

## CANAL READING

*The following is part of a description of being on a packet (passenger) boat on the Main Line canal from Harrisburg to Pittsburgh, which was written by Charles Dickens, the famous English author, during his trip to America in 1842. It would be good reading aloud to a class and could be discussed as you go along. (It is taken from "The Amazing Pennsylvania Canals", by William H. Shank, pp. 86-91, American Canal and Transportation Center).*

### A Passenger Trip on the Canal

"In the bow or front part of the packet boat there was a small room where the crew slept. Next came another small sleeping room, this one for the women passengers (it was separated from the next room by a red curtain) and next, in the middle of the boat, was the main cabin, the largest room on the vessel. This was the dining room and parlor during the day, and at night the men slept in it. The sleeping space for the women and girls was much smaller than the men's because there were fewer women traveling than men. In the stem of the boat were the pantry and kitchen, where the food for the passengers and crew was cooked.... then a train of three horses was attached to the tow-rope. The boy upon the leader smacked his whip, the rudder creaked and groaned complainingly, and we had begun our journey."

"... at about six o'clock, all the small tables were put together to form one long table and everybody sat down to tea, coffee, bread, butter, salmon, shad, liver, steak, potatoes, pickles, ham, chops, black puddings and sausages."

"By the time the meal was over, the rain was nearly over too; and it became feasible to go on deck; which was a great relief, notwithstanding its being a very small deck, and being rendered still smaller by the luggage. It was somewhat embarrassing at first to have to duck nimbly every five minutes whenever the man at the helm cried 'Bridge', and sometimes, when the cry was 'Low Bridge' to lie down nearly flat."

"I have mentioned by having been in some uncertainty and doubt, at first, relative to the sleeping arrangements on board this boat. I remained in the same vague state of mind until ten o'clock or thereabouts, when, going below, I found suspended on either side of the cabin, three long tiers of hanging bookshelves, designed apparently of volumes of the small octavo size. \*Looking with greater attention at these contrivances (wondering to find such literary preparations in such a place) I descried on each shelf a sort of microscopic sheet and blanket; then I began dimly to comprehend that the passengers were the library, and that they were to be arranged edgewise on these shelves till morning."

"As to the ladies, they were already abed, behind the red curtain which was carefully drawn and pinned up in the center, though as every cough or sneeze or whisper, behind this curtain was perfectly audible before it, we had still a lively consciousness of the society."

"My shelf being a bottom one, I finally determined on lying upon the floor, rolling gently in, stopping immediately I touched the mattress, and remaining for the night with that side uppermost, whatever it might be."

"Between five and six o'clock in the morning we got up, and some of us went on deck. The washing accommodations were primitive. There was a tin ladle chained to the deck, with which every gentleman who thought it necessary to cleanse himself (many were superior to the

weakness) fished the dirty water out of the canal, and poured it into a tin basin, secured in like manner. There was also a jack-towel. And, hanging up before a little looking-glass in the bar, in the immediate vicinity of the bread and cheese and biscuits, were a public comb and hair-brush.”

“At eight o’clock, the shelves being taken down and put away, and the tables joined together, everybody set down to the tea, coffee, bread, butter, salmon, shad, liver, steak, potatoes, pickles, ham, chops, black puddings, and sausages all over again. When everybody had done with everything, the fragments were cleared away, and one of the waiters, appearing in the character of a barber, shaved such of the company as desired to be shaved.”

“... And yet, despite these oddities - and even they had for me at least, a humor of their own - there was much in this mode of traveling which I heartily enjoyed at this time, and look back upon with great pleasure. Even the running up, bare-necked, at five o’clock in the morning, from the tainted cabin to the dirty deck; scooping up the icy water, plunging one’s head into it, and drawing it out all fresh and glowing with the cold; was a good thing. The fast, brisk walk upon the towing-path between that time and breakfast, when every vein and artery seemed to tingle with health; the exquisite beauty of the opening day, when light came gleaming off from everything; the lazy motion of the boat, when one lay idly on the deck, looking through, rather than at, the deep blue sky; the gliding on at night, so noiselessly, the shining out of the bright stars, undisturbed by noise of wheels or steam, or any other sound that the liquid rippling of the water as the boat went on; all these were pure delights.”

### Vocabulary Words

<b>parlor</b>	a room like a living room for sitting
<b>tow-rope</b>	the rope which attached the mules or horses to the boat
<b>black pudding</b>	a kind of sausage made with blood
<b>feasible</b>	possible
<b>rendered</b>	made
<b>nimbly</b>	quickly
<b>vague</b>	unclear, fuzzy
<b>octavo size</b>	around 10 inches high
<b>contrivances</b>	things cleverly put together
<b>descried</b>	noticed
<b>accomodations</b>	things provided for convenience
<b>primitive</b>	simple, uncomplicated
<b>vicinity</b>	nearby area
<b>barber</b>	someone who cuts hair, and in earlier days, shaved people
<b>savory</b>	tasty
<b>tainted</b>	smelly
<b>exquisite</b>	beautiful
<b>idly</b>	lazily