

**Toronto Telegram**  
**Schooner Days No CXIX (119)**  
**By C.H.J. Snider**

## **Christmassing on the Main Duck**

*Capt. Nelson Palmateer, Prince Edward County veteran, here tells readers of The Telegram how he escaped doing this sixty years ago, and how Dick Grant had a Christmas visitor that stayed till spring. The captain's story of this long ago adventure of his boyhood has already appeared in the Picton Times, but it will stand telling twice. The Main Duck, now the property and summer residence of Mr. Cole, of Cape Vincent, N.Y., was visited by The Telegram six weeks ago. The present islanders are enthusiastic fans of Jim Hunter. They listen to his Telegram newscasts daily – indicating how far the Main Duck has travelled since Capt. Palmateer's enforced sojourn.*

"ONE fall early in the 1870's – it was long before I was married, and that was in 1878 – Capt. John Walters got the *Jessie Brown* to go to the Main Duck to bring home his live stock. He had a big farm on Point Traverse, and he had the Main Duck Island rented. He used to pasture his horses and cattle there, and had a farm of sorts where he grew corn and rye and he did quite a fish trade as well.

"In the fall he used to get a threshing outfit on to a little vessel and sail out to the Main Duck and thresh out his grain, taking the threshing hands with him. Then he would load up the grain and the live stock in the vessel and bring them all back.

"The Main Duck was a good place for horses and cattle, especially after the crop was in, when they could be allowed to roam at large and sheep did well on the neighboring island of Yorkshire, where no dogs could get to them.

"This time that Capt. Walters got the *Jessie Brown* to go over from South Bay for the live stock it was pretty late, long after threshing time.

"It was at the end of the season, and Capt. Walters, himself the owner of two schooners, the *Sea Bird* and the *Saucy Jack*, had some difficulty in rounding up a crew of eight farmer-fisher-sailor lads from the Point Traverse peninsula, where we all lived.

"The Main Duck is a big island midway between Point Traverse and the Galloo, in Lake Ontario, twelve miles from the nearest mainland and twenty miles south of Kingston. To this day it is pretty isolated, but sixty years ago it was almost as remote as Robinson Crusoe's monarchy.

"We got there about the first of December. There is a little island lying in behind the Duck, known as Yorkshire, and near it, on the east tip of the island, is a boat harbor, a little pond, about twenty rods by thirty across. Sometimes so dry you could walk across it. The Government has since dredged a passage through, so that fishboats now use the harbor, and there is a little dock there; but sixty years ago it was much more primitive. There was Hiram

Ostrander, George and Edward Ackerman, Reuben and Johnny Sanderson, my brother Ephraim and myself besides Capt. Walters. Ed. Ackerman was the cook.

"There is a bluff along the north-east face of the island, and then a beach, and then this little harbor, and then a point. Outside the point, close in, lay a wreck, the backbone and ribs of an old-time wooden ship. The story went that she was an eighteen-twelve, lost there in the war, or beached after a battle.

"The point was called Graveyard Point, and there were little sunken mounds there, like graves, and marks on the frees, as if memorials had been cut. Buttons and bones used to be found here, and the story went that the killed in one of the lake fights in the War of 1812 had been buried on the point."

(The only thing of this kind officially recorded is Sir James Lucas Yeo's running fight with Commodore Chauncey across Lake Ontario, Sept. 11, 1813, in which the British brig *Moir* was badly mauled. Four men were killed and seven wounded. Yeo put into the Ducks to shake himself clear of the weather-gage which Chauncey held, and it is quite possible that he buried his dead on the Main Duck, which he passed on his way to Kingston. Another naval action in which the Ducks figured was on Oct. 6 in the same year, when Chauncey captured a transport convoy off the Main Duck; but there were, apparently, no casualties, although one British gunboat was burned. Would hers be the hull lying off Graveyard Point?)

"At this time, sixty years ago, a bar cut the little pond off from the lake."

