike trails to the canal's waterway path.

Between Rock Falls and neighboring Sterling, visitors find many accommodations while enjoying the canal's recreational opportunities.

The Hennepin is an obvious resource for locals, who have enjoyed it for several generations. Its rich history and abundant recreational opportunities are just now becoming known among vacationers from Chicago and beyond, says Hahne. Much like its life as a cargo network, the Hennepin's true potential feels strangely untapped – for now, at least.

"I wish I knew why it was such a well-kept secret," says Hahne. "So many local people have grown up with it, and they have a great appreciation for it. I'm not sure why it's such a secret, but it's a great asset for this community." ■



Most of the Hennepin's 33 locks are no longer operational, and one is submerged. Five of those have been restored to working order, but they are not used.