

Midnight's Canal Adventure

Warning! Warning! Urgent message:

Please **do not perform** this Readers' Theater **until after you have visited the canal!** The reason is that if the weather is unsafe to have students ride the boat, this script will be the activity that will take the place of the boat ride. The students will also play some canal games as well. It's a fun script for the kids, so please use it after your field trip. Thanks! Janet Conners, author

Characters: (**highlighted** = many parts to be shared)

Pat/Dad- Father and Captain of the DeWitt Clinton line boat (cargo)

Kathleen/Mom- Mother

Sean- brother and mule driver

Molly- sister

Midnight- Molly's cat

Kevin- mule driver

Mike- steersman

Storekeeper- of Sims Store

Robert- packet boat traveler

Robert's Mama- packet boat traveler

Lock tender- operates Gere Lock

Weighmaster- weighs boats and collects toll at Syracuse Weighlock

Suggestion: To save printing costs, print the script for the whole class and then save it for the future. Print enough for half the class, share, save and print more the next year. Print 7 copies to share as that is the most speakers in an Act.

Midnight's Canal Adventure

Act 1- Meet the Canal Boat Family

(5 speakers: Midnight, Pat/Dad, Kathleen/Mom, Sean, Molly)

Midnight- I'm a cat. My name is Midnight. I want to tell you about my amazing adventure on the Erie Canal. In 1850, I was living on my family's line boat, called the DeWitt Clinton. Our boat was named after the governor of New York, who pushed for the construction of the first Erie Canal that was started in 1817. I'd like you to meet my family.

Pat/Dad- My name is Pat O'Brien. I'm the father of the family. I am the proud owner and captain of the DeWitt Clinton, a line boat that transports cargo. My family came from Ireland. We wanted a better life so we settled in Syracuse. I was hired as an axeman to chop trees to clear the path for the new, enlarged canal. I was paid \$1.00 a day and when the enlargement was finished, I had enough money saved to put a down payment on a line boat. I started my own business, shipping cargo, on the canal from Albany to Buffalo. My whole family lives on the boat, all year long. Now, I would like to introduce my wife.

Kathleen/Mom- My name is Kathleen O'Brien. I am the mother of 3 children. I work from dawn to dusk taking care of our floating home and all the people on board. We travel on this boat from April through November. Then we stop where ever we are for the winter months. Winter is when the children go to school. Even though we live on a boat, a woman's chores are never done. I plan meals, cook, shop, care for the children, sweep, wash clothes, sew, mend clothing, beat the rugs, and remind the children to take care of our canal cat, Midnight. Speaking of children, I'd like you to meet my oldest son.

Sean- It's nice to meet you. My name is Sean and I'm 11 years old. You might think it's weird, but for most of my life, I have lived on our family boat traveling back and forth from Albany to Buffalo. Sometimes, we bring our load to NYC. For the first 10 years of my life, I watched my dad steer the boat and our two mule drivers walk our mules along the tow path, as the mules pull our heavy boat. This year, I am old enough to be a mule driver. I am lucky that I work every day from 7 in the morning to 1 in the afternoon, and then from 7 at night until 1 in the morning. In between shifts, I take care of the mules, eat, and sleep.

Molly- Hey Sean, it's my turn now. I'm Molly and I'm 9 years old. I love living on a canal boat. As we travel across the state of New York, we get to meet lots of new people. Every winter, we live in a different port town so I can go exploring and get to go to a new school where I meet new friends. One day, I hope to be a teacher at one of these port towns, maybe at Camillus Landing, because it is halfway between Buffalo and Albany. I mostly help Mother with all the

woman chores, but my most important job is watching my baby sister to make sure she does not fall off the boat. Whenever we are on deck, I put the harness on her and then tie her to a long rope attached to the boat. That way, if she falls off the boat into the canal, I can pull her up so she doesn't drown. My best friend is Midnight, my cat.

Midnight- Now you've met the family but there are 2 hired hands who live on our boat too. Kevin is eleven and he is the other mule driver, who trades shifts with Sean. Either Sean or Kevin is walking the towpath with the mules, while the other is resting on board with the tired mules. We also have Mike, who used to be a mule driver, but now he is the steersman. He steers the boat so the mules won't pull it into the side of the canal. He also knows how to handle the boat to safely pass another boat in either direction. Mike switches off with Molly's father, the captain, for 6 hour shifts to steer the boat.

