

The Toronto Telegram, Oct. 15, 1955.
Schooner Days, MCCXXXII (1242).
By C.H.J. Snider.

TELEVISION, A.D. 1900.

This is the picture of the passing out of the schooner *Picton* on Lake Ontario on Dominion Day 55 years ago, with three other vessels in sight, almost within hail. It is reconstructed from relations of eyewitnesses and from the text of her Captain's last message, found in a floating bottle afterwards. She has suddenly opened up and the water is so high in her that its over the cabin floor. Let go everything shouts Captain Sidley, running to the halliard belaying pins, and get the boat down. The sails came flailing down as the loosened halliard coils snake aloft. The mate, cook and one man try to cast off the turns of the davit tackles so that the yawl-boat on the stern can be unhooked from the davits, but the schooner is so low now in the water that every sea that smacks her stern lifts the boat up against the davits and drenches the tackles so that the rope will not run. Perhaps the boat burst or is stove in. Its remains float into Oswego harbour months later. Captain Sidley takes the heaving line from its pin on the quarter and lashes his little boy to his back. He grabs the empty catsup bottle that they keep near the wheel for getting water from the coldest depths of the lake in summer – writes the shortest note with the stub of a lead pencil, and corks it tight. Before he can do anything the schooner drops under him or rolls over on him. Those water bottles always had the cork attached by wire. It would be in the neck when the bottle was lowered with the sounding lead to take it to the bottom. The pressure at great depth would blow the cork out and allow the bottle to fill with cold water. All happened in less time than it took to write this. Captain Sidley must have intended to lash himself and his child to something that would float. But there was no time. Watchers a mile away who saw the flogging sails only thought the *Picton* was reefing. They saw her rolling drunkenly, then swing into the trough, roll over on one side, and go down, all in one movement.

That was why everyone on board perished without being seen. She rolled them into the raging sea and went down over them, a 400 ton mass a 100 feet long, netting them in her disordered sails and snakelike coils of gear, and taking her yawl-boat on the davits with her. Why did the *Picton* sink while 3 other schooner swam through? She was rotten beyond all knowledge. She had been well built, with strong timbering, keelson two feet square etc. But that was in 1868. For 32 years her bottom had been soaking in bilge water, warm under 300 tons of cargo – pressure begets heat – freezing in ice every winter, silently sweating to death down in the dark, with no ventilation. Oak will last hundreds of years completely submerged. But wet and dry, hot and cold and never ventilated? Fatal to any wood.

The *Picton* had been worked hard, and was worn out at the end of 30 seasons. Then she lay idle for 2 years deteriorating more and more rapidly. And she was nail sick. Thousands of nails, spikes, bolts and other iron fastenings had been boring and sawing out her softening frames, literally sawing her asunder, with the vibrations of 30 years afloat. That is the hazard of all wooden vessels that are iron fastened. That is why treenail fastening, with wooden pins offer

advantages. The three other vessels had been subjected to the same stress and strain in life as the *Picton*. They had survived because they had better care. They had been salted, ventilated, repaired as renewals seemed necessary. And they had not lain idle for two killing years. When Captain Sidley (Jack) bought the *Picton* in Cobourg at the end of the winter of 1899-1900, she smelt musty as an old apple barrel. Some of the butts where her planks joined, end to end, had gaps two inches wide. He horsed bale after bale of oakum into her, to tighten her up, and he knew he would have to do a lot more repair work. He did not know how fargone she was. Nobody did. Buying her for a \$1, 000 when she had cost \$10,000 to build – it was all he could afford – he hoped to rehabilitate her out of earnings. That was why she was again on Lake Ontario that fatal Dominion Day.

[Transcribed: G.B.M. Sept. 1, 76.]