

**Toronto Telegram, August 19, 1933**  
**Schooner Days CI (101)**  
**By C.H.J. Snider**

## **HE BUILT 120 SHIPS — LOUIS SHICKLUNA — AND ALL WERE GOOD**

It is a recognized mark of great skill for a ship carpenter to hold a billet of wood “under his toe” and hew a wedge with his adze, using “head high strokes.’ Legend has it that Louis Shickluna could and frequently did use a “lip adze’ for hewing his wedges under his toe, and that his hewing was done with full arm swings. A ship carpenter’s lip adze is the most dangerous of edged tools. The width of its bitt between the razor-sharp lips is not much greater than the width of a man’s shoe sole. One who assays to hew wedges under his toe with a lip adze must needs strike absolutely true or he will surely shear off his toes or the sole of his foot. Novices are strongly advised against trying the trick.

Shickluna could make a perfect job of hewing out the finely curved and twisted rabbets of a vessel’s forefoot without using a shaping tool;’ or without guiding marks he could adze off a caulking seam in perfect bevel for the length of a fifty-foot plank and leave no tool marks. For Fifty-eight years, Louis Shickluna engaged in the business of building carriers of Great Lakes freights. In 1836 he chose for the location of his activities one of the best shipyard positions on the system of Great Lakes waterways, a natural basin beside the Welland canal at St. Catharines.

The contour of the land and the unfailing flow of the waters of the canal combined in creating a site for a drydock that required only a minimum of labor and expense for its construction and negligible expense for its physical operation.

At the time of the establishment of Shickluna’s dockyard and for many years thereafter, the major part of the shipping of the Great Lakes passed up and down the Welland Canal. The drydock was as convenient to lakewise traffic as is a highway service station to the traffic on which its existence depends. There was an abundance of first-class ship timber growing within wagon-hauling distance of the shipyard and on the plateau on the Niagara escarpment were forests of white oak of a quality that was unequalled elsewhere in America.

Shickluna started building and repairing lake vessels before the demand became pressing for “full canal size” tonnage. He is credited with the introduction of the bluff-bowed, wall-sided, bulge-quartered type of schooners that eventually were squeezed through the locks of the old canal with their jib booms cockbilled to admit their entrance to the locks and each with 700 tons of cargo in her hold. He was the first to build them, and he built many, of models peculiarly his own.

He was born on the Island of Malta in 1808, and arrived at Quebec when he was 23 years old. His forebears of several generation were ship builders and it is said of him that before he was twenty years old he was master of shipwright’s craft and highly skilled in the use of ship carpenters tools. On his coming to Canada he found employment in the shipyards of Quebec and worked at the building of the *Royal William*, first Canadian steamer to cross the Atlantic, whose centenary is being celebrated this week with a special postage stamp. The *Royal William* was launched in 1831. Next he worked at Oakville one of the builders of the *Transit*. A steamer of 350 tons, launched in 1832, and first known as the *Constitution*. He next worked at dock building at Niagara then at Youngstown where for two years he studied the finer points of draughting, and is said to have engaged in the building of the *John Porter* and the *Shickluna* although these are

vessels of later date. In 1836 he established his own shipyard at St. Catharines.

He built schooners on speculation or to owners orders. The dockyard was constantly busy with works of rebuilding, overhauling and repairing. The drydock was divided in two sections which could be flooded or drained separately, and could accommodate two full canalers at once. Both sections were almost continuously occupied for years. Often while two vessels were in the dock two others and sometimes several lay waiting their turns to enter.

Of the vessels which were the product of Shickluna's hand and brain this is far from complete but perhaps representative list arrange as far as possible according to dates:

