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Schooner Days CXXXV (135)
By C.H.J. Snider

The “SILENT ST. LAWRENCE”

OUR TEXT, if you have no objection, will be “Whatsoever thine hand finds to do, do it with thy might.” In non-scriptural language, put your best foot foremost. A thing well done is twice done. And for illustration, let us take the “Silent St. Lawrence.”

She is chosen because there was a reference to her last Saturday, in describing the desk from which “Schooner Days” come; and there will be more references to her tomorrow, down Picton way, at Cherry Valley.

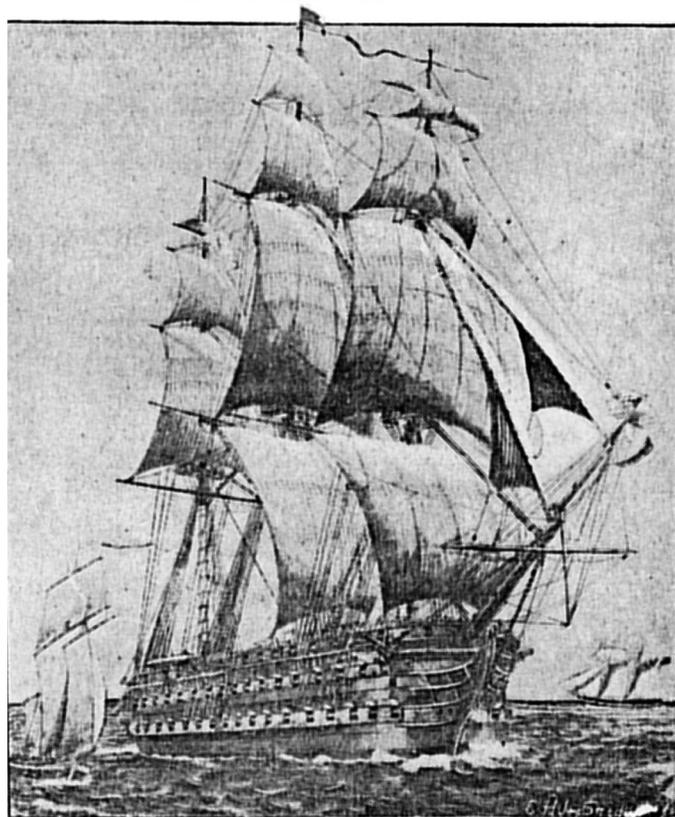
This little Prince Edward County church is the scene annually of a brave Mariners’ Service, where they bid a cheery Godspeed to the boys going away for the season, and read the roll of those who have made port since the last spring fitting-out.

Never a freighter blows for a canal lock but some Prince Edward boy’s ears tingle. This fine old county still sends forth its sons to all five basins of the Great Lakes at fitting-out time, though the barley days and the schooners that made the Bay of Quinte famous have long since passed.

Besides the sailors who go from Prince Edward in the spring and come back in the fall, there are the fishermen who ear the harvests of Soup Harbor and Point Traverse, and the False Ducks and the Main Duck and the Duckling; and the farmers who fill the canning factories and the dairy trucks. They come from miles around to Cherry Valley. The little church holds six hundred when packed to the ceiling. It stands out like a lighthouse in a sea of automobiles with new license plates. So hath it been and so will it be.

These annual Mariners’ Services are largely the inspiration of Capt. Nelson Palmateer, retired schooner man and steamboat skipper. His fine granite tombstone stands proudly in the cemetery, but his fine weather-beaten form will be noteworthy in the Captains’ Row in the church

THE “SILENT ST. LAWRENCE”



*H.M.S. ST. LAWRENCE in full sail on Lake Ontario.
From the painting in the John Ross Robertson collection
of Canadian Historical Pictures, Toronto Public Library*

to-morrow, as it has been for many years past, and as it will be, please God, for many years to come.

It takes a fore-handed man to arrange these services, and that is what Capt. Nelson Palmateer is. The granite obelisk which marks his grave-plot, with all but the last figure of the date filled in, is just another example of sailorly fore-handedness; of doing what a man's hand finds to do with a man's might. But to the "Silent St. Lawrence."