"We anchored in the lee of the island with the wind from the westward, and went ashore in the *Jessie Brown's* boat, taking a big scoop-shovel along. Once ashore we rounded up a couple of Capt. Walter's horses that had been out to grass all summer, hitched them to the scoop and attacked the gravel bar. In a short while we had cut a hole through it into the lake wide enough to haul the *Jessie Brown* through. Then we put her right on the smooth bottom of the little harbor, where she was sheltered, and began to round up the stock.

"There were thirty head of cattle, calves and cows and one big bull, scattered over the island, and we had many a scramble getting the bunch together and penned up by the harbor. The island not entirely uninhabited, for two old cronies, Dick Grant and Dickon Lobb, had been fishing there all summer and looking after the farm. They had a log house with a cookstove and bunks built in the wall and here we stayed.

Dick Grant was a Southerner, despite having the game name as the famous Northern general, and he had left his native land after the American war. Dickon Lobb and he got on together after their fashion, but their fashion was a funny one. For example, one morning they came rowing in from their set, although their nets were five miles out, and their boat had a sail, and the wind was favorable.

"What you rowing for, with a sail in your boat?" Dick was asked.

"Lobb said nothing about the sail, and I can row as far as he can," growled Grant.

“Why didn't you say to set the sail?” was the question put to Dickon next.

“Grant never mentioned it, and I can row as far as he can,” growled Lobb.

“So the fishboat toiled along with creaking rowlocks.

“Lobb had the further peculiarity that if he were politely addressed he became surly, and if addressed familiarly he would beam all over.

“How many fish have you this morning, Mr. Lobb?”

“Can't see as it's any business o' yourn.”

“Come along. Dickon old sock, how many have you got?”

“Well, now. I ain't right counted 'em yit, but there's one to spare for ye and welcome, and I reckon that'll leave two dozen anyway.”

“They had fixed up this shack or cabin near the harbor, and it looked as though we would have to stay with them all winter, for it kept on blowing hard from the westward, and there was no getting home in that little scow with the wind heavy from that quarter. The ice fringe around the edge of the little basin grew wider and wider.

“Well, boys,” said Capt. Walters, “there's scythes and sickles in the hold of the *Jessie Brown*, and we'll fall to on them acres of dry marsh hay and put up enough to feed the stock through the winter. Then we'll build some sort of shelter for the poor beasts. As for us, we've some flour and tea, and so on, on board, and there's lots of dry corn in the shocks here on the island. We'll pound out the ears of corn and rye and make hominy and cornmeal and rye flour like our fathers did. And there's fish to be caught, and a calf or a cow or two to butcher, so we'll come through all right if the wind blows westerly.

“There's acres of bush to cut for our firewood, and we'll neither freeze nor starve here in Dick Grant's hut.”

“The eight of us weren't much taken with the idea of wintering on the *Main Duck*, but as things were we hadn't any choice, and we went to work gathering marsh hay. We cut seven stacks and husked a lot of corn. Some of the cows were milking and the stock were fat, so we couldn't starve.

But after a while the wind sucked around to the northeast, and we drove the cattle up a runway and on board the *Jessie Brown*, and commenced heaving her off to an anchor we had carried out into deep water outside the little harbor. The northeast wind was right in.

“By the time we got her hove out, dragging over the bar with her Noah's ark cargo, it was blowing so fresh, and the sea had made up so that we were afraid to break out the anchor, for if she didn't cast right she'd be driven back on the beach, and then we'd certainly be marooned till spring. There was nothing for it but to lighten her up and drop her back into the harbor. All the stock had to be thrown overboard. While the *Jessie Brown* plunged and kicked at her anchor, and the cattle moored and snorted and bellowed, we pushed the calves in first and the cows

followed. Plopp! they would go down, clear out of sight, and then come up like sea monsters, snorting and roaring, but striking out for shore without delay. The big bull was the worst.

"He just would not go over the rail. But there were enough of us to manhandle him, and with handspikes and hearty good will we got him over at last.

