

THE SAGA OF THE SOO CANAL

BY STEWART H. HOLBROOK

Of all the forgotten great stories of American industrial enterprise, that of Charles T. Harvey and the Soo Canal is perhaps the most obscure, just as it was one of the most important events of our mid-nineteenth century history. Harvey was the young traveling man for weighing scales who dreamed up the Soo Canal and then dug it in a rousing, slam-bang epic that historians have ignored, or never heard of. More than the Erie Canal, more than the Panama, the one mile of flinty ditch between Lakes Superior and Huron has changed the United States and affected its people.

Harvey had never been exposed to an engineering education or engineering experience. In 1852, aged twenty-one, he was at Sault Ste. Marie where he had been sent by his employers, the Fairbanks Scales Company of St. Johnsbury, Vermont, to establish agencies for their products in backwoods Michigan. Typhoid laid Harvey low, and while recovering from the attack he ranged west across Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Here he was amazed at what he saw. Iron ore in great quantities had been discovered there in 1844. There were hills of it, mountains of it — wonderful black ore. A great deal of it had al-

ready been dug by optimistic men, but it still lay in piles on top of the ground for there was no way to get it down the lakes to the rising industrial centers of Ohio, Pennsylvania and New York.

Young Harvey also saw the great copper deposits, many of them in pure form, in Michigan's Keweenaw country; like the iron, they were only waiting means to get them out where they could be used. The iron and the copper fascinated Harvey. Here was ore without end, but how to get it to the furnaces and the mills down on Lake Erie? They were a thousand miles off. There were no railroads, nor likely to be any for years. There was water, sure enough, *sailing* water, as far as Sault Ste. Marie, and sailing water beyond Sault Ste. Marie. But at the Sault — the Soo — there were only rapids, the swift, shallow waters of the St. Mary's River that connected Superior with Huron. Harvey mused for days while his lively imagination conjured up a canal around the dangerous rapids, which fell nineteen feet in a mile — a canal with locks, big locks, that could raise and lower the largest boat to sail the lakes.

Even before the Revolution men talked of a canal there, and by 1798

the Northwest Company of fur traders and rum-sellers had made a crude ditch for their canoe fleets; but this had long since ceased to be of any use, and no one had attempted a canal to carry steamboats around the rapids.

Harvey, the drummer, the salesman, envisioned such a canal. He saw a thousand miles of fine waterway, merely by making one mile of canal at the Soo — a waterway clear from the western end of Lake Superior to the Atlantic Ocean. It was a wonderful dream, but most men of the day considered it a fantastically foolish one. Michigan had wanted such a canal for a long time, but the Federal government, which had a reservation called Fort Brady at the Soo, refused to permit the building of a canal.

Young Harvey returned to Vermont and imparted his idea and some of his fire to his employers, the Messrs. Fairbanks, as hard-headed a crowd of Yankees as could be found. They were interested. They also had powerful friends in New York and Washington. Presently the matter was put before Congress again, and this time in spite of the rabid opposition of Henry Clay, Federal consent for a canal was given. "Why, it is," said that great man, referring to need of a canal, "it is a project beyond the remotest settlement of the United States, if not the moon." Clay didn't get around so much as Charles Harvey.

Congress finally voted a land-grant to aid in construction. And Harvey, with the backing of the Fairbanks family and their friends, undertook

the job of organizing a company to build the canal, and of directing the work as well. On June 1, 1853, when he was almost twenty-three years old, Harvey arrived at the Soo with a shipload of supplies and four hundred men he had inveigled into the adventure beyond the moon. "We will start digging here and now," he said, as he stepped hard on the top-side of a Number Two shovel to turn the first spade of earth.

II

Although the course was to be little more than a mile, the job was a titanic one in its day, for several reasons. Harvey's capitalist backers were all in New York or New England; at least six weeks were required for an exchange of letters. The nearest telegraph station was in Detroit, 450 miles away. The nearest machine shop of any description was on Saginaw Bay, half as far. Every stick of blasting powder must come from Delaware, a good thousand miles. Stone for the canal's sides had to be quarried near Malden, Ontario. And wrought iron by the hundred thousand tons had to come from 'way down in Pennsylvania.

