
Franklin D. Roosevelt — “The Great Communicator”

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Before Convention of the New York State Waterways Association,
Albany, N. Y., October 18, 1929

Senator Hill, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I know something now about the waterways of the State of New York, because last summer I covered a large part of the canal system, and, being a resident of the Hudson River section along here, I knew that angle of it before.

I suppose I should, in good precedence before coming here, have carefully prepared something so that it would have been all down in black and white and my tongue could not possibly slip. The last time I talked about the waterways or canals I said in a casual way over the air, just before I went South, what was perfectly true and I hoped that the meaning was clear to any person of average intelligence in this State, with emphasis on the word "average," that as far as our Barge Canal goes, while it is a splendid waterway

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and while it is being, I think, very well run, that it does not satisfy me. I think there are many ways in which we should improve the Barge Canal in the future. Then I went on and made what I thought was a perfectly fair statement, that in the future, unless we did something to improve the Barge Canal, we might just as well scrap it. The next morning I was somewhat perturbed, to put it mildly, when certain newspapers came out in large headlines, in fact that same afternoon, with the statement, "Governor Roosevelt advocates scrapping the Barge Canal."

It occurs to me that the "average intelligence" which I was speaking of was not exercised by the writers of that article, or by the gentlemen at the desk of the papers. So you see I should have every word down to one syllable and have them edited by a committee of ten, and then submit them to a jury to see if anybody could possibly misconstrue my words. However, I have not got it in that form and I will take my chances with the press in the future in spite of slaps.

I did have a perfectly delightful summer, to take up the non-business end of it first, and I wish very much that the people of this State and the people from all the surrounding states could be impressed as I was this summer with the charms of the canal, quite apart from its utility of the canal as a common carrier. For mile after mile the canal as it is today is a very beautiful and charming river, a place for recreation and a place to spend a real vacation. Some day we will wake up to it and use the canal a hundred times more than we are using it now for pleasure purposes.

When I completed my trip I asked the State Council of Parks to make a study of the proposition of taking into the department of parks that stretch of country from Waterford out past Little Falls and practically as far as Utica, where the canal is not a canal but a beautiful river practically all the way.

A few people have discovered the advantage of the canal, but you can travel it for miles without finding anyone using it for boating purposes, for camping purposes, for picnicing purposes or anything else. There are quite a few spots along the trip from here to Buffalo or from Syracuse to Ontario or along the Champlain Canal where the prospect changes every mile.

I have gone so far as to talk with some of my friends about putting on certain sections of the canal boats with some form of a round trip for passenger service. It has been figured out by some of my friends that the experiment could be made for the sum of between \$100,000 and \$200,000.

People are using boats more and more for pleasure. As far as seeing the natural beauties of the State is concerned, I would much rather see them while being seated in a comfortable chair on the deck of a boat going along at a speed of six or seven miles an hour, than I would from the most luxurious automobile ever made traveling along at forty or fifty miles an hour. You really see the country and, incidentally, on this trip, I saw many people, too, and that was mighty interesting.

From a business point of view we know that the waterways of the State are constant and are of far greater value to the people of the State and other states than anybody could have prophesied ten years ago. I cite as an example of that, an episode that happened to me. I think it was about ten or twelve years ago some gentlemen came to my house at Hyde Park, some residents of Poughkeepsie, and asked if I did not want to subscribe for some stock in a new company that was coming to Poughkeepsie, a lumber company. If I had the money I would not have invested it, because they made this perfectly astounding proposition. They were going to get this fine river front property at Poughkeepsie and they were going to bring lumber to Poughkeepsie, not from the State of New York, nor from the South, which would have been perfectly logical, but they were going to bring it to Poughkeepsie from Oregon and Washington, and distribute it all over the Hudson River.

I said: "That is bringing coals to Newcastle."

We have plenty of lumber nearby and I did not think that it was a sound proposition. Today that company is not only formally established, but it is bringing in once a week an ocean-going steamship from the Pacific Coast

filled with lumber. That is not half of it. This Summer, when I was traveling along the Barge Canal out beyond Syracuse, we came across a couple of barges, half loaded with lumber and going in a westerly direction.

I looked at the lumber and saw that it was reddish and I said to Colonel Greene, "Is that Pacific Coast Lumber?"

