

LEHIGH CANAL¹

In the northeastern part of Pennsylvania lies the Lehigh River. It flows from its head waters in the Pocono's south until it meets the Delaware River at its confluence at Easton, Pennsylvania. Bypassing the Hudson River Valley and New York City the Delaware flows south into the Delaware Bay at Philadelphia.

The rain drop which falls on a mountain slope the Lehigh River valley works its way down the slope and into the Lehigh River. It passes Stoddardsville and White Haven. As little streams pour their excess rain drops into the Lehigh, the river gains volume and strength as it passes Mauch Chaunk, now named Jim Thorpe after the famed olympic athlete, and eventually flows into the Delaware at Easton. There the waters of the Lehigh combine with those of the Delaware to continue their trek down river to Philadelphia. When the waters of the Lehigh and Delaware are high the brackish tidal waters at Philadelphia are pushed out into the bay. When the waters of the Delaware and Lehigh are low the waters of the bay intrude up the lower portion of the Delaware.

The upper reaches of the Lehigh River are fairly remote, even today. Between White Haven and Jim Thorpe the river tumbles 600 feet in twenty-six miles or approximately thirty feet per mile along much of this stretch. The river descends into a canyon which rises over a hundred feet to the rim on either side. For twenty-six miles there is little sign of civilization except for an active railroad along the one shore and an inactive railroad along the other shore.

In the early 1970s whitewater sports were becoming popular in this country. High technology created first aluminum canoes which replace wood the main stay wood and canvas canoes in the 1940s. The rapids on the Lehigh became a challenge for the growing sport of whitewater canoeing. By the early 70s fiberglass technology and the import of kayaks from Europe created new boats to navigate the Lehigh. At the same time, rafting was becoming popular and new rafting businesses were springing up on dozens of rivers, including the Lehigh. Its remote canyon along with its close proximity to New York City, Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. made the Lehigh an attractive river for commercial rafting.

Initially raft trips were run between White Haven and Rockport, about ten miles downstream of White Haven. With its steep canyon walls, Rockport was about the only practical place to exit the entire river between White Haven and Jim Thorpe. As the rafting business increased it was only a matter of time before rafting would invade the gorge between Rockport and White Haven.

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At that time we lived in the Poconos about thirty miles from both the put-in at White Haven and take-out at Jim Thorpe. Living close by, raft guiding became a convenient way of earning extra money on the weekends. In a way, to get paid for your leisure time. Being fairly competent in canoeing, I was hired as a trip leader on my first outing as a raft guide.

At that time we could pump eighty rafts down the river a day. With eight people in a raft this was 640 people down the river a day, over a thousand people a weekend. Logistically, this became an immense effort of choreographing trucks, guides, rafts and rafters. Wave after wave, the trips descended the river, full of rafters seeking a day's adventure on the whitewater wilderness offered by the Lehigh. Counting the other rafting companies operating on the Lehigh, large numbers of people experience the delights rafting the Lehigh gorge each year.

One of the trip leaders duties was to give a pre-trip talk before the trip. There was a subtle competition present since all the other guides were present to listen to and rate the talks.

An old railroad bed provided a convenient flat spot for inflating the rafts. Small white birch trees grew everywhere in gravel ballast of the abandoned roadbed. Occasionally, a railroad tie could still be found, almost rotted through. The ground dropped steeply down into the river. Its flow created a constant rush in the background.

Two stake body trucks partially loaded with rafts were parked next to the abandoned right-of-way. Two men on each truck were busy filling the chambers in the rafts with air. They turned the valves and with blowers that looked like large hair dryers, they filled the chambers in the raft one by one. Quickly closing the valves they moved to the next chamber. The purr of the electric generator added to the noise of the river in the background. When the raft's five chambers were filled they tossed the raft to the ground and started the process all over again.

Other raft guides moved eight of the rafts into a grouping for the next trip. Additional rafts were stacked in neat piles five to six rafts high for the next trips to arrive. Several guides came along placing paddles and bailers into the rafts. In between the activity there was ample time for the guides to discuss the day's events.

Shortly a school bus would pull up to the site. Its doors would open and out would come another group of rafters. Dressed in black wet suits, orange lifejackets, and helmets they scurried to find a raft. Much like a group of kids in the school yard they sorted themselves into groups. Eight to a raft, they sat in their rafts on this river of gravel gibbering to each other and waiting for further instructions.

"I am your trip leader and these are your raft guides today....," began the trip leader as he introduced each of the guides and said something funny about them. Next, he usually outlined some basic safety rules and procedures for the trip.

"This is a paddle." He held up a paddle for all to see. "You hold it this way," he continued.