Act 2- Life on the Canal

(7 speakers: Midnight, Pat/Dad, Sean, Mike, Kevin, Kathleen/Mom, Molly)

Midnight- Would you like to hear about my life as a canal cat? Today started when we were tied up at Port Byron, loading wood to bring to Syracuse for the salt boilers.

Pat/Dad- Sean, Mike, Kevin, let's get the wood loaded onto our boat.

Sean- Father, why do we have to take firewood to Syracuse? Don't they have trees to cut down for firewood?

Mike- I know the answer to that question. All the trees around Syracuse have been cut down and used to build houses, buildings, boats but mostly to boil the salt brine to make salt. Salt is needed to preserve food, used in manufacturing, and of course for cooking. Syracuse produces the most salt in the country so it is called the Salt City.

Mike- I love to flavor my food with salt. I especially love it on corn on the cob.

Sean- Don't forget about buttered and salted popcorn. Yum!

Kevin- There's nothing better than some hot salt potatoes to eat while driving the mules on a cold day.

Kathleen/Mom- Speaking of salt, Pat, we need to stop at Sims Store at Camillus Landing, to pick up some new supplies, before we head into Syracuse. I need some eggs, milk, vinegar, flour, sugar and lard.

Molly- Do you think we could get some penny candy too? I'd love a root beer barrel to suck on while I watch Little Sister.

Kathleen/Mom- We'll see. Right now you need to make up the beds, and beat the rugs while your sister is still sleeping. Then you can help me make supper. We are having beef stew. I hope a farmer will be selling vegetables along the towpath, as I need some more carrots and onions. If they have apples, I can make apple crisp for dessert.

Pat/Dad- Okay boys, let's load the cargo so we can get going and make some money. My mouth is watering already for stew and apple crisp.

Midnight- The family and crew go to work and get their job done in no time. I sit on top of the family cabin watching all the hustle and bustle. When it is time to shove off, I head to the bow to the mule stable, as I love to watch those huge animals walk up and down the mule bridge. They are so scared, that Sean and Kevin have to hold their tails to steady them, as they walk down onto the tow path. Sean gets to hitch his team up, and Kevin gets to rest until after lunch. Mike is at the stern keeping the boat in the middle of the canal. It would not be good to crash into the bank, make a hole in the boat, or an opening in the canal for all the water to drain out. Then, we would be mudlarked, or stuck, onto the bottom of the canal. No boats would be able to travel until the hole was fixed, and more water was added to the canal.

Molly- Midnight, come here. Little Sister and I want to pet you. You are such a good cat. I wish you could talk. Sometimes, I get lonely because the boys always hang out together and Little Sister doesn't talk yet.

Midnight- I love it when Molly pets me. I purr and curl up in her lap. I was lucky when she picked me out of a basket with a sign that said, "Free kittens", at the flight of five locks at Lockport. I've been with the family for 3 years now.

Mike- Mrs. O'Brien, Sean is waving his hat and I think I see a farm stand on the berm side up ahead. Would you like me to steer the boat over to see if they have the fresh fruits and vegetables that you need?

Kathleen/Mom- Yes, please pull close Mike. Molly, go get me a big potato and the tin box with the change. I hope they have what I want.

Midnight- Mrs. O'Brien was happy when she saw the farm stand. As the boat approached, she shouted her order for carrots, green beans, onions and apples. The price was 50 cents. Mrs. O'Brien took 2 quarters from the tin box and pushed the coins into the potato. When the boat was close to the stand, Mrs. O'Brien threw the potato to the farm girls. Then they threw a potato sack filled with the produce towards the boat. Molly caught the bag and thanked the girls. Then Mike steered the boat back to the middle of the canal.

Molly- Mother, I will help you get the meal ready. Let's go Little Sister.

