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Schooner Days CXIX (119) – A
By C.H.J. Snider

The CAROLINE'S CRASH - 96 YEARS AGO TONIGHT

Our so-called "debunkers" are people who lick the gilt off the gingerbread of history. Sometimes they substitute a decoration even more difficult to swallow. Often enough they argue with that ingenious variety of logic by which anything and everything can be proven or disproven. Nevertheless, they are not always convincing.

Did General Wolfe recite some stanzas of Gray's matchless "Elegy" while on the way to claim his own immortality? Yes, said midshipman (afterwards professor) Robson, of Edinburgh, who's in the last little boat and heard him. No, say certain modern professors, who, of course, did not hear him.

Did the little steamer "Caroline" in a spectacular doom of fire and flood really crash over Niagara Falls and provide a colorful page in the drab story of the Rebellion of 1837? Yes, said a number of eye-witnesses. No, say some of the historians of our skeptical generation. It has been settled conclusively that the Caroline actually dropped over the mighty cataract. It has been decided, finally and forever, that she did not. So there you are. And as Theodore Roosevelt once aded, "Where are you?"

All agree, however, that on the last night, but one of the stirring year 1837, the Caroline was cut from her moorings after being set on fire, and that she sank, a blazing wreck, somewhere in the Niagara River. And Percy Ghent contributes to "Schooner Days" the above remarks and the following account of the "deep damnation of her taking off," between with the words "arch rebel.

HERE is the story of the event as told by William Lyon Mackenzie: "We observed about one o'clock a.m. a fire burning on the American side of the river in the direction of the small tavern and old storehouse commonly called Schlosser. It's volume gradually enlarged and many were our conjectures concerning it. At length the mass of flame was distinctly perceived to move upon the waters and approach the rapids and the middle of the river above the falls. Swiftly and beautifully it glided along, yet more rapid in its onward course - as it neared the fathomless gulf into which it vanished in a moment, amid the surrounding darkness. This was the ill-fated steamboat *Caroline*."

It was ninety six years ago tonight that this last weird trip of the steamboat was made. Then, as now, the Union Jack floated bravely over the Canadian side of the Niagara, and the Stars and Stripes over the other. But between the two, on Navy Island, a mile or so above the Falls, a strange new flag fluttered in the winter breeze. It was the Twin Stars of the "Patriots," the stars representing Upper and Lower Canada.

Citizens of the tiny island republic were a band of rebels scattered a few nights before in a scrap at Montgomery's Tavern on Yonge street, near the newly incorporated City of Toronto. Sympathizers from the United States had augmented their numbers, and Mackenzie was their leader. He set up a provisional government, and printed some even more provisional paper currency to be redeemed at the City Hall, Toronto, at some future date.

Physically, Mackenzie was a short and insignificant looking man. His second in

command was a tall and handsome American, not yet thirty years old, named Van Rensselaer. By friend and foe alike, the two were dubbed “Tom Thumb” and “Jack-the-Giant-Killer.” And the lofty purpose of these worthies and their followers was to bring by force of arms the blessings of Liberty and the light of Freedom into the inky gloom of Canadian thralldom.

Arms, ammunition and food the rebels found aplenty on the American side of the river. A portion of the press in that country protested hotly against this impudent breach of neutrality, but if the protests ever reached the eyes of the powers that be, those eyes merely winked. Officers of the United States Army had indeed been ordered to “look out” for the so-called patriots on their country’s soil.

Here comes a gang of Makenzie’s men route to Navy Island. They are dragging a piece of ordnance behind them. An American officer with a few soldiers is patrolling the river and meets them:

“Halt,” he commands, “Whiter bound?”

“We are going to shoot ducks.”

“Forward, the duck shooters.”

And with a broad grin he salutes.

Neutrality!

On the Canadian shore there is a small military force, mostly farmers who have responded to the call for volunteers. A few Indians are there too, and perhaps more eager for action than the rest, a substantial number of negroes. Many of them carry ugly whip scars of the slavery in that land of liberty from which they have escaped. All watch with keen eyes the doings of the patriots under their flag of the Twin Stars of Navy Island. A desultory bombardment which does but trivial damage is induced in both sides. Thus, for several days, nothing very thrilling happened.

