

Where Lincoln's Voice Was First Heard . . .

# EXPERIENCE Ottawa

SPRING/SUMMER 2007

MAGAZINE



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Ottawa Visitors Center, Inc.

Cover photo by Peggy Schneider, Ottawa Visitors Center. Curt Trizzino of Minooka challenges the waves in the Outlaw Division at Wakeboarding Boot Camp 2006 along Ottawa's riverfront.

Stories and several accompanying photos: Peggy Schneider, Ottawa Visitors Center.

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## Ottawa Visitor Center

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▲ Reddick Mansion, Ottawa Visitors Center is located in the small cottage to the left.

# WET AND WILD:



## THE CANAL THAT TAMED ILLINOIS, AND THE MEN WHO TAMED THE CANAL

Before he became famous as “Wild Bill,” James Butler Hickok was growing up on a farm in La Salle County and driving mule teams on the Illinois and Michigan Canal.

Hickok is probably one of canal’s biggest celebrities, while many of the men who drew their fame from the engineering marvel of the 19th Century have faded, along with the commercial appeal of the canal, into history.

One fellow though, by the name of Lincoln—well, he’s still popular.

Violence, mythical and real, swirled around Hickok even before he left Illinois to become a scout, Civil War spy, and Plains lawman. East Coast periodicals and pulp novels chronicled the men he’s reputed to have killed, and his exploits—often romanticized and wildly exaggerated accounts—won him admiration.

Hickok, the son of a storekeeper, was born in 1837 and grew up in Troy Grove, a few miles northwest of Ottawa. Offsetting that traditional upbringing were his father’s clandestine activities of hiding and assisting runaway slaves on the Underground Railroad.

Hunting game put food on the table, and Hickok developed his reputation as a crack shot while still very young. A monument to him stands in Troy Grove today, and an exhibit about him is housed in the Hume-Carnegie Museum in nearby Mendota.

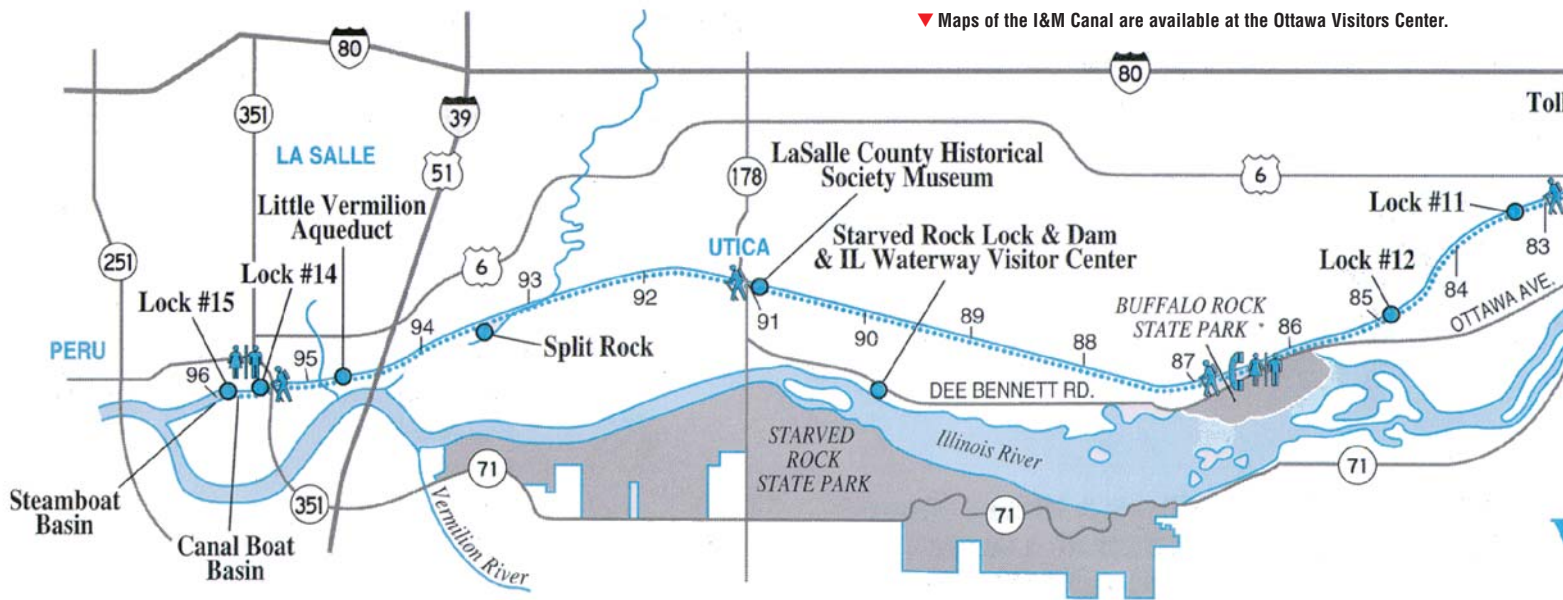
Hickok stands as a symbol of the wild side of the Illinois and Michigan Canal. Many mule drivers were teenage boys, but they could cuss, drink and fight with the best.