The region around the Soo, it should be remembered, was savage backwoods country. There was not sufficient labor at or anywhere near the Soo to operate more than a few wheelbarrows. The four hundred men Harvey had brought with him soon began to thin out. So, Harvey sent

agents East to board ships from Europe before they docked in Boston and New York and grab off what immigrants they could. These determined and imaginative fellows told whopping big lies about the opportunities of getting rich by digging the Soo Canal, and they succeeded by various means in shanghaiing sufficient laborers to keep Harvey's forces at around fifteen hundred men.

The job was less digging than blasting. All drilling was done by hand, and there was a monstrous pile to be done — done through rock that was flinty long before history began and was getting harder, so the drillers said, every day. And this job at the Soo called not only for muscle but also for resistance to the elements. During the short days of winter, a winter of close to five months' duration, there was a bare eight hours of sunlight much of the time. The thermometer commonly hovered around zero, or below, with sudden drops to 35 degrees below zero.

But Harvey could match the winter; at the head of every runway for wheelbarrows — which were the main motive power for moving dirt — he stationed a man to watch the barrowmen and to rub promptly with snow the faces of those who gave sign of frostbite. He detailed crews of firemen to cut wood and keep great bonfires around which laborers might thaw out a bit — so long as they weren't too long about it.

Incredible winds roared down off Superior, bringing blizzards to pile

snow higher than the bunkhouse roofs, and sleet that stung like bird-shot. Tools and equipment were buried again and again. Men at work suddenly grew dreamy, then fell from cold and had to be taken to the bonfires to be thawed out — which some few never did. Good cookhouse refrigeration was assured, and every cook in the outfit was provided with an ax. When he wanted more meat he went out into the shed and hacked it off the sides of beef that were frozen hard as plank.

Young Harvey was no desk engineer. He faced the winds and the cold and the snow and drove his men to the limit. What hours he himself worked, no other man ever knew. He was up and about before the first cookhouse fire was started. And the working-stiffs told one another, wonderingly, of seeing Harvey, silhouetted against a high drift of snow, sighting his level by the light of Borealis itself. The Northern Lights blazed and crackled and dimmed, night after night, and the white pines along the right-of-way snapped and boomed from the intense cold. Nothing could stop Harvey's driving frenzy. This was the way America was to be built. . . .

During the winter, word came to Harvey that some members of the company had become alarmed at the difficulties faced in building a canal in such a climate and in such a place. One of Harvey's right-hand men on the job was John T. Whiting, an old-timer of the region. Harvey asked

him to go East to put heart into those of his backers who were growing faint. Whiting set out on snowshoes and walked to Saginaw, then journeyed East to Syracuse, Albany and St. Johnsbury, visiting members of the company into whom he managed to instil some of the fire and the iron that Harvey was expending on the project. They dug into their pockets for more cash.

The winter wore itself out, but it had thinned the ranks of the crew. Harvey had to resort to his immigrant agents again, and he also set man-catchers to work in Eastern cities, picking up down-and-outers who were shipped virtually under guard to the point of production.

The second winter was almost as bad as the first, but the work never ceased. Then, during the last few cruel months of the last spring and summer, an epidemic of cholera broke out in the camp. Men began to die at the rate of two a day, then four a day; and at last came a day when ten died. All of them were buried as discreetly as possible in the dark of the night, in an effort to keep the others, or most of them, from knowing that the disease was present in such deadly power. Harvey had to detail special trusted men to act as body-snatchers and undertakers, for more than two hundred died in all. The melancholy squads would wait until the crew had gone to work in the morning, then they would make the rounds of the bunks, collect the bodies, hide them, and at night bury them furtively here and

there in the woods, where their skeletons have since frightened generations of prospecting boys. But not a single day's work was lost by the crew.

It was a hard and cruel two years of work and pain and death. Only one strike marked it. The grumbling of hard-driven workmen at last flared up one day in resentment over the harsh conditions; more pay was demanded. Harvey met them, as he did everything, head-on. He shut down all the cookhouses and placed tough men armed with double-barreled shotguns at their doors. No work, no grub. The men debated. A thousand of them threw down their picks and paraded. Harvey sent word to them to parade and be damned — they would get nothing to eat until they worked. The strikers lost two meals, then returned to their drilling.

