

THE MEMOIRS OF PETER CAMPBELL

“Working on The Canal”

BY PETER CAMPBELL



Peter Campbell

In several previous editions of our journal, we have re-printed interviews with local people, which first appeared in ‘The ’Pass Times,’ This was a local news-sheet which was produced by a group of young people in the early 1980s.

The following is part of one such interview. In 1984 the group interviewed 87 year-old Peter Campbell. While the interview ranged over many aspects of Peter’s early life, the following extracts deal with his long association with the Newry Canal:

When I was about fourteen, I went down to Gordon’s Locks (*Waddell’s*) where I worked for a brother and sister – William and Jane Gordon. They had been teachers in Jerrettspass School in their younger days but they had quit in my time. They had walked the Canal Bank to Jerrettspass every morning and home every evening. They had a nephew, Bob Minnis, and he was with me – they had a couple of farms up at Robinson’s and a bit here and there. They were lock-keepers too. The locks were very busy then. That was my first contact with the canal. I had to go to let the boats through. I remember one day I let 30 boats through – that was the busiest I mind. You had to take the number of every boat and put it down in the book. There were heavy and light boats – the heavy ones came from Newry. They were deeper down in the water. The light ones were high coming from Portadown and the Madden.

Every boat had a name. Francie Campbell had a boat called *‘The Norah’*. He kept a lock house at Terryhoogan as well. A lot of the boat names I can’t remember now. They all had their own ways. When they were coming by with a load of coals they would give you a bag of coal at the locks. The people I was with wouldn’t have taken the coals – they were very particular. I was with them for a brave while. After a while William died (**January 1912 aged 96 years**) and then Jane went up to what’s now Robinson’s and she died up there!

My wages were £5 for half a year – it wasn’t hard to count. I was going all day, as busy as a nailer, between feeding pigs and calves and taking in cows and opening lock gates. You would have heard the *‘wheeps’* or whistles of them coming up the canal warning you to get the locks ready. They would have come on till 10 o’clock at night. They had no fixed time. We would go out to with the hurricane lamp and they would see that



Terryhoogan Lock House, Francie Campbell, his daughter and his wife.

light from the Crack Bridge and then you would have heard the ‘wheooo’. Some of them were great whistlers. Then you had to make the lock ready.

If the lock was full and them coming out of Newry, you had to open the low sluice gates to empty the lock. The gates wouldn’t open till you emptied the lock, and the boat came in loaded. When she was in you shut the gates and you dropped the two sluices, ‘heads’ they called them, and raised the other ones and that brought her up to the other level. Tons of water came through two sluices and when she was level two gates would open – but no sooner. There were the short gates next Poyntzpass and the long gates next Newry.

I mind asking one fellow, he was a droll sort of a fellow, he used to appear now and again. He was a bit lightsome as a cork – I don’t know what you called him. I used to shout at him “Are you living yet?” and he would say “Why, did you send anybody to kill me?” One day he wanted me to give him a hand onto the horse’s back and I threw him up but I threw him out over the horse! Paddy Quinn was on a boat too. Jemmy Monaghan was the head of the whole thing. He had all to say - and he did say it.

(When Jane Gordon died in June 1915 at the age of 85, Peter left the lock-house and spent some time at various jobs including farm work and quarrying stones for Armagh County Council’s road-making.)

Well when I left the roads I went to work on the Canal. Bob Minnis spoke to Jemmy Monaghan for me and he started me. I remember the first job I did on the Canal. I was working at Poyntzpass near Arthur Moody’s. I was sent to work with John Waddell and Willy Crothers – they were old hands at it.

We were dredging the Canal near Arthur Moody’s where the Ball Alley River runs into the canal. The river brought down a lot of gravel and mud and rubbish – bottles, buckets and tin cans. Jimmy Monaghan attended the meetings in Newry and was always complaining about the rubbish – he had it in the paper. The headline in the Reporter was “Buckets and Tin Cans from Poyntzpass!” You dredged with a long tool, you pulled it down along the bottom – you had to give it time. You put the mud and gravel on the punt, two dredged and one had to

wheel it back and spread it to level the punt.