Drivers walked along long stretches of towpath, coaxed the stubborn mules that towed the barges and made sure the towropes did not get tangled when canal boats passed each other. Many of the boys slept in dormitories along the canal, according to canal historian Ron Vasile.

By Hickok’s time, life along the canal might have settled down a bit but during the decade of construction, life was rough and boisterous. Backbreaking work called for hardened men who were also hard-drinking. During peak construction, about 2,100 men worked on the canal to earn \$1 a day plus whiskey. Though canal organizers tried to forbid whiskey, contractors discovered that drink cemented their workforce.

Many of the workers were Irish, and tempers often flared in factional strife. County Sheriff Alson Woodruff was called to quell one such riot, but his poor showing prompted citizens to





urge the office on William Reddick, an Irishman (and later builder of the Reddick Mansion in Ottawa).

Crews shouldered shovels and pick axes, and blasted away rocky cliffs with explosives. Ox-drawn teams pulled scrapers and plows to clear away vegetation. The men might curse the 14-hour shifts in the summer, but when construction was suspended during the winter they scrambled for a way to feed themselves. Workmen lived in shanties and endured work injuries and malaria. When they availed themselves of the cheap whiskey, Ottawa and other young communities braced for their arrival looking for a bit of “boisterous relaxation.”

The immigrants who had landed on the East Coast had been lured inland by advertisements promising jobs. By the time Hickok appeared on the scene, many workmen had traded in their wanderlust in exchange for home and family, and settled into the communities they had helped bring into existence.

Hickok’s association with the canal ended when he headed west to follow his brothers—not, as legend often has it, to escape the law after an altercation with a fellow canal worker.

He was tall and broad-shouldered, with shoulder-length auburn hair and a sensuous mouth crowned by a straw-colored moustache. The blue-gray eyes that dominated his features could grow steely and piercing when he was angry.

The eyes eventually failed him. Glaucoma diminished his eyesight, and the bright stage lights in one of Buffalo Bill’s productions, where he spent a brief time, pained him. He cut short his theatrical career, deciding the stage was not for him.

The card table was always a friend he could fall back on, and he gambled there as he had challenged the odds of life. By 1876, Hickok had reached the boom town of Deadwood, Dakota Territory, where his life ended with a bang in a saloon. He went against his practice and sat with his back to the door, presenting an unwary target to Jack McCall. The poker hand he held, aces and eights, would follow him into legend. Hickok was 39.

If Wild Bill personified the rough-hewn elements of the Illinois & Michigan Canal, Abraham Lincoln typified the visionary, even if that vision was somewhat cock-eyed. Other visionaries down through history would use the canal to launch

a progressive work program or use it as a springboard for a vast recreation corridor.

Lincoln and other early lawmakers saw the potential of a canal for enhancing the young state and making it competitive in commerce and growth. Lincoln adopted the internal improvements program in his 1830s legislative campaign, and bragged to a friend he aimed to become the DeWitt Clinton of Illinois. Lincoln’s role model was the New York governor who had pushed the legislation creating the Erie Canal, which preceded the I&M by 10 years and inspired Illinois’ program.

The building project was more ambitious than the state could afford. Within a few years, the state was bankrupt and canal progress coasted, then halted. By then, the state’s fiscal health and the canal were unequivocally linked, and the state needed tolls and land sales to pull itself out of the hole.

Having succeeded in helping to engineer the grand internal improvements scheme, Lincoln settled down to practice law, married Miss Mary Todd of Kentucky and raised a family.

