

# Riverton Lock

by Cecil Hayes

One of the most exciting times in the history of the Tennessee River Valley occurred during the cutting of the Colbert Shoals Canal — the last link in opening the river to year-round traffic.

According to the information I have, the canal was a little more than eight miles long, paralleling the south shore of the Tennessee River from Riverton to Colbert Georgetown. The purpose of the canal was to bypass Colbert Shoals, a long shallow section of sandbars where the mile-wide river was only about three feet deep.

Shallow-draft vessels could pass over the shoals, but not steamboats, which drew about six feet of water.

The bypass enabled steamboats to continue upriver to Tuscumbia and Florence.

Construction of the canal began in 1893 and was completed in 1911. The Riverton lock, a forerunner of the giant locks that would dot the Tennessee, was also erected during this time.

The two projects just above Big Bear Creek employed about 200 men at all times. They worked two 10-hour shifts. The pay was about 15 cents an hour, and at a time when jobs were hard to find, the Riverton area was said to be booming.

Men came from hundreds of miles away to work on the two projects. Most of them were young and single. Some stayed only a brief time, while others remained to marry local girls and make Riverton their home.

The workers had a difficult time finding places to room and board. All the local hotels were filled. Many nearby families took in boarders. Still there was always a shortage of lodgings.

Many men boarded with families living nearby or took lodging wherever they could find it. Still there were many workmen who could not find accommodations.

Ragged tents were pitched and tar-paper shacks erected along the edge of the canal. These grew in number to be locally known as "shanty towns," or more properly, as "canal towns." In time they developed into filthy eyesores and centers of crime and corruption. On Saturday night the idle workers gambled, drank and fought like wild animals.

Finally, when a local boy was viciously murdered, the decent citizens of the region decided they'd had enough. Banding themselves together, they loaded their shotguns and made a concentrated assault on these festering limbos, burning the tents and hotels to the ground. After that the company imposed more rigid rules.

Almost overnight, the town of Riverton changed from a sleepy riverside hamlet into a rip-roaring metropolis. It doubled many times over in population. The river was teeming with traffic, with many steamboats crowding the loading wharves.

Everybody was making money, the blacksmith, barber, store keepers and hotel owners. With railroad service, electric lights and a telegraph line, Riverton seemed well on its way to becoming one of Colbert County's leading cities.

With more modern equipment, the digging of the canal could probably be accomplished in a few brief months. But back then, they did it the hard way. Most of the dirt was moved by means of heavy iron shovels or flip scrapers drawn by four or six huge horses or mules. Two men operated the scraper, one on each handle.

In order to fill the scraper, the handles were lifted slightly, forcing the sharp blade into the ground. When the dipper was filled, the handles were then pressed down and held until the load reached its destination. Then the handles were lifted high, flipping the scraper over and dumping the load. Hundreds of these scrapers were used.

Then one day a new excavating machine arrived. It was manufactured in Pennsylvania and shipped by steamboat upriver in parts and assembled at the canal site. It was said to be the first of its kind used in North Alabama. It was so new it had no name.

The men who operated it began calling it a dragline because the bucket was attached to cables and was operated by being drawn toward the machine. It would seem that the machine known all over the world today as a dragline got its name from the workers on the Colbert Shoals Canal.

Many men operated the dragline at different times. It was powered by steam and fueled by wood and coal. I was told that 17-year-old Charlie Hayes was the youngest man to operate the machine. Charlie made many photos of the dragline.

The flood of 1897 on the Tennessee River did \$30,000 in property damage in the Riverton area, and stopped work on the canal for several weeks. It also did extensive damage to the equipment. A wooden "hood" or housing was built around the new dragline to protect it from bad weather.

In 1911, when the canal project was completed, this machine was purchased by the North Alabama Construction Co. It was disassembled and shipped to Cotton Plant, Ark., where it served many more years in construction of a railroad.

Many highly interesting stories came out of the canal years, some almost too brutal to be printed. One of my uncles, Bob Carrithers, who lived in Hog Hollow and worked as a boy on the canal, told me this story when he was in his 80s.