Act 3 – Stopping at Camillus Landing

(7 speakers: Midnight, Pat/Dad, Kathleen/Mom, Sean, storekeeper, Molly, Kevin)

Midnight- As you see, life on a canal boat for a cat is pretty comfortable. Good food, lots of sunshine on the deck, mice in the cargo hold to chase and lots of petting from my family and crew. That's why I can't believe I did what I did. Here's the rest of the story.

Pat/Dad- Kathleen, we will stop soon at Camillus Landing. You can stock your pantry. Get your list ready as I want to make this a quick visit to Sims Store. The Salt Works in Syracuse is expecting our load this afternoon. I want to get our new cargo of salt loaded and then get through the busy weighlock at Syracuse so we can continue our trip east.

Kathleen/Mom- Pat, I will work on my list. I will try to be quick, but remember haste makes waste. I don't want to drop the eggs.

Sean- Father, will you let us go ashore to the store to pick out some penny candy? I've saved up a nickel that is burning a hole in my pocket.

Pat/Dad- Yes, all you children may visit the store while I stay on the boat to watch Little Sister.

Midnight- So the Dewitt Clinton tied up at Camillus Landing. The mule bridge was set out but this time, the mules did not walk down, but the humans did, heading to the store. I followed them off. It was good to get my four paws onto grass again. Soon by the horse barn, I spotted some birds scratching through some hay that had fallen from the hay wagon. One bad thing about being on the canal boat is that I don't get enough exercise. Since it was a beautiful day, I thought, why not? I'm going to chase those birds!

Well, I started sneaking up and was almost ready to pounce when I realized they were chickens. The rooster turned and started chasing me! I ran for my life as I didn't want to give up one of my nine. I zigged and zagged but that rooster was catching up to me.

I thought, if I make a leap, I can land on that canal boat. Then I can hide amidst the cargo or under the beds. I ran as fast as I could and leaped up to the railing. I went down the other side and hid myself behind 2 barrels. Whew! No sign of the rooster. I was safe. My adventure made me sleepy, so I took a little nap.

Storekeeper- Mrs. O'Brien, how nice to see you again. I was hoping you would stop by as some mail arrived here for you a week ago. Let me get it for you.

Kathleen/Mom- Oh, thank you. It is from my parents back in Ireland. I so love to hear from them. I also have the \$5.62 that I owe you from the last visit. We made a good profit delivering the cook stoves, axes and plows to Buffalo.

Storekeeper- I will get your credit slip and will mark you paid in full. What can I get for you today?

Kathleen/Mom- Here's my list. Please be quick, as my husband wants to make it to Syracuse to unload our cargo and then to pick up a shipment of salt to take onto New York City. Okay, children, let's look at the penny candy as you always have a hard time deciding. As a surprise, I have another penny for each of you.

Storekeeper- Mrs. O'Brien, here are your goods. The bill comes to \$8.26. Would you like to put it on credit or pay in cash?

Kathleen/Mom- I will pay in cash. The children will pay for their own candy, now that they have finally decided. Then, it is onto the boat to head east. Let's go children.

Sean- The mules are hitched and ready to go, Father. I'm sure they enjoyed their rest while we shopped at Sims Store. The jaw breaker I bought might last the whole 6 hours of my shift.

Pat/Dad- Ok, Sean. As soon as Kevin unties the lines, we are off. Sean remember keep steady with the mules, as we will be crossing the Nine Mile Creek Aqueduct. We don't want the team going into the canal, or falling over the side of the aqueduct to the stream far below.

Molly- I love traveling over aqueducts and peeking over the edge to see the river or swamp below. Sometimes, if I remember to pick up a rock along the tow path, I will throw it over the side and will count- one thousand one, one thousand two- until I hear the rock splash into the stream. This aqueduct is really high. I can't imagine how the workers built it.

Kevin- I sure would not want to be one of the masons making the stone supports, or the workers building the wooden canal that rests on the supports. It's scary enough walking on the tow path and looking down to the creek below. The worst time is when I am on my night shift at maybe 3 in the morning, and there is no moon or it's rainy. I can hardly see the tow path with just my lantern, and the mules and I are so far ahead of the boat, I feel like we are all alone. Something could happen and no one would even know.

Molly- Speaking of something happening, has anyone seen Midnight? I have not seen my cat since before Sims Store. Kevin, will you help me search for Midnight?