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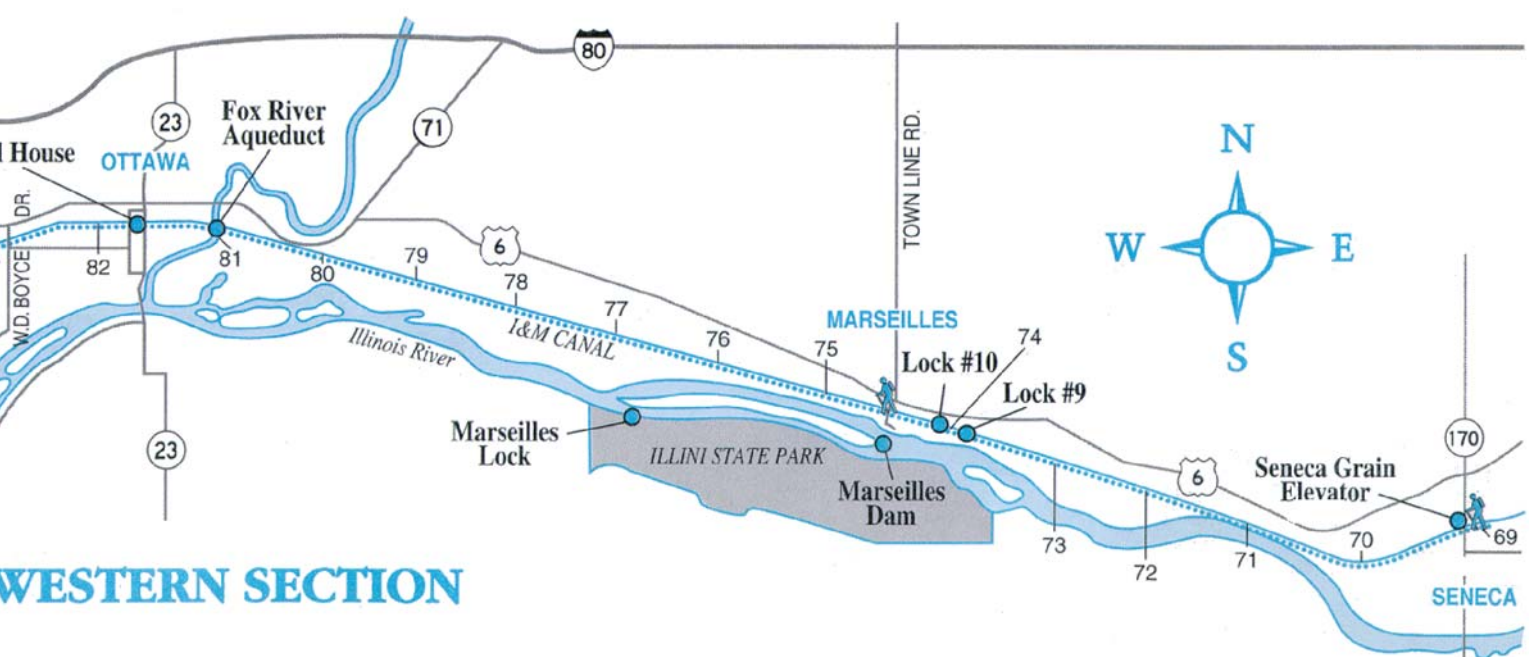
*As Lincoln matured, so did his adopted state. It can be difficult to imagine how a trough now waterless in some places along its route was a key to opening settlement of the Illinois frontier.*

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In the 1830s, northern Illinois was still prairie dotted by scattered settlements and Ottawa had grown little from the trade outpost begun along the banks of the Fox and Illinois. When it opened in 1848, the canal would become Northern Illinois’ link to the Great Lakes and markets on the Eastern Seaboard.

Commerce meant settlement, and settlement meant commerce. Settlers needed goods and building materials to build their lives here, and markets within easy reach of their farms. Though to us today, traveling a full day to reach Chicago seems tough, before the canal travel took much longer and was more arduous.

The Illinois River from Ottawa north was too shallow and inadequate for large craft until dredging and dam construction deepened the channel in the 1930s. Ottawa was planned to be



## WESTERN SECTION

the canal's western terminus, but low water doomed its chances, and the honor went to Peru.

Ottawa was a planned community along the canal route, platted by the same surveyor as Chicago. The surveyor named the proposed town "Carbonia," perhaps for the coal deposits nearby. The canal is a thread through history. Later methods of transport, from railroads to air, followed its lead in establishing Chicago as a transport terminus.

Original canal plans were scaled back to cut costs, and the decision helped cut short its commercial viability. Large steamers still were forced to unload to smaller vessels at Peru rather than lock straight through on the canal.

Ottawa the boom town could boast two significant construction projects. At 464 feet, the Fox River aqueduct, which defines Fox River Park today, was the largest of four on the system. The Lateral Canal, a sort of industrial spur, headed south from the main canal along Canal Street, then turned east to flow into a hydraulic basin, through a mill race and into the Fox River. Barges could lock through into the Lateral to service the industries there, and the water flow powered industrial turbines.

During the Depression, Mayor Hubert Hilliard created jobs by filling in the long unused Lateral and mining coal along the main canal in Ottawa's own version of the New Deal. If you follow Canal Street past the Ottawa Scouting Museum and Reddick Library, then down Woodward Memorial Drive above Central School, you've walked the Lateral Canal and hydraulic basin. The Boat Club building, behind which the water spilled into the Fox, still stands.

Railroads that arrived on the heels of the canal robbed it of passenger service by shortening travel time, but freight service continued well past the turn of the 20th century. Improvements to the Illinois Waterway allowing larger commercial traffic capped the canal's fate. It fell into disuse until the 1980s, when federal funding and local energies turned it into a superb hiking and biking route through Northern Illinois.

# CANAL TIDINGS

**Length:** 96 miles long, from La Salle to Bridgeport and the Chicago River

**Size:** 60 feet wide on the surface, 36 feet wide on the bottom and 6 feet deep.

**Along the canal:** 19 Locks, 4 aqueducts, 4 dams, 4 feeder canals.

**Canal Construction:** began in 1837 and was completed in 1848, with a two-year suspension from 1842-45 after the state ran out of money.

**Cost:** \$6.5 million

**Travel Time:** A journey from end to end took 24 hours. Passenger packets traveled about 5 mph and freight barges about 1.5 to 3 mph.