He said, "Certainly."

There was the Barge Canal being used for the transportation of lumber West, that had come down the Pacific Ocean, through the Panama Canal, up through the Caribbean Sea and Atlantic Ocean and had been transferred and was headed for Buffalo. I say that to show that there is nobody who can predict what is going to happen in the future as to the movements East or West or as to the character of goods that will be carried. Nobody who was familiar with the situation when the Barge Canal was built, could prophesy that it would ever be used for the shipment of lumber headed West that originated on the Pacific Coast. So the best we can say is that no human being can definitely say how many tons will be carried next year or the year after, or whether the tonnage will come all one way or be divided half and half. Nobody can tell what the character of the tonnage will be. All we know is that it will be a definite fact. That is to say, water transportation reached, a good many years ago, its low point and from now on very definitely, water transportation is going to be an increasing factor all over the United States. If we do not believe it in this State, all we have to do is to go out to the Mississippi and talk to the business men along the upper Mississippi and Missouri. There is not one of them who is not able to follow navigation the whole length of the river. Take the Ohio Canal that is about to be opened. That is another indication that business men all over the United States are waking up again to the possibilities of water navigation.

Let us come down to the Barge Canal itself. I will concede that we have a Barge Canal that has been very much kicked around. There has been a general feeling, and plenty of talk about the white elephant that the State has on its hands; that it will never pay, and that it is not worth while spending money on it, and that the State is spending three or four million dollars a year for free tolls for the few people who are using it. As a matter of fact you know that under very adverse conditions the tonnage of the Barge Canal has increased steadily. I do not know the record for more than five years back, but during the past five years the tonnage has increased on an average of four per cent each year,—sixty per cent increase in tonnage in the course of five years—and, believe me, there is not a railroad in the country that would not be tickled to death to have a guarantee of four per cent increase in the amount of freight carried every year for five years to come. I do not know and you do not know whether that increase is going to continue for another five years or not, but I hope it is.

Frankly, I was struck by certain things that I saw on the Barge Canal this summer, and compared them with what might be called parallel cases on the Canadian Canal, the Canadian Canal being approximately the same size. I happen to be a sort of salt water sailor more than I am a fresh water sailor. Perhaps for that reason I have a natural prejudice in favor of anything that looks like a ship as against what we used to call a canal boat. I like the lines, I like the appearance and practicability of a ship over that of a canal boat. Up there on the St. Lawrence you see every mile sometimes, two or three of these small ships, which, incidentally, are operated to capacity. They have the same capacity as some of our large boats that use the Barge Canal. They have comfortable decks and they have living quarters which are up in the air, and they have a new gadget or stick that extends upward from the boat enabling the skipper to lay his course through the intricacies of navigation, but these ships when they come to Lake Ontario to keep right on going. They are not as large as grain boats but they are able to keep on going. They can not go to Europe—they have not solved that problem—and they are probably not good for the heaviest kind of lake storms but most of these Canadian ships that use their canals are capable of keeping on to the more distant points on the lakes. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. The Canadian Canals are run to capacity. They

are not as modern as ours. I will not say that they are not as well run as ours, but I will say that ours are as well run as theirs, which is the more polite way of putting it.

Our canal has limitations, very distinct limitations. A proposal has been made by some of my friends in Congress and also around Buffalo, that we take our canal and increase it from twelve to fourteen feet. It would still be a canal, a boat canal, and that is my objection. My thought is that some future day, which in my judgment will come, we will definitely have a ship canal across the State of New York and until it comes, that it will be better as a financial policy for us to do the best we can with our present canal, and instead of adding a foot here and a foot there and the very heavy cost, that we should do the best we can with what we have until we do make the big change. That does not mean that we can not all work for this major change, which, I repeat, is bound to come about some day. It means the elimination of the permanent bridges which today span the Barge Canal. Just as long as you have permanent bridges you will have the canal type of vessel, and just as long as you have the canal type of vessels you will have the limitation from which the canal suffers. I hope that the most of you have been along that canal during the later years and have seen the operation of it. It seems to me that we have the required depth of water all the way and, where there is any question about the twelve foot depth, we have a very adequate fleet of dredges which can reach any point that is filled in and keep it at the twelve foot depth. Further, I think that the personnel of the canal corps constitutes an important factor. They are very efficient and they take pride in their work, not merely in seeing that the physical appearance of the canal locks and banks are excellent but also that the practical cost of the operation of the canal is kept down to a low point. That goes with practical efficiency and, as you know, the canal is certainly not in politics. That I can substantiate because of the constant howls from some of my Democratic friends along the canal.

