



The second of a special three part series in which author Leo McNeir explores the canals of New York State



CRUISING USA ★

PART 2: Go West (not so) Young Man



A Mid-Lakes Navigation boat cruises past Holy Trinity Church at Seneca Falls

PHOTO: ABC CREATIVE GROUP

We collected our boat, *Seneca*, from the Mid-Lakes Navigation Company's Erie Macedon Landing on the last Saturday morning in May. It was the first week of the season for the company founded twenty years ago by Peter Wiles Sr, and final preparations were in hand for the fleet to receive boarders.

As soon as we stepped aboard, *Seneca* felt strangely familiar.

Why *strangely*? Because it felt odd to be stepping aboard a boat so similar in style to a British narrowboat on the Erie Canal in upstate New York. Also, a number of differences soon became apparent: this is no narrowboat, nor yet quite broad beam.

The boats built and operated by Mid-Lakes have a beam of ten feet and are not as long as those normally offered for hire in the UK. *Seneca* was of the type known here as a Lockmaster 42. A hire

boat just forty-two feet long? Though shorter and wider than a narrowboat, it felt more spacious inside; the extra width makes a lot of difference to the accommodation. It seemed to us to have roughly the same amount of internal space as a sixty-footer in our terms.

A noticeable difference was the canopy over the stern deck. At first it looked somehow twee, reminiscent of that other American institution, the Surrey with a fringe on top, as the song goes. Once we began travelling we quickly became grateful for the shade it gave from the sun. Even though we were enjoying a spring break, the temperature and sunshine were up to average British summer levels and we were glad of that extra protection.

Clearly, in the hot summers of this region, the canopy would be more than welcome. Although it passes through miles of



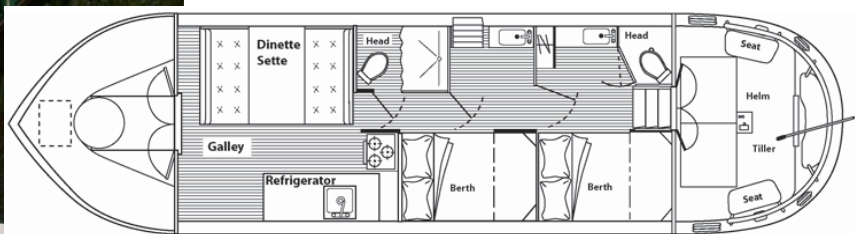
ON BOARD OUR LOCKMASTER 42

Our boat, *Seneca*, a Lockmaster 42

Inset: The interior layout of *Seneca*

Below, left: The cooking facilities in the galley are good

NYS produces excellent wines that will enhance any galley!



woodland, at around 120 feet wide, the Erie Canal provides no opportunities for shady cruising, such as you find on, say, the *Canal du Midi* in France.

Interior layout

The interior layout of *Seneca* was very reminiscent of British styles, though it had a retro feeling. The company has modelled its fit-out on a style reminiscent of UK boats of the 1980s. The interior is lined in tongue-and-groove pine – they call it ‘knotty pine’ – which gives a warm cosy atmosphere and a very *boaty* feel.

The specification is comprehensive, though with certain deliberate exceptions. These boats do not come equipped with microwave ovens or CD players. The cooking facilities are good, but the company recognises that many of the meals taken by their clients will be in the numerous restaurants and cafes in the villages and towns along the way. In a country where eating out is very common, this approach is realistic.

An American friend remarked that in the US breakfast is a social event. Even so, the galley was well equipped with a good cooker and fridge and all the utensils you would be likely to need. As for the absence of a CD player, this is also a realistic response to the rise of the iPod and the walkman.

Remarkably for such a short boat, the external areas are generous. All their craft have a spacious sitting area in the cratch – the ‘front deck well’ – and a well-proportioned cruiser stern deck. These boats are designed for socialising, with none of the purist attitude of the British trad boating fans, where the steerer stands in splendid isolation on the counter, while his friends enjoy convivial drinks at the fore end.

The Lockmaster 42 can sleep four in comfort, six with ease. Two permanent double beds in separately divisible sleeping cabins can

be supplemented by converting the dinette into a further double bed. Each bedroom has its own washbasin plus an *en suite* toilet. One *en suite* facility contains a good-sized shower cubicle.