The punts were sunk at the last. There's one of them at the 'Crack Bridge' yet. There was tons of timber in it. I could show you where it was sunk. The contractor who built the new bridge, Sinton, Joe Monaghan got him to cover it with the mould. The punts were a "great old lad", you could have put 30 tons on them easily. The punts were used for everything, repairs as well as cleaning the canal out. Many a time they had to put a floor in a locks – they made up the stuff on the punt – things like that. When the punt was full of mud and gravel you put it wherever you could get rid of it – in a meadow – the people would ask you to do it. It had to be wheeled out.

It was rare to find anything valuable. One time at Arthur Moody's, Jemmy Burns found a half-crown. Another time we were putting a floor in at McKnight's locks and Jemmy Burns and me were working and I saw the shape of like a penny in the mud. So I lifted it and put it – mud and all – in my pocket. I didn't know what it was. Anyway I said to Jemmy that I found something. The boss – Jemmy Monaghan – was standing up above watching every move. So Jemmy (Burns) never said a word. Then in a jiffy didn't I see another wee round shape. I got it into my pocket too – so I whispered to Jemmy, "I got another one". When dinner time come I couldn't wait till find out what it was but when I got them cleaned I had two half-crowns which was a good bit at that time. That was at McKnight's.

We spent our time mostly dredging, and cleaning land drains. In the winter we had to break ice sometimes. They had a boat specially made in Bessbrook foundry, an iron boat, for a wooden boat was no use. It was twelve or fourteen feet long. It wasn't very deep, but open with a rail at chest height along both sides of it. There were two at each side of the boat, along each rail and there was the horse pulling it and a man steering. Then you rocked the boat from side to side as the horse pulled and that broke the ice as you went along.

I remember that one Sunday we had to open the Canal from Poyntzpass to Portadown – you were sweating going and foundered coming back! We went down for Dan Skelton with a load of turf. He had to come to Newry. We started off and broke the ice till him at the point of the White Coat (*where the river meets the canal at Portadown*) and then he followed us back. From the 'Pass to Newry that day there was less ice and he didn't need us from there on. The ice would have been gorged sometimes. That day the men rocking the boat were Jemmy Burns, John Waddell, Willie Crothers and me. Young James Monaghan was with the horse and Jemmy Monaghan was steering the boat. The locks were never badly frozen because there was always a bit of a run of water at the locks.

We had to work right down to Moneypenny's. Long ago when there was no bicycle the old hands had to go and stay for maybe a week – people like Paddy Hanratty and Tom Allen. They had a hut on the punt with their beds in it. Tom Allen told us many's a story about when he was on the canal.

He told me about one time they were working down beyond the Madden Station on a very straight stretch – you could see up the bank for maybe 3 or 4 miles. Well anyway, they were staying overnight and this morning they took a bit of a 'lie-in'. When they wakened up didn't they see this man walking down the bank in the distance



***A tea-break for the maintenance crew.
(Peter Campbell right front)***

no bigger a marble. It was the boss, Jemmy Monaghan. So they all up and to work right away they had no time for breakfast. They were cutting weeds and when Jemmy came up he passed no remarks but stayed about watching the men working. Tom Allen said, "It was a fast day that day for all creeds!" Anyway after an hour or two Jemmy set off back up the bank to catch the train at the Madden Station and he wasn't too far till the "tay-drawer" was on.

Another time they were down at Moyallen working and staying on the punt at night. Now there was a grand field of potatoes just across the ditch so this day they decided to dig a stalk or two for their dinner. Shortly after they had the spuds dug and in the pot boiling didn't the man who owned the field

send a man down to dig some for him and when this fella saw the punt he came across to speak to the men. Paddy Hanratty was cooking the dinner and after a while he said to the fella "What's your praties like the year?" "Ach, they're only middlin'" says your man. "Our own are just the same", said Paddy.