**Barge power:** Horses and mules towed the barges. In the late 1860s, some barges were converted to steam power.

**Revenue:** Traffic tolls, sales of real estate and leases for water power. By 1871, the canal had paid its debt.

**Volume:** Over 67 years of operation, some 74 million tons of freight were hauled.

# LIFE CYCLE:



“Some of my favorite sites are the lock at La Salle, Split Rock, and the aqueduct at Ottawa,” Gary says.

# PEDALING THE POWER OF THE I&M CANAL

The restoration of the Illinois & Michigan Canal as a hiking and biking trail came just in time for Ottawan Gary Kirkpatrick.

Since his retirement 10 years ago, the 69-year-old has logged 4,000 miles a year bicycling in Illinois, the Midwest and Arizona. Many times his tires have trod the canal towpath, which began to take shape for recreational use in the 1980s decades after it was discontinued as a commercial waterway.

“I’ve covered the I&M from La Salle to Joliet on many different rides. My friends and I have taken many rides to La Salle and back or to Seneca and back with a coffee stop along the way,” he says.

The trail follows the towpath along which mules or horses plodded while towing the canal barges. It carries you through wetlands and forest, past fields and over streams, sometimes bringing you within a stone’s throw of the majestic Illinois River. You’ll cross an aqueduct, pass an historic grain elevator, a toll house and several locks and travel through villages that were created when the canal went through.

Leisure riders find the gentle curves and easy grades ideal for a pleasant ride. Families can ride without worrying about interference from motor vehicles. Dedicated riders can challenge themselves to travel most of the 90-mile length in one trip. The crushed-limestone surface endures all weather conditions, and numerous access points and parking areas let riders take up the trail almost anywhere and travel a moderate distance to the next point. Veteran riders even have favorite refreshment stops at ice cream stores, coffee shops and delis!

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*Like many riders, Gary marvels at the view from the trail. You might spot a bald eagle’s roost on a high branch or wild turkeys having lunch or a red-tailed hawk pursuing dinner.*

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“It is always a delight to encounter deer or wild turkeys or just observe turtles sunning on a log. You also see many birds, ducks, ground hogs and occasionally a beaver dam.”

On its way west from Ottawa, the trail passes below the bluff-top Buffalo Rock State Park, which is a popular stop for riders who want to meet the three buffalo who live there, says Jackie Franz. In outfitting riders with bikes, helmets and maps, and shuttling them to and from the canal from their head-

quarters at River Adventures on the Fox, Franz and her partner Randy Malcolm hold the key to unlocking the mysteries and delights of the canal.

“The towpath takes you into areas you can’t see by car. It’s a beautiful trail, and an easy trail even for people who don’t bike a lot. Biking is a fun and easy way to see a lot of the canal in a short time. You can bike with the same energy as hiking and go faster,” she says.

Like a mother hen, Jackie watches her chicks return after a ride full of tales of what they’ve seen and done. On that return trip, the shuttle comes alive, though not necessarily in ways Franz expects.

One family of six proudly displayed grimy badges of honor when Franz rendezvoused with them. They were mud-splattered from head to toe.

“It had rained a couple of days before, and portions of the towpath were kind of soupy. When they got back to the van, they were all laughing; they had all been trying to spray each other in the puddles! They had a great time!”

Another couple enjoyed a picnic on the canal, she said. Still others take advantage of all the outdoor recreation opportunities River Adventures can offer. You can go horseback riding one morning, canoeing that afternoon, biking the next morning and wind up your adventure skydiving.

River Adventures added a line of bikes to its canoe rental about two years ago as “an additional way of providing an activity to see the best about our area,” she added. River Adventures has about 15 men’s, women’s and children’s bikes to choose from. The equipment, helmet, directions and shuttle service are included in the price of \$20 for adults and \$13 for children. Reservations are requested.



**River Adventures**  
815 481 2142  
<http://www.canoethefox.com>

◀ Gary Kirkpatrick

# TOE-TAPPING TO OTTAWA'S SUMMER CLASSIC IS ONE BIG PARTY



If you love books, being surrounded by thousands begging to be plucked from the pile and taken home to savor is like paradise! Imagine, yards of hardbacks and paperbacks, magazines and cookbooks, children's books and reference books—and all available for mere pennies!

La Salle County's largest used-book sale offers a tantalizing selection every summer. Browsers stand at the tables, heads bowed, reading titles and thumbing through pages. Their final choices get tucked in a cardboard box—veterans of the sale don't expect to carry away all those bargains by hand! Kids lured by the brightly colored jackets clutch their choices, hardly able to wait until they get home to unlock the mysteries inside!

It wouldn't be Riverfest without the American Association of University Women's book sale. And it wouldn't be July in Ottawa without Riverfest.

For 12 days in July and August, Ottawa's reputation as an outdoor recreation capital undergoes a bit of a shift. Sure, we're surrounded by four state parks, the Illinois and Michigan Canal and the Illinois and Fox rivers, but every summer we also open our doors to an unparalleled street festival.

There are no strangers here, only friends to gather on shady lawns to listen to live music or peruse book and arts stalls. When the Town of Two Rivers celebrates, you're in for a good time no matter what your taste or what your age. Our massive summer festival, which derives its name from our signature waterways, comes jam-packed with activities.