Kevin- Molly, I have looked everywhere and did not find Midnight.

Molly- Oh no! Midnight is missing!

Act 4- The Search for Midnight

(5 speakers: Pat/Dad, Molly, Midnight, Robert, Robert's Mama)

Pat/Dad- Molly, calm down. When we pass a boat heading west, ask them to keep an eye out for the cat. Have them give a message to the storekeeper at Sims Store to look for Midnight and to keep our cat until we make a return trip. When we come to Gere Lock, you can give a message to the lock tender to watch for a lost black cat.

Molly- But, Father, it will take us 3 more days to get to Albany and then 3 days to be towed to New York City. Then it takes a day to unload and then 3 more days back to Albany and then another day to find our next job. Then 3 days to Camillus. That means 2 weeks until we can see if Midnight turned up in Camillus.

Pat/Dad- I am sorry Molly, but we need to keep moving to make money as I have to pay off the mortgage on the boat, pay wages, and have money for food and clothing. The storekeeper in Camillus will take good care of Midnight.

Midnight- I awoke from my nap and stretched. I walked out from behind the barrels, but everything looked different and we were moving. I remembered that I had been chased by the rooster and jumped onto the nearest boat, but this is not my boat. This boat has no cargo and has lots of people in fancy outfits. The boat is painted in bright colors. Instead of brown mules pulling the boat, beautiful white horses pull this boat. I can't smell that delicious aroma of hay and manure. Where's Molly?

Robert- Look, Mama! There's a black cat on the boat. I don't remember seeing it for the past two days that we have traveled. Do you think it is lost? Mama, I would like to pet it. May I?

Robert's Mama- Of course, Robert, but be careful. It does look a bit like our cat back home. Why don't you take it up top to the benches as we go through the lock and pet it so it will be calm? Then we can talk to the cook to ask if you could feed the cat some dinner. Maybe if the cat likes you, it will crawl in your bunk bed tonight to keep you warm.

Midnight- So Robert took care of me but I still missed Molly. Where is she? Will I ever find her? Does she miss me?

Act 5- Going through the Lock

(3 speakers: Pat/Dad, Molly, Lock Tender)

Pat/Dad- Kevin, are you set with the mules for going through the lock? We will be waiting in this line for a while to lock through so you might as well let the mules graze on the grass for a bit. I will have Sean bring them some water.

Molly- I've talked to all the people I have seen on the boats heading west to have them look for Midnight. When I see the lock tender I will ask him about Midnight too. I am very sad. I miss Midnight so much.

Pat/Dad- I know, Molly. If we don't find him, I know some other family will take care of him. There will be another basket of kittens somewhere along the canal, so you can find a new pet.

Okay, it's our turn to enter the lock. As soon as the gate closes behind us, talk to the lock tender before too much water is released from the lock chamber, and we go down to the next water level of the canal. Once the downstream lock gate is open, we'll be on our way to Syracuse and you won't be able to talk to the lock tender.

Molly- Sir, my black cat Midnight has gone missing. Have you seen a stray cat around here?

Lock Tender- No missy I haven't. Sorry to hear your cat is missing. Have you asked the west bound boats to keep an eye out for it?

Molly- Yes sir, but I don't have much hope.

Lock Tender- Hmm. Now that I think of it, young lass, a packet boat, the Miss Daisy passed through here about a half hour ago. As she lowered down in the lock chamber, I happened to notice a young lad sitting on the benches above the sleeping quarters. In his lap, he had a black cat that he was petting. I thought it odd as most packets don't allow animals due to all the passengers on board. I wonder if that could have been your cat.

Pat/Dad- You know Molly, when I was on the boat back at Sims Store I happened to notice a packet boat docked a bit up from us. I think Miss Daisy was her name. I wonder if Midnight snuck off our boat. Maybe that crazy black cat somehow got confused and jumped onto the other boat by mistake?

Molly- I bet you are right Father. Oh no- now I will never find Midnight because packet boats travel faster than our boat. Also, Miss Daisy does not have to stop in Syracuse to unload and load cargo. Midnight is lost forever.