There was an auld fellow called George that lived down at Terryhoogan. He lived on his own. He was well enough off for he grew potatoes and sold them in the 'Pass. He sold the big ones and kept the wee ones for himself. Hughie Convery was also one of our squad at the time. One day Hughie spoke in to the man to see how he was. He came out smiling. He said, George had a great way of takin' his dinner. He ate his dinner sitting at the fire with a pot of wee potatoes beside him and he had the salt on the toe of his boot. When he took a wee potato he peeled with his thumb-nail he threw the skin into the fire. Then he dipped the potato in the salt on the toe of his boot and ate it. So when he had finished the dinner, there was no washing-up, nor anything to redd-up. That was the end of the dinner. Hughie said it was a handy system!

When I worked at Gordon's Locks Miss Gordon always had a bart (*long stack*) of hay in the haggard and she was always watching it in case the lightermen would steal some of it for their horses. Well one night this lighter came to the locks and Bob Minnis went out to let it through. Miss Gordon told me to "Go out and mind the hay". So I went out and I stood behind the stack. Anyway the lighter went through the locks and the man said "Good night" to Bob and on his way. When Bob went in yer man out with a bag and he started to pull handfuls of hay out of the stack. I could feel the stack swaying with every pull and the horse was nickering with delight. I said to myself, "Sure for all he'll take, it's not worth talking about." So I waited till he had his bag full and went on, whistling, and then I went inside.

One day Bob Minnis was down in the 'Pass at Arthur Moody's when Sam Hunniford from Portadown (any relation of Gloria's?) came along with a lighter so Bob stepped on for a lift back to Gordon's. Sam says "Can you steer?" and Bob said "Surely, many a time I steered a lighter"- although he'd never steered at all. Anyway he took over and Sam went down into the cabin to make himself a cup of tay. Well Bob got on well. He got through George Hall's (McVeigh's) locks alright and was going great. The next obstacle was the 'Camel-backed' bridge at Monaghan's. You had to cast off the tow-rope from the horse and go under the bridge and hook- on again on the other side. Now when the lighter is going well and you cast off the line the lighter veers off quite suddenly if you're not expecting it and Bob wasn't ready. Well, he cast off the line and as soon as he did the lighter swung over and run straight into the bridge with a bang. Sam was down below and tay and all went head over heels. When he got himself gathered he come up. He said to Bob "You've ruined me lovely boat!" but luckily enough there was no real harm done. That was all the steering Bob ever done!

When I worked in Gordon's the First World War broke out. Miss Gordon was by that time an old woman and was confined to bed most of the time. Canon Nelson was the Church of Ireland minister and he used to come regularly to visit Miss Gordon. He would always say to me "*Peter, you'll have to do one of two things, marry or go to the front – go one way or the other.*" He was always at me. When he came I had to go upstairs and tell Miss Gordon and see that 'the coast was clear', move chairs and so on.

Miss Gordon had an old-fashioned gun, a muzzle-loader, which was kept in a corner behind the hall door. You put a handful of hail and rammed it down into it. It was kept for a crow or a rat.

This day Canon Nelson came in and I went up as usual to make sure everything was alright. Just as I came to the top of the house I heard this unmerciful bang. I thought the house was blew up. There was dust and smoke everywhere. Well, when I came down the stairs the Canon was standing with the gun in his hand, as white as a sheet. There was a hole in the wall as big as your fist. He was doing what manys a one would while waiting – he didn't know it was loaded.

Miss Gordon was nearly stone deaf and passed no remarks and the Canon was glad to have no talk about it. Anyway the next time he come to see her, he says to me "*Peter, which way are you going to go? Are you going to marry or are you going to go to the front?*" And I says to him, "*Your Reverence, if they only knowed the good shot you are, they'd have you out to the front right away!*" and that put an end to that.



An 'Ice-Breaker' - Similar to one used on the Newry Canal