This arrangement proved to be comfortable and practical, and there was a plentiful supply of sheets, blankets and towels. The shower drains into the canal, in common with all the boat’s grey water, but each loo has its own forty gallon holding tank.

Storage was well provided, with lockers, shelves, cupboards and drawers built into every available cranny, including stowage for power cables under the steps down from the stern deck and for the water hose in a locker in the cratch.

Automatic systems

All the systems on *Seneca* seemed to work automatically. A locker under the stern deck contains two linked propane bottles. If one is exhausted, the other immediately comes on stream. The starter battery for the engine operates independently from the leisure batteries – known as ‘house batteries’ here – so that if for any reason the domestic supply failed, there would still be full power for starting the engine. The engine compartment has a dry bilge and there was no need during our week of travelling to run a bilge pump or adjust a stern gland.

The technical specification was similarly of a high standard. The Yanmar engine produces over 50 horsepower, more than adequate to propel *Seneca*’s fourteen tons at the canal’s cruising speed limit, which is generally 7 mph, with occasional sectors limited to 5 mph. Our normal running speed for the engine was just over 2,000 rpm, with around 1,700 rpm for slower sections and the slowest running speed of about 1,300 rpm past moored craft.

On one occasion in a long stretch of deserted water where the banks had been blasted through solid rock – so no risk of damage to the shore – I opened up experimentally to 3,000 rpm. The boat surged forward with ease, and there was plenty of power in reserve.

This was my first experience of a boat fitted with a bow-thruster, and I’ve now become an enthusiast. In particular I was glad to have it for manoeuvring in the huge open spaces in the lock chambers.

One notable difference between the Lockmaster 42 and a British boat was the steering. *Seneca*’s tiller was very firm which made it possible to steer a straight course with relatively few adjustments when on the move.



During our orientation lesson it was suggested that an easy way to guide the boat was to sit back on the steerer's bench with a foot on the console and a leg resting against the tiller arm to keep it in place. I tried this laid-back, no-hands approach and it worked.

It also allowed me to relax at the tiller and look cool in my Ray-Ban Aviator sunglasses. Was it a coincidence, I found myself wondering, that the HQ of Bausch and Lomb – makers of Ray-Bans – was just a short distance off the canal up the Genesee river in Rochester?

Another first for me – on a canal boat, at least – was the provision of two-way radio. This was required for contacting lock-keepers and bridge-keepers and, while not needed very frequently, was an essential part of the boat's equipment.

Our boatyard

In the boatyard prior to departure I had plenty of time to examine the Lockmaster fleet. They are good, solid, practical, well thought-out boats that lack nothing anyone would be likely to need on holiday.

In Britain we sometimes hear of hire companies offering training that amounts to little more than a quick run up the cut and an outline of how to tackle a lock. Not so with Mid-Lakes Navigation. Despite our experience of owning our own narrowboat for over



Some features look familiar - the Yanmar control panel - but not others...



fifteen years, no corners were cut. We received a thorough checklist of instructions and detailed information on every aspect of boat management.

One of Peter Wiles' daughters, Libby, guided us through every item on the list then left it with us to absorb in our own time with no rush or pressure. I had to initial every item once I was clear about it, and I received comprehensive replies to all my questions.

The next step was a practical lesson on the canal, including the passage of a lock situated about a mile from the boatyard. This was important as, although the locks are operated by lock-keepers, their passage follows strict procedures unlike anything



Peter Wiles' daughter, Libby, provides thorough training



Comfortable berths aboard the Lockmaster 42

we have in the UK. At a distance of around two hundred yards (it felt strange to be back in a world where everything is in Imperial measurements) I had to radio ahead to the lock-keeper. It was fun.

In my youth I did some gliding in Germany and I was once invited to do a stint on the two-way radio as ground control. As several of the glider pilots had served on Heinkels in the war, it felt bizarre, like being in the Luftwaffe. Here, on the Erie Canal, it was like commanding the Starship Enterprise. The exchange went something like this.

'Lock Thirty, Lock Thirty, Lock Thirty ... this is vessel, Seneca, requesting eastbound.'