This is the time of year when shady Washington Square

heats up as an art gallery, book store and grassy auditorium. Riverfest recalls the days when it was fashionable to stroll to the town center and relax in pleasant company, listen to music or just chat with a neighbor.

During the first week, before the entertainment moves down to the main stage on the waterfront, audiences assemble at Washington Park to listen to toe-tapping live music and watch tumbling and martial arts demonstrations. Melodies from polka to patriotic drift over the bronze statues crowning the central fountain, and you can imagine Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas, whose likenesses are cast in bronze, pausing in their great debate to listen.

Kids enjoy the fireworks display, the sidewalk art contest, fishing rodeo, Agriculture Day petting zoo, outdoor movie and world-class thrill rides at the carnival. The entire town gathers along the river to watch our second grand fireworks display of the season, which caps off our festival on that last night.

Mom, Dad and Grandma enjoy the outdoor street market on Jackson Street, the book and art stalls, or the classic-car show.

As you stroll past the leafy vegetables, ripe tomatoes and fresh-baked breads and pies at the Farmers Market, feel your mouth begin to water. A delicious palette of fresh-picked and homemade goodies is displayed on all sides. Tall slender gladiolas nod graciously to you, and squat mums tremble in the breeze. Bone-shaped pet biscuits remind you of some hungry companion back home, or you can satisfy your



# SPINE-TINGLING



own snack cravings with a handful of homemade snack mix. Down the lane, flea market vendors hawk collectibles and curios.

Riverfest activities are split between downtown Washington Square and the riverfront. The carnival, food courts and live entertainment shimmer and rock down by the river for five nights during the festival. The events are free to attend, but carnival rides and food carry a cost.

If you prefer a slower pace to the carnival, climb aboard the carriage which joins the horseless carriages for nightly cruises around historic Old Town. Let the clop-clop of the horse's hooves and the gentle coaxing of the driver lull you. If the route happens to take you over the river and down the cobbled brick streets of Ottawa's east side, imagine when those shady avenues were populated by just such transportation.

Riverfest has grown with Ottawa since the 1960s, though its name has changed. More food vendors, more entertainment and a carnival have become staples for the fest.

Riverfest's appeal stretches across miles and state boundaries, notes coordinator Heidi Eisert. Families reunite for the event, and gather in backyards along the parade route for post-parade barbecues. High school classmates reconnect and recollect during the festival.

"Riverfest is a good time to see everybody, and gives you something to do while you're here," Eisert said.

Long before one Riverfest has even concluded, callers want to know when they should schedule next year's vacation! For many, Riverfest has become an annual homecoming ritual.

Nobody does a river festival like Ottawa!

"Come see what Ottawa is all about," says Eisert. "This is our chance to show Ottawa off."

## RIVERFEST 2007

July 25-August 5

July 27-28 – Book Sale, Art in the Park, Farmers Market

July 28 – Agriculture Day, Kids Art Contest

August 1 – Kids Contests

August 1-5 – Taste of Ottawa, Carnival, live music on the riverfront stage

August 1-5 – Horsedrawn carriage rides, Sidewalk sales

August 4-5 – Craft and Flea Market and Farmer's Market

August 5 – Classic Car Show, Parade, Fireworks

[www.ottawariverfest.com](http://www.ottawariverfest.com)

# STEP OFF THE



When you develop an appetite in Ottawa, just say “Cheese!” Or rather, “The Cheese Shop!”

Owner Marty Ruhland has done a great job melding the past and the present, and the glue that sticks the eras together is ... cheese. In naming his enterprise The Cheese Shop and Deli, Ruhland has stuck to his roots while branching out. His past also is apparent in the décor he has chosen for the lofty dining/serving room.

The “deli” part of the name is apparent as soon as you see the display cases of delectable desserts and smell warm aromas of meatballs or fried chicken or macaroni-and-cheese emanating from the kitchen.

“We have home-cooked food with flavor and plenty of it. I’d rather hear complaints that I serve TOO much than not enough.” Marty said. Customers are pleasantly surprised by the reasonable prices and a selection that includes hot and cold sandwiches, dozens of varieties of soup, salads, pastas

and fried chicken. “People come down from Chicago and tell me they’ve never seen anything like this!” Marty says proudly.

The food is available for take out or dining in, or you can invite The Cheese Shop to be part of your next festivity. Some 30 percent of the shop’s volume is catering buffets for weddings, lunches for industrial clients, or special occasions like parties or reunions.

You won’t want to deprive yourself of the full Cheese Shop experience for long, though. The interior décor offers as much a feast for the history buff as the menu does for the stomach. Not far from the bustling city center, you can explore this unobtrusive structure along the banks of the historic Illinois and Michigan Canal which features the cream of Marty’s antique collection.

Metal toy cars, pedal cars and tractors, antique appliances and advertising signs are displayed from floor to ceiling. Many of the items trace the history of Ottawa, Marty’s hometown, and some have to do with the dairy industry, in which Marty grew up.

# BEATEN (TOW) PATH

## AND DISCOVER A DELI(CIOUS) HIDDEN TREASURE

There's a conversation-starter everywhere you turn. Marty has a tough time fending off people who want to buy pieces of his collection, but the items are not for sale.