Presently it was discovered that the waters of Lake Superior were subject to a rise and fall of several feet annually, in addition to the changes occasioned by storms and wind. This meant still more work; the canal must be deepened by approximately one foot. It was done, and promptly.

III

Harvey's driving fury continued until, on April 19, 1855, he opened the sluiceway to the cofferdam on the Lake Superior side, and let the cold waters of Gitchie Gumees flow into Lake Huron by way of the Soo Canal. On June 18 the first boat, the steamer *Illinois*, Captain Jack Wilson, west

bound, was locked through without trouble. An event of more importance and more indicative of the canal's place in history took place on August 17. On that great day the brig *Columbia*, Judson Wells, master, with one hundred tons of fine, black Marquette-range ore on her decks, passed through the new Soo locks and canal on her way down to the iron-making ports along Lake Erie. It was a historic occasion of far greater importance than anyone could have dreamed, and it was not allowed to pass unnoticed. A blacksmith at Sault Ste. Marie fired an anvil-cannon that shook windows; and more than half of the males at the town were reported to have got drunker than so many boiled owls.

When the Soo Canal was dug, the iron ore beds of the Eastern United States, never very extensive, were nearly played out; the United States was fourth, possibly fifth, among the iron-making countries of the world. Twenty-five years later it was first.

The Soo Canal, more than any other thing, was responsible. It was the big factor in making good iron, then good steel, cheap. The Soo is also and by far the most important commercial canal on earth. In peacetime its waterborne commerce exceeded that of the Suez and Panama Canals combined, and the Soo, it should be remembered, is open to commerce no more than seven months of the year.

Since the beginning of World War II, the Soo is likely the most important mile in all the United States, for it is the mile that connects — as no roads or railroads could connect — the Menominee, the Marquette, the Gogebic and the Mesabi ranges with Pittsburgh, an affinity that creates guns and shells and armor plate and much else that is needed these days. I can't learn that a Liberty Ship has yet been named for Charles T. Harvey, but I hope one will. He deserves that much, even if all biographical dictionaries, including the *Dictionary of American Biography*, ignore him.



To feed men and not to love them is to treat them as if they were barnyard cattle. To love them and not to respect them is to treat them as if they were household pets.

— MENCIVS

MOLNAR

By ILES BRODY

WHEN the New York weather is fair, you may see Ferenc Molnar set out for his mid-day walk from the Plaza Hotel. The immortal author of *Liliom*, a dozen other successful plays, a score of novels, a thousand articles and short stories, walks slowly, halting and looking at a stop-watch now and then, taking pains to fulfill his doctor's instructions minutely. The heart of the sixty-six-year-old playwright is tired, although the hand that holds the pen and the brain that guides the hand are unimpaired. At an age when Anglo-Saxons usually find their second wind, Central European writers get somewhat weary physically.

You would immediately know that he is Molnar, or some equally outstanding European man of letters, the first time you saw him. There is something in the carriage of his medium-sized figure, in the rakish angle of his old, soft felt hat on his silvery head, in his polka-dotted bow tie, in his self-conscious effort to mingle with the crowd, that betrays him.

Since living in the United States

Molnar has rarely worn his monocle in public, but in his room he is never without this lens of four-dioptic strength on his left eye. He does take it off to read, however, and then holds the page within a couple of inches of his myopic little brown eyes. Long ago, in Europe, rumor had it that he never removed it even for washing — not only on account of that bad eye, but because in his youth he had the same contempt for cleanliness as Doctor Johnson had had all his life.

Molnar was born in Budapest, but the whole world is his home town. For many years there was a *bon mot* circulating about him to the effect that he lived in a four-room apartment — only the rooms were somewhat divided: one was in Budapest's Hotel Hungaria, another in the Imperial Hotel in Vienna, the third in the Danieli in Venice, the fourth in the Hotel Bad in Karlsbad. He kept these rooms all year round, so that when the urge to write a play came upon him, say in Venice, he could at once travel to Budapest, sit at his familiar desk and complete the manu-

ILES BRODY, globe-trotting countryman of Ferenc Molnar, has written many articles for national magazines and is the author of the recent book, *On the Tip of My Tongue*. Especially familiar with the gastronomic habits and preferences of the great, he is at present working on a book about the Colony restaurant.