I want to make it perfectly clear that I am in favor of a much bigger and better canal than we have now, but we can not get it until we can sell the idea to the people of the State.

I am certainly in favor of a deeper and better Hudson. I live on the Hudson myself. The day will come, I am very sure, when the whole of the Hudson River from New York to Troy will be used commercially, where every foot of waterfront will be put to the most useful possible purpose. We shall see before we die, not merely the occasional tramp steamer come up to Albany, but we shall see real ocean steamers, many of them, belonging to the regular lines coming up the whole length of the Hudson as far as the Troy Dam. I would not be surprised to have that happen in our lifetime, because the trend today is back towards the use of inland waterways. If you go back in history you will find that the country as a whole was single-minded and could not see anything but canals from about 1829 to 1850 or 1860, and from that time there was a gradual decline and a tremendous building of railroads, and the canals went out of favor and touched the low points when the average citizen said that canals and river navigation were things of the past and that they were gone, and people began to collect prints and write books about something that was gone from civilization. Well, the old type is gone, yes, but a modern substitute for it is on its way back, and I am convinced, from a practical business point of view, that we shall need development in the next generation of water transportation far more than we have developed it in the last generation.

We will need it not only because of the larger volume of merchandise we will find necessary to carry, but we will need it as an economic adjunct, to keep a check on what transportation should cost. But a little competition, even in this modern era of merger and consolidation, is a good thing.

About a month ago I said something about the development of power on the St. Lawrence and as somewhat of a coincidence within a few days my friend, Henry Ford, came out with an article in one of the magazines in which he intimated that the best thing for the United States was to have all electrical power and all water power under one great private corporation. About

a day after I read that suggestion of Mr. Ford, I met a friend on the train. I will not tell you where he was from because I might get the Ford agent into trouble, but it was not so very far away.

He said, "Did you read that article of Henry Ford about having all the power in the country under one private corporation?"

I said, "Yes."

He said, "You know last Thursday I had a good illustration of why Henry Ford is wrong."

I said, "What do you mean?"

He said, "You know in my business I have to send people out a good deal and I generally keep three or four cars in commission for sending them out over the district. Last Thursday I went in to see my friend, the Ford agent, and I said to him, 'Look here! I am up against it,—one of my cars has broken down absolutely, and I have to have a Ford runabout on Monday morning next.' The agent said to me, 'I am awfully sorry, I wish I could let you have it, but these Ford runabouts are in tremendous demand. Do you know we are thirty days behind on delivery!' I said, 'I have to have that car next Monday morning.' The agent said, 'You can't have it Monday morning, they don't grow. I can let you have one in a month but that is the best I can do.' I said, 'That is impossible. I have to have the car Monday morning.' He said, 'I will tell you what I will do. I will call up the distributing agent for this territory.' He called him up and said that I was a friend of his, and as a special favor, could he beat that time of thirty days. The distributing agent said, 'Well, I will do what I can for him. He is a good customer of ours. I will let you have that car in three weeks.' I didn't say much but I walked over towards the door and as I got near the door and had it half open I looked over my shoulder and said, 'Where is the Chevrolet agency?' The agent shouted, 'Here, come back! Don't go away! You don't want a Chevrolet.' I said, 'No, I don't want a Chevrolet. A Ford suits my purpose better but I have got to have it if I can't get a Ford.' He replied, 'Here, come back here and sit down. Wait a minute, don't be in such a hurry.'"

My friend said, "Well, I stepped back and he went in the back room and apparently did some more telephoning and then came back with his face all wreathed in smiles and said, 'Don't ask me how I did it, never mind how I did it, but it is all right. You come in Monday morning and I will have the Ford for you.'"

"Well," said my friend to me, "I wonder what would have happened if all the automobiles in the United States were made by Henry Ford."

So on this matter of transportation, if all the railroads in the United States were merged into one, I think it would be a mighty good thing for us, if we had the Hudson River and the Barge Canal within the control of the people of the State of New York.