"We had one of the biggest men I've ever seen working on the canal. He was a black man and we called him Mo. He must have been seven feet tall and weighed about 300 pounds, with not an ounce of fat on his frame. He was a hard worker, was as gentle as a lamb, and everybody liked him.

"Mo would sometimes amuse us with his incredible strength. He would lift two ordinary sized men over his head, one in each hand, and walk a 100 feet with them.

"Then one day Mo didn't show up for work. This was unusual as he was usually one of the first on the job, and he never missed a day. Some of the men went looking for him. They found him in his shack, dead.

Someone had shot him in the back of the head while he was sleeping. We never learned who the killer was. We always wondered why anybody would want to kill such a fine person."

The Harland Hotel was the biggest hotel in Riverton. It was built in 1898 and was owned and operated by Jimmy Harland and his wife, Adell Lela Russell Harland.

The big hotel contained 20 rooms, with two beds in each room, and could accommodate at least 40 guests. Room, board and laundry was offered at \$2.50 per week.

After work, the men used the big downstairs parlor. They wrote letters, played simple games and discussed the events of the day. Lela ran the place with the discipline of a drill sergeant. She had two young sons and would allow no rough stuff.

There is a family legend that Lela Harland's mother, Mrs. Emily Jane Carrithers Russell, financed the building of the hotel. She used the inheritance she received from her father, John Calvin Carrithers, a very prominent citizen of Riverton. All she asked in return was to be able to live out the remaining years of her life as a non-paying guest of the hotel.

I have many remarkable stories sent to me in letters concerning "Granny Russell." Annie Belle Hayes Kelt, who grew up in Dark Hollow and worked as a young girl at the hotel, remembers this grand and wonderful lady well.

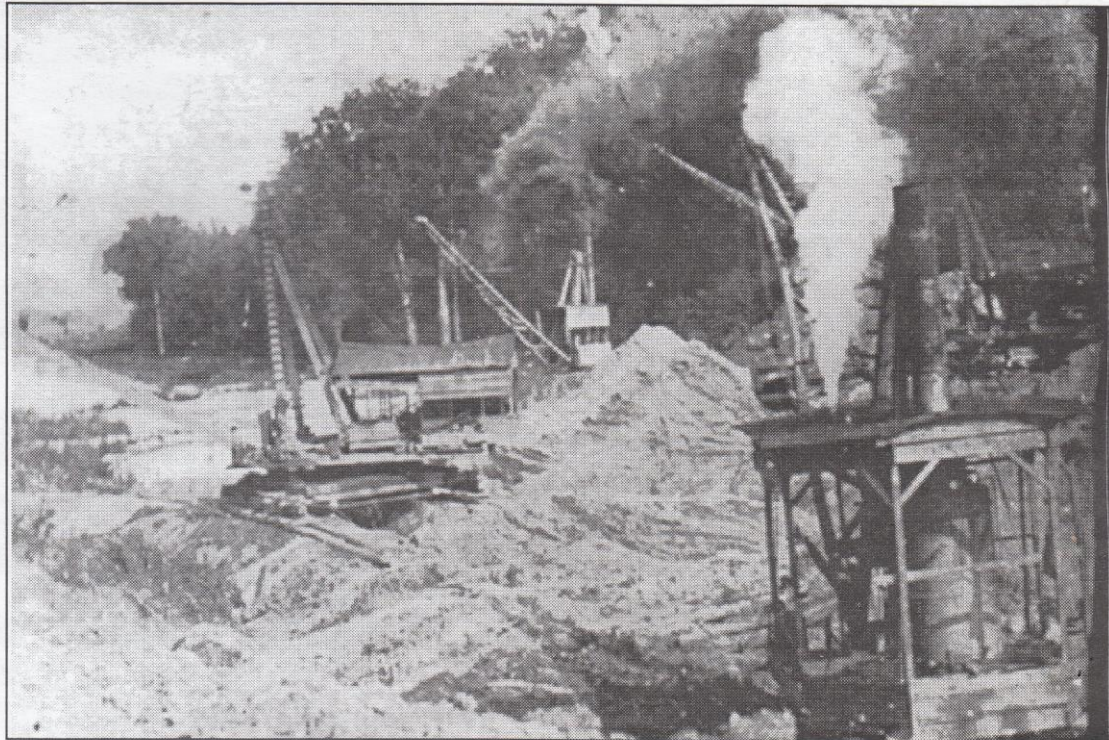
"She smoked a pipe and carried water from a spring on her head," one letter states. Others remember her as a white-haired lady sitting on the vine-shaded verandah of the hotel, writing in her journal.

