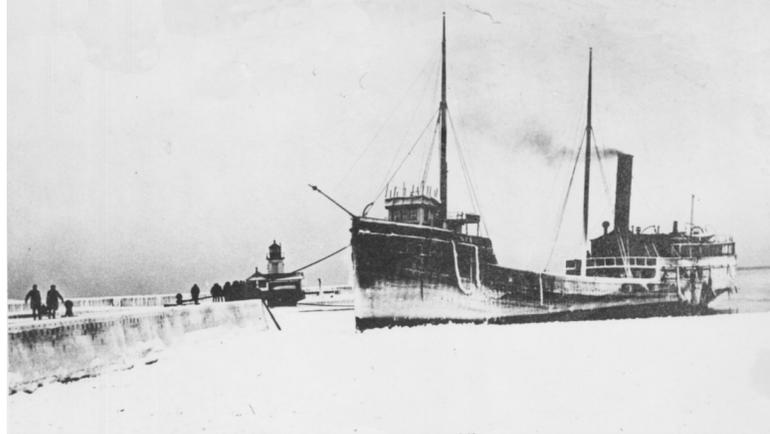


**Toronto Telegram, April 2, 1955**  
**Schooner Days MCCXIV (1214)**  
**BY C. H. J. Snider**

## ANGELS IN OILSKINS

ONTARIO never got the 1,041 tons of soft coal a dozen Oswego sailor folk risked everything, yes, everything, to deliver in December, 1902 – to relieve the fuel famine caused by the great Pennsylvania mine strike.

That coal is at the bottom of the lake. So are most of those sailors.



*The steamer NIKO in ice, Oswego Harbor, 1902.*

The province struggled through with slabs and cordwood and what coal could be got in by rail through the winter from B.C., N.S. and U-K, which latter initials were unknown or unused in 1902.

Toronto would have suffered cruelly had not Thomas Urquhart, newly elected mayor, jumped into the emergency with a civic rush order of thousands of tons from Britain. It was our first acquaintance with Welsh coal – and was it a happy one!

Tom Urquhart, God rest his Baptist soul, deserved a halo. And so, though they may have dug with the other foot, did the Oswego Donovans, who tried, and failed, to get that 1,041 tons to Deseronto. There are halos enough to go round in heaven.

County Warden Amos McDonald, keeper of Wicked Point light on the west shore of Prince Edward, shook his head as the four vessels that had anchored under Point Peter overnight got under weigh that calm freezing morning of Dec. 14, 1902. Bad weather ahead, wind and snow. He resolved to light up early. They would be seeking shelter somewhere, before nightfall. He would do all he could to help.

This end of the coal strike, he reflected, had brought out all sorts of craft, to fill the empty fuel yards before winter sealed the harbors tight. He had never before seen that queer white American that looked like a two decked passenger-package-freighter, cut down forward like a car ferry.

The others, the *Resolute* and her tow he knew well enough, the stranger's tow, too. She was the *John R. Noyes*, once the pride of Oswego's sailing fleet of schooners. "The best that ever left the trestle" his Point Traverse neighbor Marsh Spafford had often said. Cut down to a

barge now, with one sail only in place of her eight great canvas wings. And one sailor only in her forecandle where once eight men kept watch-and-watch.

He had heard the name of the steamer towing her. *Hall*, it was, *John E. Hall*, from “Up Above,” bought from Manitowoc or somewhere by an Oswego man. He watched them vanish around the point, trying again for Deseronto, for which they had now been striving all month, against frost, snow and headwinds.

### **LONG HARD TRIP**

At least the *Hall* and her tow had. Making hay while the famine sun shone the pair had been to Toledo on Lake Erie, turned into Cleveland, Oh., and loaded over a thousand tons (between them) of soft Pennsylvania bituminous for Rathbun and Co’s coal hungry industries in Deseronto.

They had some “union trouble,” somewhere, and were scantily, if adequately, manned. Seven men and a woman cook in the steamer, a woman cook and three men in the schooner that once sailed with a minimum of seven.

As it was the beginning of December of course they had bad weather. But the little convoy, was a family affair, seven of those aboard Oswego Irish, and four of these Donovans. All stuck, loyally together, facing the heart-scaldings with Praise-be-to-Gods instead of whining. They had locked down through the 26 wooden steps of the second old Welland Canal, and entered Ontario at Port Dalhousie – to find the wind still ahead and the weather un-promising.

After 24 hours butting into head seas they went into Charlotte for shelter, and lay there until the 11th of the month.

Putting out in a lull they made slow progress against the left-over swell. Snow squalls came and went, east winds drove them back, fog and frost vapor made it impossible to enter any port. It took three days to pick up the partial shelter of Point Peter, at the southwest corner of Prince Edward County. Here they had a lee from the east wind. That was why Amos McDonald saw them making a fresh start on the morning of Dec. 14th. He never saw the *Hall* again.

### **SNOW, CRUEL SNOW**

No one ever did.

It came on to snow soon, and it kept on snowing. And blowing blowing hard from the pitiless northeast. Amos McDonald lighted up early, as he had resolved. He was up all that night, brushing the snow from the windows of the lantern, shovelling it from the surrounding light-platform. The wind was so wild he was hurled against the guardrails again and again as he worked. Twice he was almost blown into the lake, roaring below him invisibly on the Wicked Point reefs.

Twenty-two inches of snow fell in Oswego.

In Toronto it was clear. The steamer *Niko*, after unloading precious coal here, cleared Oswego the night of Dec. 15. Next morning she was off Oswego, but could not get in for the heavy ice floes which jammed the entrance and extended into the lake. She used up all her bunker fuel but could not get through or out of the pack. Rather than freeze or starve Capt. Thos. Beggs and his crew walked ashore on ice, for they were out of food too. They got help in Oswego, and carried out provisions and coal in baskets, 20 tons of it, the only way over the ice hummocks. Dynamite was used to blast the entrance open, and in two days the *Niko* crunched her way in.

Amos McDonald knew nothing of this, for Prince Edward was isolated by the weather though the snow was not so bad there.

Five mornings later he saw the *Hall's* consort, the *John R. Noyes* again – and for the last time. She was a complete wreck, burst open on the grindings of Wicked Point, her coal cargo washing in amongst the gravel, great sections of her following, even to the keelson and bottom of the once fine vessel.

The *Hall* is still to be accounted for. We will tell what we know next week.