

follow the voyageur route up the Ottawa River from Montreal to the mouth of the Rideau River, then turn south along an old Indian canoe route, the Rideau River, the Rideau Lakes and the Cataraqui River to the Royal Navy base on Lake Ontario at Kingston. Work began on the Ottawa River locks in 1819, but soon afterwards postwar retrenchment stalled plans for completion of the waterway.

The Duke of Wellington strongly advocated the Rideau Canal as an adequate defence system for British North America.

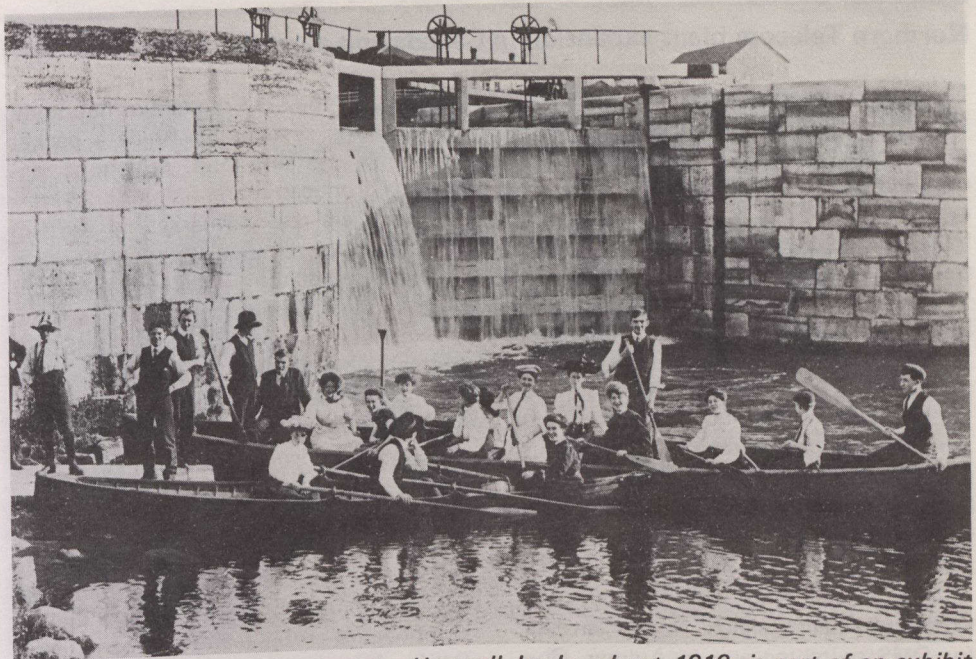
In 1826, Lieutenant-Colonel John By of the Royal Engineers was sent to the wilderness of Upper Canada to build the waterway connecting Upper and Lower Canada. Arriving at the mouth of the Rideau River, he found only three small settlements in the area: Hull was on the far side of the Ottawa River, and Perth and Richmond were both some distance inland from the Rideau River. Since none of these was convenient, he set up his headquarters near the junction of the two rivers, across the Ottawa River from Hull. This settlement, called Bytown, formed the nucleus of what is now Canada's capital, Ottawa.

The Rideau Canal had originally been planned as a small barge canal. Colonel By immediately advocated a system of much larger locks. He finally persuaded his superiors to authorize a minimum size of 40.5 metres long and 10 metres wide, with a 1.67-metre draft — large enough to accommodate the new steamboats which were beginning to appear on the Great Lakes.

Work actually began on taming the wilderness rivers in 1827. The over-all design involved a series of dams and associated locks which turned the rivers into a procession of placid levels. Because the scheme utilized the natural watercourse wherever feasible, and so reduced the need for artificial channels, it cut the cost considerably by avoiding the expense of extensive excavations. Throughout the whole system, land acquisition proved of minor consequence due to the sparse population, although later litigation erupted over disputed land evaluations.

Colonel By and a small contingent of Royal Engineer officers designed the Rideau Canal and supervised the project. The actual construction work was let out to private individuals on a contract basis. Most of the locks and dams were built of stone quarried on site, and the necessary iron fixtures were forged by local blacksmiths.

The labourers who dug the lock pits,



*A photograph of canoers near the Hartwell Locks, about 1910, is part of an exhibit presented by the Public Archives in Ottawa in honour of the waterway's anniversary.*

hailed the stones, and built the dams and locks were drawn from two main sources. Many came from the only major centre of population in the country, the French-Canadian settlements of Lower Canada. Still others were recruited from the boatloads of immigrants — mostly from Ireland — who were beginning to arrive in ever-increasing numbers at Montreal and Quebec. New recruitment was always needed to replace workers who had moved on, and labourers who had died of malarial fevers contracted in swamps along the way.

From its official opening in 1832 until the 1950s, the Rideau was a busy com-



*In winter the Rideau Canal becomes the world's longest skating rink.*

mercial artery for the whole country. Although barges and steamboats could navigate the direct route down the rapids of the St. Lawrence River from Lake Ontario to Montreal, the return trip was impossible. The Ottawa and Rideau system was the only way to reach the Great Lakes from the east, in spite of undersized locks on the Ottawa River, which hindered full use of the system.

In 1849 the last of the deep water canals around the rapids in the St. Lawrence was completed, and commercial shippers were quick to switch to that more direct route. Because the threat of war with the United States had never materialized, and had almost disappeared by mid-century, the Rideau Canal system had lost the military significance for which it had been designed. Accordingly, Britain transferred the Ottawa and Rideau system to the colonial government.

The Rideau Canal's heyday as a busy national highway had ended. However, the region it passed through remained ill-served by roads and railways until after the First World War, and the Rideau continued to serve as an important local transportation system.

After the First World War commercial traffic disappeared almost entirely from the Rideau. The only factor which saved the system from abandonment during the Depression was the cost of either taking it apart or rebuilding the structures for water control purposes. The Rideau Canal was no longer of any value in military

*(Continued on P. 8)*