Pat/Dad- Well, as soon as we get through this lock, we will hitch the mules up quickly. I will have Kevin drive them a bit faster than we should. We'll see if we can catch up with the packet boat. Hopefully, we won't get a speeding ticket for going faster than 3 miles per hour.

Act 6- The Weighlock

(5 speakers: Kathleen/Mom, Pat/Dad, Weighmaster, Molly, Midnight)

Kathleen/Mom- Pat, you and the crew did a fast job unloading the firewood and loading on the barrels of salt we are taking to New York City. Next, is a stop at the weighlock, to find the weight of our cargo, and then pay the toll. Then it's onto the level area of the canal so we can make up some time with no locks. I feel bad for Molly and Midnight but there is not much we can do.

Pat/Dad- She will get over it. I am sure the first kittens we see along the way will be joining our family. At least she didn't ask for a dog! Here's the weighlock up ahead. There is only one boat ahead of us. What luck!

Weighmaster- Captain O'Brien, it's nice to see you again. What cargo are you carrying today and where are you going?

Pat/Dad- Our cargo is barrels of salt and we are heading to Albany. Then we will be towed by steamship to New York City where we will unload the barrels. The DeWitt Clinton can pull into the weighlock now, so you can weigh our boat with the cargo. Then we will be on our way.

Weighmaster- Okay, pull her in. Lock tender, close the gate and drain the water so the Dewitt Clinton can rest on the scale. Then I can find the weight of the full boat.

Okay, today the scale reads 5 tons. In the spring, your empty boat weighed 3 tons.

When I subtract the weight of the empty boat from the weight of the full boat, I find the weight of the cargo is 2 tons.

The toll for salt is 5 mills or a half of a cent per ton per mile. So, to travel 1 mile, the toll for your cargo is two tons times 5 mills or two times a half of a penny so that equals one penny. One mile traveled means payment of 1 cent.

The distance from Syracuse to Albany is 170 miles so 170 miles times 1 penny is \$1.70. Your toll to ship the salt from Syracuse to Albany is \$1.70.

Pat/Dad- Here's the toll I owe you. Can you imagine how much it would cost to ship this salt by wagon over land?

Weighmaster- About 10 times as much, or around \$17.00 instead of \$1.70. Thanks goodness for cheap and fast shipping on the canal.

Pat/Dad- By the way, did you notice a packet boat, Miss Daisy, passing through here recently?

Weighmaster- Yes, I did, maybe 2 hours ago. Miss Daisy pulled up a little way down the canal to change horses.

Molly- Oh Father, we will never catch the boat. I will never see Midnight again.

Pat/Dad- Kevin, start the team. Everyone remember about the low bridge up ahead. The builders must have saved lots of money on that bridge because our boat barely fits under it. I'm glad we have a heavy load each time we go through this section of the canal. Molly, why don't you sit at the bow? You can see the sites of Syracuse to take your mind off of Midnight.

Molly- I will, Father. I love looking at the fancy sides of the buildings that face the canal. It would be fun to travel on a packet boat. There would be no smells from the on board stables. There are lots of interesting people I could talk to. I've heard that famous people ride on packet boats.

Oh, here comes that low bridge. I know some packet boat passengers get exercise by walking the tow path for a while. Then some people jump from the low bridges back onto the boat. I don't think I would do that, but I bet Sean, Kevin and Mike would.

Ooh! There is something strange up there on the bridge. Is it? Could it be?

MIDNIGHT! It's you!!!!

Father, pull the boat over. Midnight is on the bridge.

Midnight, what are you doing? Don't jump!

Midnight- There was no way I was going to lose Molly again. I decided to use up one of my nine lives, so I jumped off the bridge, as my boat was moving under it. Of course, I landed in Molly's outstretched arms and she gave me the biggest hug possible. I even got wet from her tears of joy. Ugh, you know how cats hate to get wet.

So anyway, how did I end up on that low bridge? Well when the packet boat pulled over to change the horse team, I decided to search for Molly. I figured sooner or later, the Dewitt Clinton would pass under the bridge. It was just a matter of waiting until it did. Now Molly and I will live happily ever after, traveling together on the Erie Canal.