'I have you in sight, Seneca. Advance when I give you the green light.' The lock-keeper – sorry, lockmaster – sounded like mission control at Houston.

'Understood, thank you.'

'You're welcome, captain.'

It was promotion at last. Definitely time for the Ray-Bans.

The locks themselves were – to borrow an American phrase – something else. Huge is not the word. You could go on a cruise inside the chambers. On all sides ropes dangle down for you to grip to avoid wandering around when the water is being pumped in or out. All the Mid-Lakes boats are supplied with special heavy-duty gloves for clinging to the ropes and we used the engine and bow-thruster for added control.

With the orientation behind us, it was time to set off along the most historic man-made waterway in America.

Out onto the canal

One week is a short time, and the western stretch of the Erie Canal is a big place. For our itinerary we chose to head west towards Rochester to see how far we could go before turning back in time to try a short run eastwards. It was a warm sunny morning when we left Macedon Landing and steered Seneca out into mid-channel.

First impressions: that feeling of familiarity soon gave way to a sense of difference. This was recognisably a canal, but on a grander scale than anything in Britain, apart from ship canals. At 120 feet



Mid-Lakes supply heavy-duty gloves for clinging to the ropes - you really need them!

wide, we had little impression of our speed, even though we were travelling at double our usual rate.

The waterway ran through a wooded landscape, the trees often closely bordering the rocky shore on both sides with no sign of a towpath. There were long expanses like this where there was little to do but relax in quiet and solitude and just let the world go by. At times we would emerge from the forest to catch a glimpse of a road or houses. It seemed that no one we passed let us go without a friendly smile and wave to see us on our way.

In wilderness sections with no towpath, coupled with rocky banks, it was not practical to try to tie up for the night out in the country. In theory, you should be able to stop anywhere. In practice, it makes much more sense to aim for a charmingly-called, *village harbour* (sorry, I mean, of course, *harbor*).

On our first night we docked at Pittsford on a free public mooring in the centre of the village. The term *village* in this part of the world signifies a small township, with several churches and a main street comprising a pleasing variety of shops, restaurants, bars, private houses and, intriguingly, funeral homes.

Our mooring was provided with mains electricity free of charge, and we were permitted to stay there for two nights. But keen to explore further, we cast off next morning bright and early, and headed west.

Charming

Everywhere we went, we encountered charming helpful service. And there was always the friendly greeting: 'Hi, how're you doin'?' Although at first sounding hearty to British ears, we soon realised that Americans really do like to create a welcoming atmosphere. It typifies their positive, outgoing approach to life in general, and the more we experienced it, the more we grew to appreciate it.

Even anglers seemed genuinely pleased to see us, with no apparent resentment that we might be disturbing their sport. It was a land of warmth in every way, and it gradually dawned on us that we had come to probably the most dynamic country on earth and found peace and calm.