Schooner Almeda, St. Catharines 1844  
Schooner Mary Frances Prescott, 1845  
Schooner Fairfield, Niagara 1846  
Schooner Louis Shickluna Niagara 1847  
Schooner Welland, St. Catharines 1847  
Schooner Fred Wells St. Catharines 1849  
Brigantine Lafayette Cook, St. Catharines 1851  
(He is also credited, perhaps incorrectly, with building a barquentine called Pride of Canada in 1852; said to be the first St. Catharines vessel for ocean faring. This may be a confusion with the Pride of America mentioned below.)  
Barquentine Malta St. Catharines 1853  
Barquentine Gibraltar St. Catharines 1854  
Schooner St. Andrews St. Catharines 1853  
Schooner Jessie St. Catharines 1855  
Schooner W. H. Merritt St. Catharines 1855  
Schooner Louisa St. Catharines 1856  
Barquentine Sir. E.W. Head St. Catharines 1856  
Barquentine Prince of Wales St, Catharines 1860  
Barquentine Canada, St. Catharines 1861.  
Barquentine Mary Jane, St. Catharines 1862  
Propeller America, St. Catharines 1863  
Propeller Her Majesty, St. Catharines 1863  
Barquentine Pride of America, St. Catharines 1863  
Propeller Samson, St. Catharines 1864  
Steamer City of Toronto, Niagara 1864  
Barquentine Valetta, St. Catharines 1864  
Propeller L. Shickluna, St. Catharines 1870  
Barquentine Fanny Campbell, St. Catharines 1868  
Barquentine Thos C. Street, St. Catharines 1871  
Barquentine Jessie Graham, St. Catharines 1871  
Barquentine Sir C T Van Straubensee, St. Catharines 1874  
Barquentine St. Louis, St. Catharines 1877  
Tug L. Shickluna, St. Catharines 1880

He built other vessels many others some in his own yard, some when the convenience of owners suited. The schooner yacht *Oriole*, first to bear the name made famous by the Gooderham family — the present Oriole is the fourth and was built by Louis Shickluna. He also built the steamer *Welland*, whose engines were the first made in St. Catharines, in the shop of Thomas

Towers.

For more than half a century, Louis Shickluna built continuously and all that he built was good. The number of his ships is greater than that any other individual builder on the chain of Great Lakes. At the start he built a good Canadian hardwood fastened with iron and copper, and in his old age he built composite hulls. In all one hundred and twenty vessels were built and launched at the Schickluna yards. The advent of the Third Canal 1874 diverted the principal volume of traffic from the old St. Catharines route. It afforded a faster passage from lake to lake and accommodation for vastly greater tonnage units. Expanding commerce required more capacious carriers for its freight. "Full canal size schooners" built before 1874, became obsolete while yet they were new and larger steam vessels absorbed the most profitable lines of trade. The activities of the St. Catharines shipyard dwindled and shrunk and in 1884 Louis Shickluna sold the yard and drydock to Patrick Dixon and his son, Harry J. who realized profit in a branch of the business which Schickluna had not undertaken.

The Dixon's were general marine contractors. They made the dock yard the headquarters for their contracting plant and equipment. They built tugs and lighters, barges and scows according to demand, installed or replaced marine machinery and salvaged or overhauled and repaired such lakes vessels as came within their sphere.

When H. J. Dixon abandoned the old St. Catharines yard he bought the famous "wandering floating dry dock" at Sturgeon Bay Wisconsin and towed it to Toronto, where it is at present in operation.

### **A Later Day Product of Shickluna's Building Skill**

One of the last and possibly the very last vessel that Louis Shickluna built at St. Catharines was the composite hull steamer *Tilley*, named for Sir Leonard Tilley. She was launched in 1884. In 1899 she was partly burned on Lake Erie. J. and J. T. Matthews, of Toronto, bought the damaged hull and reconditioned her at the Polson Iron Works yards. The *Tilley* became a steam barge and was renamed *Advance*. For several years she earned big dividends for her owners in the perilous trade of carrying cargoes of explosives.

### **The Last That Were Built At St. Catharines Dockyard**

Patrick Dixon's building and engining the tugs *Jessie Hume* and *Charles E. Armstrong* in 1894 was the last work undertaken at the St. Catharines shipyard which Louis Shickluna established in 1836. The *Jessie Hume* was built for Conley Brothers Montreal, and was fitted out with the machinery of the *Olivia Gordon*. The *Charles E. Armstrong* was built for Edward Armstrong, Port Colborne, and was fitted with the *Maggie's* machinery. *Hum*, *Armstrong*, *Gordon* and *Maggie* hulls are shown in the reproduced photograph above. The vessel at the farther end of the dockyards is the *Ocean*, a famous old passenger and packet freight boat which was owned at the time of the picture by the Malcolmson Brothers, of St. Catharines.