Then one fine morning officers in the Canadian side cocked their telescopes and saw things happening on the other side of the river. Armed men and guns were being taken aboard the forty-ton *Caroline*, and the vessel headed with her warlike freight for Navy Island.

“This won’t do,” said Colonel MacNab to Captain Drew, R.N., who stood beside him. “I say, Drew, do you think you can cut that vessel out?”

“Oh, yes,” answered the captain, nothing easier. But it must be done at night.”

“Well, then, go and do it,” was the grim response of MacNab.

“That order,” quoth one Canadian historian, “nearly fired the continent as well as the *Caroline*.”

Captain Drew lost no time. Volunteers for dangerous service were called for at once. And at once a hundred men responded. From these sufficient to carry out the dangerous exploit were selected. Not until they were in rowboats and headed toward Fort Schlosser on the American shore, where the *Caroline* was tied to the wharf, were the men told the nature of the errand they were on. Any volunteer who wished to return to safety was given the chance. No one took it.

So, battling against the fierce current that sought to hurl them over the Falls, the men in the little flotilla shortly after midnight on Saturday, the 30th of December, 1837, essayed the hair-raising trip across the turbulent stream to the doomed ship. They reached it without mishap.

A signal was given and they climbed aboard. With cutlass and pistol the guards on the *Caroline* were driven ashore.

One of them was killed in the scuffle. Then the chains which held the steamer to the wharf and shore ice were hacked away, while men aboard smashed up the lighter woodwork. Splintered wood and baskets were placed over an oil lamp which burned in the cabin. In a matter of minutes the *Caroline* was deserted and in flames.

When the vessel was free of the wharf, eye-witnesses have declared, she did not, as expected, follow the direct course of the stream and plunge over the American Falls, but drifting diagonally across the river, a spectacular mass of fire and smoke, crashed to her doom over the Horseshoe Falls on the Canadian side.

This daring exploit almost led to war between Great Britain and the United States, but eventually good sense prevailed. Makenzie's frail island republicans crashed with the *Caroline*, and shortly afterwards the nest of rebels was dispersed. Colonel MacNab was knighted for his part in the thrilling affair, and the City of Toronto presented swords of honor both to McNab and Drew.

But an extraordinary wave of harsh feeling rolled over the United States after the event. Its virulence is attested by the experiences of Captain Francis Marryat. That famous novelist and gallant sailor was a guest at a St. George's Day dinner in Toronto the following spring. During the evening he gave a toast, lauding the heroism of his friend, Captain Drew.

Thereafter, his pilgrimage through the United States was marked by a trail of bonfires, the flames emanating from one Marryat, burned in effigy. On more than one occasion the novelist was an amused spectator at these celebrations, smoking a cigar the while. At Lewiston his books were publicly committed to the flames. In St. Louis his effigy perished with a halter about its neck. With the courage and humor which never forsook him, Marryat referred to these warm attentions in the course of a speech in Cincinnati: "If we are to burn all those who differ with us in opinion, consider, gentlemen, what a glorious bonfire would be made of the whole United States."

At the end of May, 1838, the cutting out of the *Caroline* was "avenged" under circumstances which stand out in grotesque relief against the sober background of civil strife in the Canadas, "Admiral" Bill Johnston was the hero of the plot. This bold, bad buccaneer was a native of Upper Canada, whose knowledge of the waterways and landing places in both provinces was uncanny in its accuracy. He is said to have guided the invading Americans across the Niagara at Queenston to an obscure pathway behind the heights, during the War of 1812, and for this traitorous act his Canadian property was confiscated.

Ever afterward he cherished a fervid hatred toward Great Britain and vowed to be a thorn in her side. Like an aquatic Robin Hood, Bill and his merry men, including his four stalwart sons, roved the St. Lawrence and Lake Ontario, making occasional shore raids for supplies and money. When pursued, as often he was, by the authorities on both the Canadian and American borders, he fled to the endless river intricacies amid the Thousand Islands, a region over which he reigned in security like a king. His favored craft was a gaudily painted twelve-oared rowboat capable of carrying twenty men, yet so lightly constructed that it could be carried by two.