The cruising was relaxed and easy, and we were by now



On the Waterfront - the city of Rochester has ambitious plans for its waterway

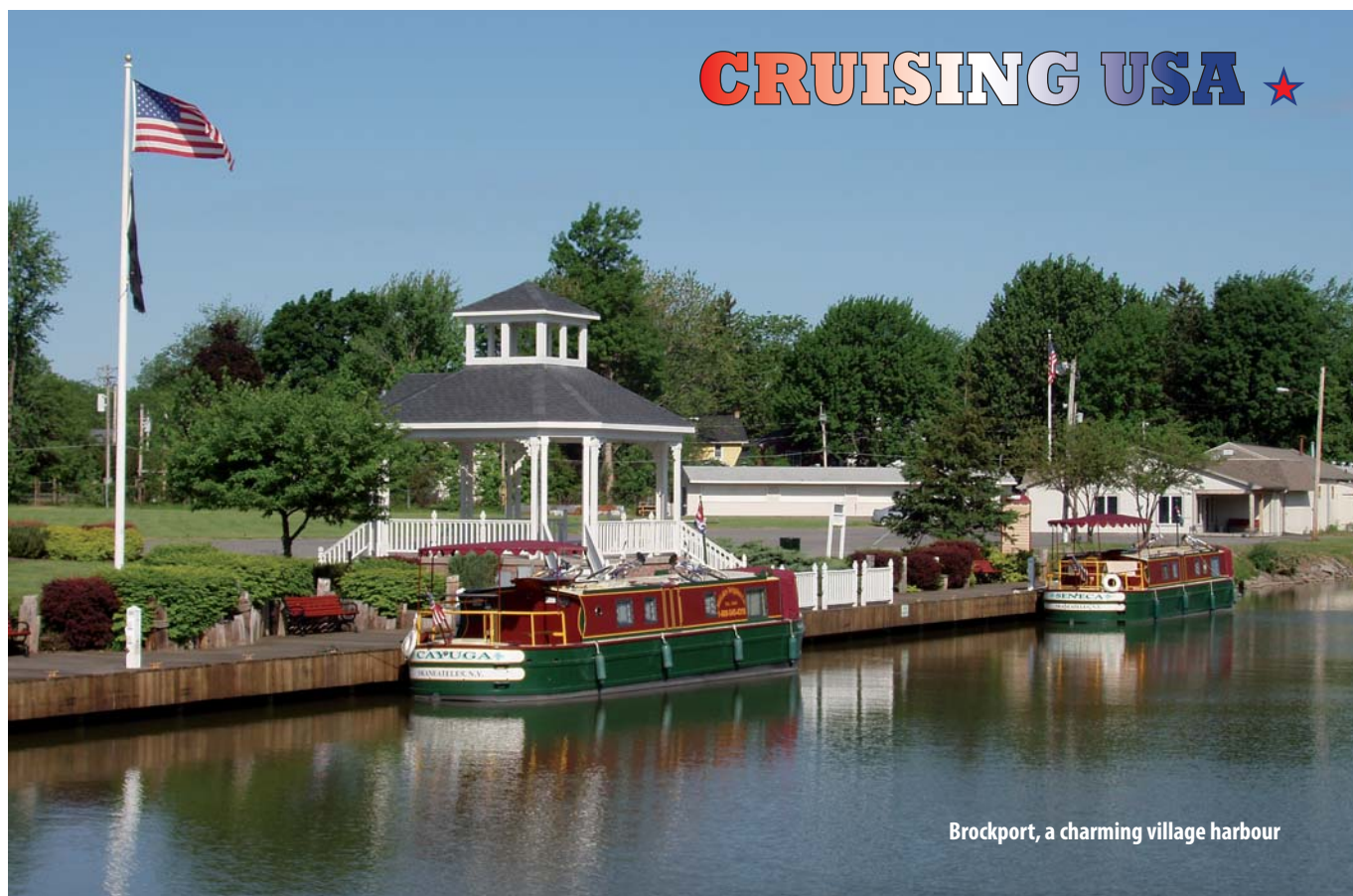
old hands at managing the locks. We arrived at our next stop, Spencerport, where we spent the night at another free public mooring and ate well at a village inn.

Another early start brought us to Brockport by lunchtime the following day. No sooner had we tied up than we were welcomed by Mr Cecil Wilson, a friendly volunteer from the Welcome Center (sic), who offered us every kind of service for just a few dollars.

When he discovered that we were interested in the history of the Erie Canal, he immediately arranged a meeting with Professor Bill Andrews, recently retired from the State University of New York, and an expert in this field. It was a fascinating and unexpected bonus. We then spent a pleasant hour mooching around the town and watching the Memorial Day parade.

Memorable

We returned in the evening to Pittsford to meet newly-made friends on Tuesday for a day out. Typically American, we had a full and memorable itinerary. We first drove to Rochester, which is a very fine city – third biggest in NYS after the Big Apple itself and



CRUISING USA ★

Brockport, a charming village harbour



Buffalo – with numerous restaurants, museums, theatres, elegant boulevards and even nearby wine trails. It also has impressive plans afoot to rewater whole sections of the canal in the very centre.

We visited the beautiful new docklands development at Corn Hill with inviting moorings just four miles up the Genesee River from the canal. With its excellent facilities, Rochester – the original HQs of Kodak, Bausch & Lomb and Xerox – is well worth a visit.

Our journey continued out of town, and now it's confession time. I don't normally do the tourist bit and I don't much like crowds, but we drove to Niagara Falls – please don't tell anyone – and I wouldn't have missed it for the world. It was wonderful!