Down one hallway is displayed a collection of creamers made by Morton Pottery, and two of the pitchers advertise his father's and grandfather's businesses. The items were premium gifts to farmers who supplied the milk for the cheese factory that helped give the deli its name.

Yes, Marty's history explains why the rest of the store's title was a natural. The deli is housed in a cheese factory run by Marty's family from before World War II to the late 1980s. In its time, it was the most modern in the state.

More than 30 small dairies once operated around Ottawa, and the Ruhlands' factory is part of that rich dairy history. The factory was supplied by small farms around Ottawa and at one point employed 20-30 people—including the eight Ruhland children.

"Before school I'd pick up a load of full milk cans and bring them here, clean up a little bit and walk to school," Marty said. The cooking process generated steam that filled the room, and it "was like working in a sauna all day. I was a great weight though, about 140 pounds!"

The factory never sold individual chunks, but by the time it closed Marty had branched into sales, taking over one factory office, then expanding twice more to sell specialty cheeses, salamis and chili. By 1990, Marty installed a kitchen and had turned the entire factory over to the deli.

The menu expanded by word of mouth. Whenever his customers suggested a new item, Marty tried it. To his wife's dismay, the Ruhlands started eating out, and Marty would sift through the tastes and ingredients and experiment with recipes until he found one he liked.

Now, when he tries a new recipe, its inclusion on the menu depends on his employees' taste buds. The "initial look on their faces" tells him he has a winner, or sends him back to the test kitchen. That's how chicken tortilla soup and homemade potato chips became part of the menu.

He inherited his pasta sauce recipe when two fellow restaurateurs retired. They refused to sell the recipe, but gave it to him instead and showed him how to prepare it!

"I love to try different things. I've had snake, alligator..." Not that those exotic items will find their way to the menu anytime soon. After years supplying their tastes, Marty knows his customers.

"Our menu keeps changing. We keep the standbys—we'll have chicken and pasta forever—but we still keep coming up with something new, or people get bored." Yet signature recipes that people have come to know and love won't be tampered with, he promises. "When you take our chicken home and everybody raves about it, you want to come back and get that same taste next time."

The nearby Illinois and Michigan Canal has always supplied hungry bikers, thirsty hikers and dog walkers looking to warm up over a delicious bowl of soup.

"My dad had photos, when we were small, of the ice rink that formed (in the defunct canal) in the winter. People would gather there at night and build bonfires." As the canal's popularity surged as a hiking/biking trail, The Cheese Shop's visibility surged with it.

"I am amazed at the traffic, even in winter. We have dog walkers constantly, and a lot of bikers, many of whom have become our steadies. They tell me they love stumbling on a little place that not everybody knows about."

That describes The Cheese Shop in a nutshell. But once you do discover one of Ottawa's hidden treasures, you'll be back!

**The Cheese Shop & Deli**  
1219 Fulton Street  
815-433-0478



# MOTORCYCLE

# DIARIES: DEFINING STARVED ROCK . . .

**'COOL'**



Each year, thousands of riders turn their Harleys, Hondas or Kawasakis in Ottawa's direction to seek solace amidst our majestic limestone bluffs and scenic river valleys and to soak up the history, cuisine and atmosphere we offer.

You wouldn't think motorcycles and spa treatments had a thing in common. Chrome-blazoned roaring engines propelling you forward at superhuman speed don't exactly scream the word "peace."

That is, until you experience the ribbon of road unraveling before you and feel your cares trailing away in the breeze and finally just disengaging completely.

"We had high paced, highly stressful jobs, and we would go out (on the bikes) and your mind completely goes away from work and problems," says Anne Justice, who moved to Ottawa from the Chicago suburbs a few years ago and loves riding round the Starved Rock area with her husband, Jeff.

"You don't ride through the countryside. You become part of it," says longtime area resident Gary Winter.

"If you want hills, we've got hills. If you want straight-aways, we have straight-aways. If you want curves, we've got curves. We have a variety, and that's what makes riding here so much fun," said Jeff Justice.

"Riding in Chicago and the suburbs is less fun because it's so congested," says Tom Eiden, another suburban transplant and owner of Starved Rock Harley Davidson-Buell, Ottawa.

Ottawa is accessible by interstates from anywhere in the Midwest, but motorcycle riders crave curving back roads and undiscovered mom-and-pop stops and relish the wide, well maintained two-lanes that carry them into the heart of Starved Rock country.

"I don't want to deal with four-wheelers or 18-wheelers," explains Ottawan Redgie Huftel, "so I pick the back roads that don't have a lot of people."

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*This group of riders defines "Starved Rock cool." They know these roads intimately—where to find the hilliest hills, the curviest curves and the tastiest ice cream.*

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Ice cream?

"We stop at ice cream stores during our rides. We're a little heavier, but safer!" says Anne.

The qualities about Ottawa that appealed to Anne and Jeff on their initial rides to this area also attracted them as a retirement home – or would, if either ever retired. Anne works at the Ottawa Area Chamber of Commerce and Industry and Jeff works at the Harley dealership. Gary is a heavy equipment operator and Redgie is in corporate sales.