On a dark night at the end of 1838, the vengeful Bill with thirteen of his band, all greased, painted and feathered like Indians, hid themselves on Wells Island, a calling place for

river boats. Thither in due course came the smart little steamer *Sir Robert Peel*, a vessel well known in Toronto nearly a century ago. She had stopped for wood. Wooding over, both passengers and crew retired for the night, the steamer remained tied at the wharf.

Eating until sleep overcame his victims, the buccaneer led his desperadoes aboard, yelling in a voice of thunder, "Wake up! Wake up!" To this rude summons he added with a grandiloquence with the situation hardly warranted, "The nations are at war!"

One by one, all on board were coolly relieved of their money and valuables, including any clothing quality to which the fastidious Bill took fancy. Then, after driving all ashore, the *Sir Robert Peel* was set on fire and cut adrift. This deed, Johnston boasted, was to avenge the *Caroline*, and the *Sir Robert Peel*, certainly, was as completely destroyed.

Large rewards were offered both by Canada and the United States for the capture of the doughty "admiral" following this glaring piracy and he was eventually landed in jail. He escaped, however, and was not recaptured. Marked with the stains of time, and with the words curiously spelt, a letter written by the notorious Bill, apparently while in hiding in Philadelphia, is in the possession of the writer, Mr. Percy Ghent, of this city.

A long way from Schooner Days, say you, of these steamboat days of rebellion times? Not so far. Schooners were, of course, the principal means of transportation for freight, and to a certain extent for passengers in 1837. Mr. Ghent recently mentioned to The Telegram some of the curious claims for losses due to rebel activity, preferred by schooner owners in Toronto. Another, which he is possibly familiar, was the audacious experience of "Fisty" Masterson, and his little schooner, *Christina*, in rebellion times, which will be recounted next week.

PASSING HAILS

Lady Likes Stonehookers

Sir,- I have read with great interest "Those Stonehookers" because from a little girl of 5 years old till a young woman of 10 years (when I was married and left home). The lakes, sailors, stonehookers, Port Credit, rotate, Oakville and Frenchmen's Bay were the main theme at our home for my eldest brother had started to work on the boats from the time he was 14 years old, and we lived in Parkdale till four years ago when he suddenly stopped writing and I haven't heard from him since. His last address was George Marett, Ponsenby, G.B., New Zealand.

Your list of stonehooker names and owners was of great interest to me as my brother sailed on most of them under Captains Quinn, Williams, Blowers and others, and owned for a time two or three of the ones mentioned. The Blackbird was owned by my brother. He either sailed on or owned the Enterprise for a time (I'm not sure of this one), and your final one, the Zebra, was owned by my brother, George Marett of Toronto, when she was wrecked.

He also owned a small boat named the Hard-a-Lee which he sailed himself up the Georgian Bay and around Midland and Collins Inlet, where the old White Oak now lies. I have at my home now, although somewhat the worse for wear as the ladders and ropes are beginning to rot, a three-masted schooner he made when he was around about 20 years old which might be of interest to some of the old sailors to see of that time, and if any of them who knew my brother would like to have a look at it they would be very welcome. My brother was one of the best sailors on Lake Ontario and the upper lakes, but never took out his captain's papers.

In Passing Hails I recognize a familiar name, A.E. Maude, who may happen to be the Albert Maude who was a great friend of my brother in those days.

—ELIZABETH LYNN, nee MARETT,

887 Palmerston Ave.

Buffalo Commercial,

January 3, 1838

THE STEAMBOAT CAROLINE. - *The history of the CAROLINE is rather an eventful one. She was built of live oak some years ago at Charleston, S.C., and was brought to Albany, between which place and Troy she plied for some time. She was then sent by the Erie and Oswego canals to Canada, when a new keel was give her, and made a British bottom. Having been engaged in some smuggling transactions, she was condemned and sold, thus making her an American bottom again. After plying from this port to various ports on the lake, she went on her ill-fated expedition down the river, and met with an end, the sublimity of which can scarcely be paralleled.*

Her capture and burning, with all the accessaries of the surrounding scenery would form a magnificent subject for a painting.