We did the whole thing, starting with the boat trip on the *Maid of the Mist*. If you go, here's a tip. Make sure you have plenty of schoolgirls on board, as we did. They do all the screaming when the boat gets into the roaring waters below the falls. It adds greatly to the atmosphere.

Thank goodness we were wearing voluminous blue capes, so we couldn't be recognised by anyone.

Also worth doing is the Cave of the Winds, where you walk up wooden stairs virtually into the falls. Another tip: don't expect not to get wet. Some visitors we saw were soaked to the marrow, but no one seemed to mind; it was all part of the fun!

After a splendid dinner in Rochester we got back to *Seneca* late that night totally exhausted and very happy.

Wishing to explore the other side of Macedon, we turned back the next day, our goal being to overnight at Richardson's Basin near the well-known Richardson's restaurant about which Cassandra is writing separately (see *Boat Food USA*). Needless to say, we had another excellent dinner and enjoyed the first class though little-known wines of the region.

New docklands development at Corn Hill, Rochester



Spoilt for choice

Next morning, our journey took us through Fairport, yet another splendid little town that owes its existence, as the name suggests, to the canal. Here we would have been more than glad to spend the day. One of the problems with this sector of the canal was that there were just so many beautiful places to visit. We really were spoilt for choice. But we had the consolation of knowing that wherever we went we would not be disappointed.

And so it was when we reached Palmyra, known locally as the Queen of the Erie Canal Towns. We tied up in the small but very pretty marina and went off to explore. We were fortunate enough

