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BOOK REVIEW

'Bond of Union: Building the Erie Canal and the American Empire,' by Gerard Koeppel

The first, storied big dig

BY JAVAN KIENZLE • FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER • MARCH 15, 2009

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In "Bond of Union," journalist-historian Gerard Koeppel recounts the story of the conception and building of the Erie Canal, a saga that would contain almost as much suspense as a modern adventure-thriller, except that we know the ending: The canal opened in 1825, 363 miles long, 40 feet wide and 4 feet deep.

A good part of the project was an Irish achievement. New York Gov. DeWitt Clinton, one of the chief forces behind the building of the canal, was the descendant of an Irishman from County Longford. Between 1817 and 1825, some 50,000 Irish immigrants worked on digging the canal.

From the Hudson River, the terrain rises about 550 feet to Lake Erie. In an era before steam shovels and bulldozers, the Ditch That Made New York Rich was built on the backs of Irish laborers. It was said that "the only things needed to build a canal were a pick, a shovel and an Irishman."

The immigrants made \$8-\$12 a month at a time when unskilled laborers in Ireland earned about 10 cents a day. Explosions, cave-ins, collapsing scaffolding and canal fever (malaria) took so many lives that it was said that one Irishman was buried for every mile of canal built.

Politicians and merchants on the East Coast had yearned, nay, lusted, for a route to the West. During the War of 1812, the British burned Buffalo. Western New York state was almost undefendable because transportation was so problematic. The cost of moving artillery from Albany to Lake Erie was more than double its purchase price, and the roads that existed were primitive.

But once the canal was open, freight and passengers made their way west cheaply and comparatively quickly. Business boomed on both ends of the waterway. From 1830-1840, according to "Irish American Chronicle," Michigan's population skyrocketed from 31,639 to 212,167.

This engrossing account of an important achievement in U.S. history shows evidence of an awesome amount of research.

'BOND OF UNION: BUILDING THE ERIE CANAL AND THE AMERICAN EMPIRE'

out of four stars

By Gerard Koeppel

DaCapo, 480 pages, \$28

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