"All the livestock reached the shore, and we got the schooner back into the eggcup of a harbor – and then the wind lulled down, and we loaded the cattle again, and decided to come back for the horses later, if we could.

"Old Dick Grant agreed to winter on the island, and to look after things and cut a supply of ice for use in the summer fishing.

" 'And what'll we do?' asked Capt. Walters, 'if we come back in the spring and find you've been dead two months or maybe three or four, all here by your lonesome?'

" 'You'll carry what's left of me down to Graveyard Point,' said Dick, 'and you'll dig a hole, and you'll put me in. And on a stone you'll cut this, if you please:

'Here lies the body  
'Of old Dick Grant,  
'Nobody cried,  
'Nobody can't.  
'How he lived  
'And how he fared  
'Nobody knew  
'And nobody cared.'

"'Cheerful, you are,'" said Capt. Walters.

"'Got to be,'" said Dick.

"The wind was westerly again when we made outside, but not too strong, and we fetched the Upper Gap the first stretch from the Main Duck, and then put her around and fetched Point Traverse, and so on into South Bay. We hove the calves and the cows and the bull overboard again and they swam ashore and made for the old straw stack.

"After we unloaded the cattle Capt. Walters wanted us to go back for the horses. It was mid-December now and bitter cold, and South Bay was freezing up, and my brother flatly said he wouldn't. But he urged me to go, and I did. We got there and loaded the horses, and got back safely by Christmas Day.

"Then it came on to blow and snow. One morning old Dick Grant woke to see a biggish schooner – four times the size of the *Jessie Brown* – hard and fast between Yorkshire and the main island. She was the *Star*, of Mill Point, as Deseronto used to be called.

She was loaded with railroad iron from Charlotte, N.Y., for Belleville. Her captain was Geordie Williamson, and he owned her, too. In the storm he had got hurt by the jibing of the boom. The mate didn't realize how far they had been set to leeward, and in a clearing of the

snow he saw open water between Yorkshire and the Main Duck and thought it was the passage between Point Traverse and Timber Island, leading to the Upper Gap. So in the *Star* headed for it, but the open water was too shoal, and she fetched up hard.

Old Dick had lots of company for the winter, with the schooner's crew, but they would have run short of provisions, for all the stock had been taken away. It was a terribly cold season, and it froze solid from Yorkshire to the Duck and from the Duck all the way across to Point Traverse and then to the Galloo, and up to Kingston and down to Sackett's harbor. The entire east end of the lake was frozen. Capt. Walters drove across in a sleigh and the whole crowd, the *Star's* crew and Dick Grant came back over the ice, and Dick's sister came up from the south for him and took him home.

"They had stripped the *Star*, and she was protected where she lay, and in the spring they got her off."

Capt. Williamson lost this *Star* afterwards at Charlotte, when she failed to make the piers. She was a fine vessel of her time, very much like the *Flora Carveth*, built at the same place, Mill Point, in the same year, 1873: straight stemmed, white bulwarks, lead-colored bottom, 110 feet on deck, 24 feet 9 inches beam and 9 feet depth. She registered 227 tons.

*Captions : Little Harbor in the Main Duck where they loaded the Jessie Brown.*

*South Bay Point light at Point Traverse, which the Jessie Brown fetched on her second tack*

*CHRISTMAS IN CHURCH STREET SLIP, TORONTO, 1905*

*No painting will ever reproduce more truly the letter and spirit of the winter waterfront of thirty years ago than this little Christmas card which Rowley Murphy sends to his friends this year. Mr. Murphy is an artist of rare accuracy and his marine pictures are truer than photographs and as redolent of reality as Stockholm tar. In this study old timers will recognize at a glance the St. Louis, the Reuben Doud, and the Stuart H. Dunn, all huddling in Sylvester Brothers' slip, where now trains rumble on the viaduct and motors whizz along acres of asphalt, far from the waters of the receded bay.*