Ottawa is a motorcycle-friendly city, and riders are welcomed and well treated here, Tom says. That atmosphere appeals to riders, and each summer brings more and more of them here, he says.

A top ride for even the most seasoned Starved Rock local takes him along Illinois 71 west of Ottawa. The road brushes the banks of the Illinois River before winding through forests, across canyons and over the bluffs of the state park. Several roads also lead to the other three state parks of Buffalo Rock, Illini and Matthiessen, or to other natural areas.

Gentleman-Trumbo Road, a county highway (2653rd Road) which leaves Ottawa's south side for a delightful dipping, curving trek along the Illinois River bluff towards Marseilles, is another favorite. County highways east of Ottawa carry you along a bluff before dropping you down a dizzying incline to the valley floor.

Deer Park Road (N. 2401st Road) lifts you from the valley and conducts you toward the Little Vermilion River. East 8th Road picks up where Illinois 178 leaves off south of the Little Vermilion and pitches you over a series of humpbacked hills.

The Eidens often recommend some scenery closer to home. "We suggest they grab a sandwich and go sit at Allen Park and watch the barges go by. It can be a Norman Rockwell moment," said Tom, referring to the riverfront park in South Ottawa.

"When they plan a trip, riders look at all the stuff they can do," and Ottawa has plenty to make trip worthwhile. His wife Sara agrees. "They're looking for places they can go as a group and hang out, or to Starved Rock where they can absorb the sunshine."

Whether riders consider a short "Sunday ride" from Chicago or an overnight excursion from Wisconsin, Iowa or Indiana, Ottawa is a rewarding destination, the Eidens said.

Riders also hopscotch to dealerships, where they know service and souvenirs are waiting. "It's amazing the things they stop and ask us about," Sara said. "People stop by for weather reports, to ask for gas stations where they can use their particular credit cards, or where to stop and eat."

"People ask if Starved Rock State Park is far and how do



▲ Riders on Illinois 71, West of Ottawa



▲ La Salle County rides (visit [www.experienceottawa.com](http://www.experienceottawa.com) for details)

they get there?” agrees Jeff, who tailors the directions based on whether they want to get there quickly or take a more scenic route. “Or they ask me to give them some roads to ride.”

Riders like Gary have been aboard some kind of two-wheeled motor since youth. Others, like the Justices, got bit by the bug later in life. Redgie and his wife, Pat, ride “two-up” or tandem. Mary Winter started as a passenger and moved on to her own bike.

Mary recalls the courtship. “I rode with him, and it was love!” For Gary, or for riding? “Whatever,” she joshes.

Motorcycles can be the ticket to back roads treasures and to new friendships with people you meet along the way, the riders say.

“People stop us at traffic lights and roll the window down and tell us how much they love riding, or how they wish they

could be riding. A lot of people want to do it but for some reason they don’t,” Gary says. “They relate to it,” Mary agrees.

Even so, some non-motorcyclists might find the vehicle or the gear a bit intimidating, and the riders are quick to reassure. “When I suit up in my ‘uniform’, I become anonymous. You never know what you’ll get,” says Sara, a mother of four. “But I might be the doctor the area needs, or the special education teacher. You don’t know who that person is going to be that one day might bring a service that this area needs.”

“People ask us about the fashion statement we’re trying to make with leather jackets, gloves and chaps,” Gary says. “I’ve told people it’s not the fashion statement. Every article has a function, either to prevent you freezing to death or road rash or to keep the elements and the bugs off you. There’s a reason for this stuff!”

Ottawa’s motorcycle-friendliness was evident in 2005 when the city became a virtual gleaming sea of black leather. The Harley Owners Group Rally was unmatched in attendance, drawing thousands of riders to the riverfront for one weekend.

“What made it so successful was our proximity to Chicago, where the riders are, and the way Ottawa embraced the event and the riders,” Tom said. Many riders introduced to Ottawa during that rally have come back to shop, eat, ride and stay longer, he added.

Riders also are drawn to the annual pilgrimage to the Memorial Wall in Marseilles. “The whole interstate was closed and every bridge you went under, people were waving. It was neat. It was enormous!” said Redgie, who witnessed one ride.

Motorcycling has no match as a sport or activity, says Anne. “It’s something you can do on your own, with a few people or with thousands of people.”

“You see the real America. It gives you a feel for what’s out there,” agrees Jeff.

▼ Allen Park overlook, downtown Ottawa



# NEWWAVE WAKING UP TO THE WORLD OF WAKEBOARDING



▲ Justin Baer, Indiana, takes a spin

Don't mistake Tim Damron and Dave Baxter for computer nerds. They might spend their workdays in front of computer screens, but on the weekends they fly.

Lifted not by wings but waves, they allow themselves to be catapulted by a speeding boat into somersaults and aerobatics above the Illinois River. As they hurtle over the water, they glide into the boat's wake, launching body and board into the air to hang motionless for a breath before slicing neatly down into the water.