"The raft is quite maneuverable. This is how you use it. If you stroke this way the raft will move to the right, and if you stroke this way, it will move to the left."

"This is the bailer." He leaned over the raft to demonstrate how to bail the raft. "It can be used to bail water out of the raft, or you can use it to get your friends wet."

This was one of the punch lines. The trip leader carefully built up to it in his talk because he knew that he would get a roaring cheer from the crowd. After about fifteen to twenty seconds of laughter and of people getting each other wet with their bailers while sitting on dry land the group again became manageable.

A couple more jokes and a few pointers and the group was ready to go. "If there are no further questions, then let's go rafting." The group picked up their rafts, carried them to the river and began their trip.

Each trip was different and each trip took on a personality of its own. With their incessant water battles, some groups could have bailed the river out of its banks. A constant water battle ensued among these rafters. It is a wonder that anyone saw anything other than water in their faces. Others simply sat back and enjoyed the scenery.

No sooner than the first rapids the rafts quickly passed a large wall made of cut limestone standing over thirty feet high and a hundred feet long. With the thrill of the first rapids it was easy to become immersed in the whitewater adventure and miss the wall. However, as the trip progresses and everyone settles in, similar buttresses of imposing size are passed by without mention as though they didn't exist.

And yet, for every person on every trip down this river the significance of these buttresses to the river and to the lives of those in the rafts was missed. Not to diminish the importance of splashing each other with water from the bailers, because for many that is all that was important for them on the trip. However, to overlook the important learning experience for others on the trip was to deny many a beneficial experience in the outdoors.

Coal from the Lehigh Canal was transported down river to Philadelphia where it was sold for fuel. At Easton, one-quarter of the coal entered the Morris Canal on its destination to Newark, New Jersey and New York City. By 1855 the Lehigh Canal carried 1,276,000 tons of coal. With one boat holding between 60 to 70 tons of coal, a lot of boats made a lot of trips carrying coal on this canal. Other commodities traveled the canal. By 1857 as iron industries became established in the Lehigh and Delaware valleys, the volume of iron and iron ore reached 184,000 ton a year. By 1859 lumber reached 73,000 ton a year.

Yet few of the rafters from Philadelphia realize the importance of the canal in making Philadelphia one of the major ports of entry on the east coast. Few of those from New York City realize the importance which the Erie Canal in upper New York state played in making New York City the major port of entry on the east coast. Few of these rafters realize the immense competition and rivalry between these cities for commerce. These rivers were the arteries of a transportation network which fed raw materials into the cities. The number of boats traveling the river provide a pulse which determined the health of the city. Yet few of the rafters appreciate how much their current livelihood today is built upon the foundations of the old locks which now lay in ruins. They are more interested in splashing each other with water.

Yet, here on the shores of the Lehigh River stands the last vestiges of the locks used on the middle section of the Lehigh Canal. Completed in 1838 they represented a technological feat for their time. Up until then, conventional locks had a lift of no more than 10 feet. These locks had a lift of thirty feet. Yet, the engineering creativity that went into these locks goes without mention as rafters splash water on each other in the shadows created by their imposing buttresses. The skilled workmanship of the stone craftsmen who labored to build these locks to specifications which have stood the test of numerous ravaging floods in this valley go unappreciated by many eyes of those seeking to see beauty in their outdoor adventure.

There is nothing wrong with splashing each other with water on a raft trip. These people are here to have fun and to enjoy themselves. Water battles can be immense fun for the rafters. It provides a source of diversion on the longer flat sections of the river. However, not to provide these rafters with more than an amusement park ride is equivalent to moral bankruptcy in the use of our outdoor resources.

"On your trip today, you will see some large stone buttresses along the river," continued the trip leader to the rafters in his introductory talk, just covering the multiple uses of a bailer. "These are part of the Lehigh Canal which has an interesting and rich history. I will point these features out to you on our trip and will be happy to those of you who are interested more about this canal."

"Also, the twenty-six mile gorge is being studied for inclusion in the Wild and Scenic River System," added the trip leader. "Whatever your feelings on this are, I hope that you will become involved in the protection of this wild area."

In his own small way, this trip leader provided rafters with additional benefit from their trip. He increased its value. His two simple statements opened the door for numerous questions and dialogues on the river. Numerous rafters opened this door increasing their knowledge and appreciation. The learning was unobtrusive. The subtlety of its delivery made it fun and enjoyable. The learning tied the lives of these people intimately with the river. The interactive effects of the outdoor world of the Lehigh river was now linked to their home environment in the city. In his own small way, he had engineered this trip into the backcountry to build receptivity into the still unlovely human mind. To do otherwise would be to engineer a sterile experience.