For 40 years Mrs. Russell wrote the history of the town she knew and loved so well. The 300-page, hand-written journal has never been in print, but it is perhaps the finest and most comprehensive history ever written of the colorful and historic town of Riverton. The old canal and lock were flooded with the completion of Pickwick Dam in the late 1930s. A portion of the old lock is visible during low water.



This photo shows 11 men who worked on the Colbert Shoals Canal and Lock from 1893 to 1911. Only four of the men could be identified: Jerome "Romie" Hastings, Jess Turberville, William Franklin and Charlie Hayes. The photo was sent to the author by Martha Wilson.

PHOTO COURTESY OF HEPBURN TUBERVILLE



This photo of the canal came from Hugh "Jude" Bryant, whose son, Norman, now owns the old William Buchanan home in south Riverton.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JUDE BRYANT

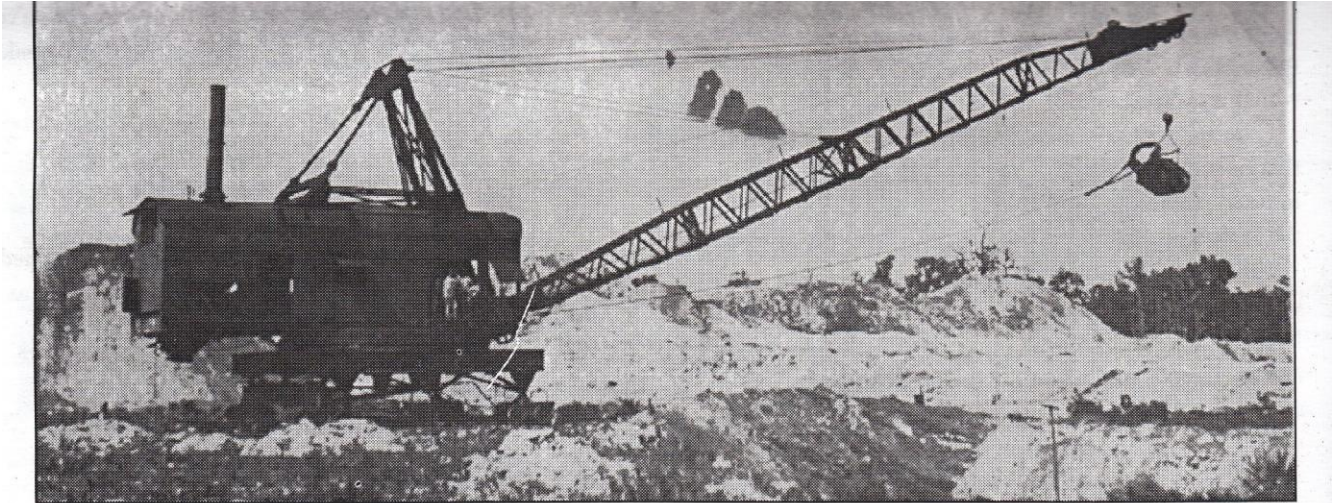


PHOTO COURTESY OF TOM BURTON

**This is the excavating machine soon after it was assembled. It is said to be the first of its kind used in North Alabama. It was built in Pennsylvania, shipped upriver in parts by steamboat and was assembled at the canal site. It was so new that it had no name. The men began calling it a "dragline," because the big iron dipper had to be dragged by cables to fill it with dirt. The machine was later moved to Arkansas and used on railroad construction for several years.**

**7. A graveling crane and stone yard in Riverton, Alabama. It's supporting the Colbert Shoals Canal project on November 8, 1895.**