Welcome to wakeboarding, one of the fastest growing water sports in the nation and one of the best-kept secrets in Ottawa!

Damron and Baxter are trying to change that, a wave at a time.

They are soldiers in Midwest Militia Wakeboarding, a 6-year-old grassroots organization of enthusiasts who want to bring notice to a sport whose popularity on the oceanfront East and West Coasts has outpaced the Midwest.

"There is a wakeboarding 'scene' here and we want everyone to know it. There is a lot of talent here and there are quite a few pros who have come from here," declares the MMW web site (<http://www.midwestmilitia.net/>)

The website draws national recognition and thousands of hits a month, says Damron, its designer, and is consulted by wakeboarders new to Illinois and looking for a crowd to hang with.

The pair concedes the group's name might be a bit striking too. The name, brainstormed one summer afternoon on the water, just fit. "It intrigues people," Damron says.

The recognition has paid off. Three times a year in Ottawa, hundreds gather at the east end of Main Street to watch novices and veterans catch a wave, to marvel over new gear, to sample the latest boat model and to camp the weekends at The Busted Prop, a riverfront bar. Besides Demo Days in May and the Fall Fallout to wrap up the season in September, the signature event comes in August with Boot Camp.

"We draw people from Illinois, Indiana, Minnesota, Michigan and Iowa," Damron says. "We have repeat customers to all three events, and people come just to hang out and meet their friends. One girl has been coming for her birthday weekend since the first year. That's what makes it so worthwhile."

Ottawa's delicious cuisine is a draw for spectators and riders after a day of riding or sunning on the bank, and boaters and drivers gas up at local service stations. Regulars make a beeline for R. Grotto's pasta or Jimmy John's subs, Damron said.

Ottawa has more than a group of men and women willing to champion the sport to make it appealing to wakeboarders; it has location, location, location. The Busted Prop is located off the main channel away from commercial barge traffic and the main pleasure-boat route. That section of the river is unimpeded by trees, giving spectators a long view up- and downriver, and offers room for camping.

Equally important, says Baxter, the water there is calm and deep. “The deeper the water, the bigger the wake.”

Wakeboarding combines water skiing and surfing. For wakeboarders, like skiers, the tow rope is an umbilical cord knotted to the moving speedboat, and, like a surfer, he’s standing on a single wide board. The sport began to evolve in the 1980s and its riders used gear adapted from other sports. Eventually, designs for the specialty sport were perfected, world associations were formed, and the sport was christened “wakeboarding.” By the mid-1990s, it had even earned air time on ESPN!

Dave Baxter took to the new sport like, well, like a duck to water. The family of water-sport enthusiasts (the Baxter Brothers have become synonymous with water skiing in the Starved Rock area), spent hours on a lake every summer boating and skiing.

“My brother got a board and started wakeboarding. It was one of the new things we did, and we just took to it. It was entertaining and fun,” says Baxter, a 30-year-old father of two.

Baxter introduced Damron to the sport. “After my ninth broken bone, I quit racing motorcycles, and I needed something to do,” said Damron, 32, also a father of two. The pair are often joined by their wives, who also are avid skiers and wakeboarders.

At one point, Baxter and Damron owned the only two “wakeboarding” boats on this stretch of the Illinois. The boats are identifiable by the tow-rope tower that soars well above the hull. “Some people wondered if it was a roll cage,” Baxter chuckles, shaking his head.

The bar’s height gives the rider a greater center of gravity and, thus, greater lift. Other modifications to the boat include a hull designed to throw a deeper, bigger wake and ballast systems designed to weigh the boat so it sits lower in the water and throws a bigger wave. A booming stereo system is also critical, laughs Damron.

Despite a design that might make them seem sluggish, the boats can reach top speed of 43 mph in seconds from a standing start, giving a towed rider the speed and watery ramp he or she needs to launch in the air, twist 180 degrees, somersault, or grab air time in whatever fashion he chooses.

“It’s all technique, about your stance and how you hold the rope and carve into the wave. How you get to the wave is 90 percent of wakeboarding,” Damron says. “It’s not about one trick, it’s about getting a nice solid grab (on the board) and landing smooth and having style and feeling good. It’s the whole feel of the run.”

Competitors are judged on fluidity, difficulty and style.

“It’s not scripted. It’s all in your head,” Baxter said. “You might start out doing one maneuver and feel a wave of courage and do something you don’t normally do.”

The freedom of the sport appeals to Baxter, who says it demands the independence of the rider.

Baxter, Damron says, has been virtually indestructible. Not so Damron, who tore a knee ligament and broke a foot after two bad landings. “It’s a lot harder landing on water than you think.”

“I don’t consider myself a daredevil. I’ve been doing things like this since I was five and wanted to learn to pop a wheelie on my first bike,” says Damron. He still enjoys motocross and snowboarding, and Baxter is a barefoot skiing enthusiast.

Both of them hope to pass on their love for wakeboarding to their children—and both hope, by that time, Ottawa’s reputation as a wakeboarding capital will be all but assured.



▲ Youth wave, Boot Camp 2006

## Ottawa Visitors Center

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