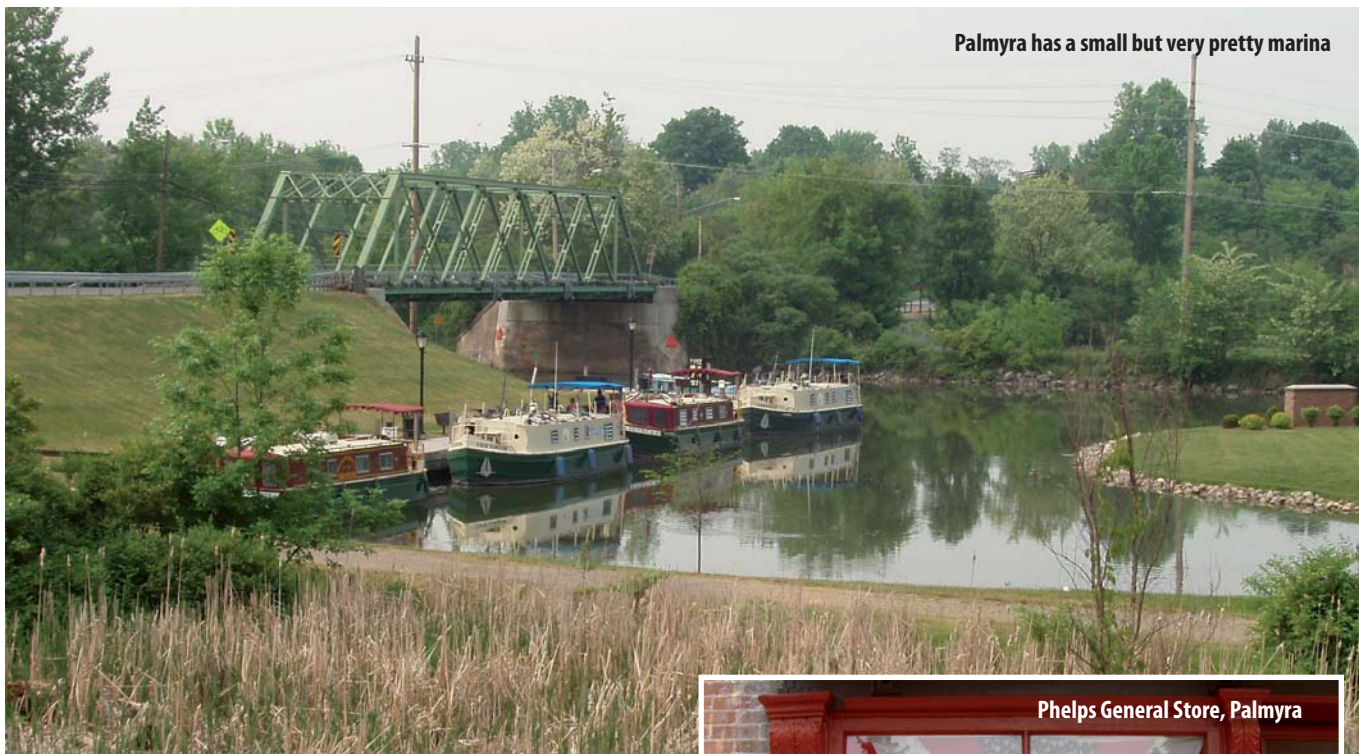
CRUISING USA ★



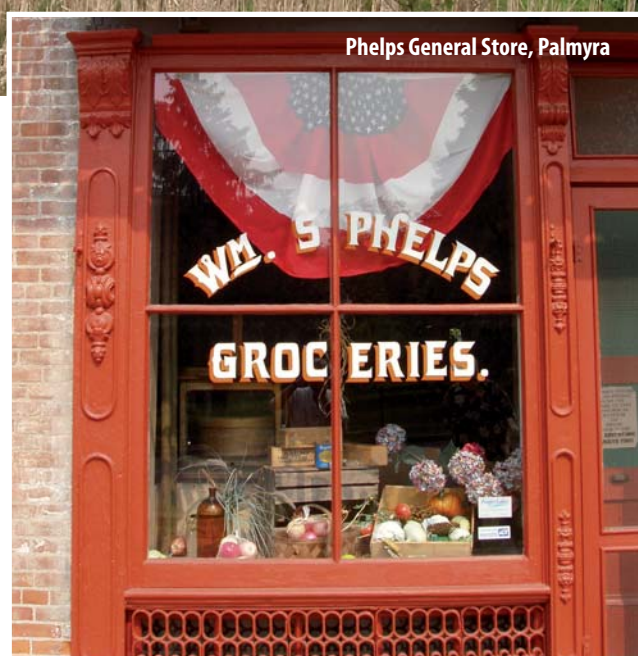
Charming, helpful
service everywhere
we visited

And now it's **confession** time. I don't normally do the **tourist** bit and I don't much like **crowds**, but we drove to **Niagara Falls** – please don't tell anyone...

Palmyra has a small but very pretty marina



Phelps General Store, Palmyra

Ailing Coverlet
Museum, Palmyra

to meet the mayor, Vicky Daly, who gave us tips on what to see and accompanied us for part of our visit. For such a small town – population around 3500 – it had much to commend it. The biggest surprise was to find no less than five museums. All were attractive, but our favourites were the Ailing Coverlet museum and the Phelps General Store, a kind of time capsule, unchanged since the owner walked out of it in 1940 – even the eggs on sale on that day are still on the counter! It was another case of much to do in too little time.

All too soon our week was over and we headed back to Macedon Landing very satisfied with the boat, the travelling and the encounters on the way. What was best? Hard to choose, but it really had to be the people. From the Mid-Lakes Navigation team to the lockmasters, the servers in the restaurants, the welcoming volunteers, the mayor and the professor, not forgetting our new friends from the Rochester area. They really made the holiday for us.

The brochures refer to this area as the best one hundred miles of the Erie Canal. At the end of our most enjoyable visit I was certainly not going to argue with that. But now we were looking forward to a different boating experience.

It was time to head east.

C&R

Next month Leo and Cassandra continue their travels on the Erie and Champlain Canals and the Mohawk and Hudson rivers.

RESOURCES

For full details about **Mid-Lakes Navigation** hire boats, see their website: www.midlakesnav.com

The company may be able to offer a range of extra services to UK hirers, including use of a car free of charge, collection from Rochester NY airport and an initial shopping delivery to your boat. To discuss all points by phone ring: **001 315 685 8500**. You'll find them very helpful.

For travel to the Erie Canal, western sector, flights are available to Rochester NY airport by several carriers. Try **United Airlines** (direct flights) www.unitedairlines.co.uk or **Air Canada** (via Toronto) www.AirCanada.com We arranged our trip through **Thomas Cook**.