

A Message from the Niagara Frontier for Governor Cuomo

In 1827, the schooner Michigan was loaded up with a cargo of "worthless and viscous dogs" and other animals, an American bison, a goose, two raccoons, and one bear—and floated over the Horseshoe Falls for entertainment. It was reported that twenty-five thousand people lined the banks to watch it go over. I depicted this event to mock and deplore it, in a poem called "Looking for Niagara," to recount this cruel idea of fun. The poem became the title poem of a book of poetry published by Slipstream Press in 1993; the poem is now available online. (Google: www.niagarapoetry.ca or at Looking for Niagara, Niagara Falls Poetry Project)

In March of 2012 a nonfiction book of mine, *Niagara Digressions*, in which this event is re-presented, will be released by Starcherone Books. It's a piece of history that should have taught us something, but it doesn't appear to have done so. Betsy Potter, Niagara Frontier artist, recognizes this and, stunned by this casually horrific and exploitive day in our legacy, has for years been researching and working on a painting of the schooner heading toward the brink of the Falls, a period-authentic portrayal of the ship and the dressed manikins that accompanied the living animals to their deaths. This painting will be on display at a showing of Betsy's work, together with a dozen or more of her paintings, at a show scheduled to open on 5 February 2012, at Niagara University's Castellani Art Museum, concluding the Topspin Regional Exhibition Series.

The schooner Michigan plunging over the Falls prefigured an era of daredevils and other stunters, starting with jumper Sam Patch in 1829—and continuing with those who went over the Falls in barrels and other contraptions, shot the lower rapids in barrels, rode them in boats, attempted swimming the rapids, wire walkers over the gorge, an attempted kayak ride over the Falls—and culminating with the last of the wire walkers, Samuel Dixon, aka Daring Dixon, in 1890, who earned a total of \$56.00. A fair number of these stunters and performers died, which was part of what compelled people to watch them in the first place, but in the end, the spectators had grown bored with it all. The last of the barrel-over-falls riders were Peter DeBernardi and Jeffery Petkovitch, who took the plunge together in 1989. All of these mentioned, and the rest of them, have been documented in "Looking for Niagara."

In 1951, arising from the death of the well-known riverman and barrel-rider, Red Hill, Jr., laws were passed both in Canada and New York State that prohibited further stunting and other such performances--and so for over a half century these actions have been against the law. Public safety was undoubtedly a concern, but many also welcomed the laws as expressing an awareness that the background of the falls should not be perceived or utilized as a backdrop for circus events. If people want to see a wire walker they should go to a circus.

In 2011, however, the arrival of wire walker Wallenda on the scene, arguing that he should be permitted to rig a wire over the Falls, seems to have prompted Senator Maziarz and Assemblyman Ceretto to ask the Governor to rescind or suspend the law. Their reasoning has to do with economic benefit they imagine will be realized

by the chronically depressed City of Niagara Falls and the surrounding area. How this supposedly one-time event will be of real and sustained help, however sincere the Senator and Assemblyman are, is open to serious question. The mere expense of stringing the cable would quickly be used to justify leaving it in place for longer than the one walk, perhaps all summer, perhaps for an indeterminate time. Already other wire walkers have expressed an interest: they reason that if it's there for one, why not them? It's too easy to imagine the return to the circus of the eighteen hundreds and the proliferation of other abuses until the character of the Falls is further debased.

We urge Governor Cuomo to turn down this request for reversing the law. We further urge him to encourage Senator Maziarz and Assemblyman Ceretto, if they are truly interested in the economic well-being of the City of Niagara Falls and the region, to cease and desist their opposition to the proposal for total gorge parkway removal between Niagara Falls and Lewiston, NY. We need their support and the support of others for a project that calls for an ecological restoration of the gorge rim that would provide long term and sustainable economic growth, while preserving, restoring, and honoring our environmental legacy. We have gathered and provided evidence that a highly focused eco tourism and heritage campaign could create the benefits that other communities around the world have already experienced with similar highway removal projects. The templates are already in place. Have Maziarz and Ceretto studied the details of our 15 year advocacy for removal? They have not.

The Business and Professional Associations of Niagara Falls support total removal; the Niagara Falls City Council supports total removal; the Niagara Falls Tourism Advisory Board supports total removal; over 30 Niagara Falls Block Clubs support total removal, along with the total of 80+ other groups and organizations, as do 2,195 individuals from across the nation and internationally, who've signed the online petition. (www.niagaraheritage.org) But Senator Maziarz and Assemblyman Ceretto oppose it. They oppose it because...well, just because.

We encourage them to abandon their ideas of quick-fix wire-walking solutions and to study the gorge parkway removal proposal sufficiently to prepare themselves to sit down with members of the Niagara Heritage Partnership, City Council members, and Tourism Advisory Board members and others to discuss the details of the issue. If all of our above suggestions fail, we rest our hopes on the steadfast position of the Parks Commission in Canada on the topic of stunting. A wire walker can't walk if the wire is attached only on one end.

Sincerely,
E.R. Baxter III
Niagara Heritage Partnership
Conservation Chair