The War of 1812 had dragged on for three years. When it began we British had a ship and a few brigs on Lake Ontario; paltry little things, no bigger than stonehookers, poorly armed, poorly manned. The Americans were even worse off. They had only one brig, and she was such a slug they could not get her to work to windward.

They set about remedying their deficiencies by seizing trading vessels, ours as well as their own, and arming them with guns they were not fit to carry, while, they felled trees and laid the keels of larger warships at Sacket's Harbor.

We did the same. We had control of the lake for the first season, but by the spring of next year the Americans had more armed tonnage afloat, while our ships were still on the stocks at York and Kingston; and in consequence the Americans swept up the lake and poor old Toronto-that-was-to-be was captured after the bloody battle in which Gen. Pike was killed and the ship here, and the Parliament Buildings, were burned; and then the Americans went over to Niagara and over-ran the peninsula.

By the end of the season we had tied the score by capturing some of their vessels and sinking others and getting some more of our own launched. Next winter saw another feverish building race, and next spring saw the same old weary wicked round of sunken ships and burned farmhouses and slaughtered men. Neither side was strong enough to gain complete control of the lake, and control of the lake spelled control of the land.

Then a man had a vision. It may have been Lem the Dreamer, or Brother Lemuel, of the Children of Peace, as this blue-eyed shipwright giant, of Kingston, was known among that obscure sect. Or it may have been the black visaged Sir James Lucas Yeo, R.N., the commodore of the British fleet on Lake Ontario. Or it may have been John Dennis, the United Empire Loyalist master builder, whose descendants are with us to this day. Or it may have been The First Lord of the Admiralty in Whitehall, 3,000 miles across the ocean.

One gigantic battleship

Whoever it was, this man was positively inspired. He conceived the idea, and he put the idea into execution, of one gigantic battleship, the super-dreadnought of her time, which would make war impossible, because she alone, on her single keel, would carry so many guns she could sink a whole opposing fleet. And she herself from the thickness of her oaken sides would be impervious to their broadsides.

It was objected that a ship so large and so powerful could not enter the little shoal natural

harbors of the lake. The answer was that she would not have to enter any harbor. She would be so large and have such enormous anchors and cables that she could ride out any gale wherever it caught her. And she would be so powerfully armed that she could lie outside the harbors and batter to pieces the fleet sent out to drive her off.

There is an old stone building in Kingston, used as R.M.C. barracks, still known as the Stone Frigate, because it had, originally, three floors open from end to end like the decks of a ship.

Beside this old yellow Stone Frigate in Navy Bay, in Kingston harbor, keel-blocks were laid for 200 feet.

Deserters scuttled to the American naval base with the news, and Commodore Chauncey, the American commander did not believe them. A 200-foot keel was as inconceivable for Lake Ontario in the year 1814 as a keel a quarter of a mile long would be inconceivable in 1934. But whole forests of oak and elm and maple and pine around Kingston were denuded of their timber, and as the summer waned this enormous dreamship took shape and being.

She was as wide as a city street. She was as high as a three-storey house. She was as long as the market square. She was pierced for 112 guns in all, in three long tiers, seventeen to a side on each deck, with ten more in the bridles and stern ports. They could hit a target at a mile, and a half, and carry three miles at random.

This is no fairy tale, for before me lie the plans from which she was built, faired up after the job was over and signed by F. Strickland, Admiralty naval architect, and docketed with the London Admiralty stamp. These prove her, by the graphic scale attached to have measured:

From figurehead to taffrail, 221 feet.
On the upper deck, 191 feet, 2 inches. ,
Keel, actual, 174 feet.
Keel for tonnage measurement, 157 feet, 8 inches.
Breadth, extreme, 52 feet, 7 inches.
Depth of hold from lower deck, 18 feet, 6 inches.
Draft, fully loaded. 20 feet.
Height from bottom of keel to upper rail, 45 feet.
Tonnage, burden, 2,304 90-94ths.

Her ribs were oak timbers, fourteen to sixteen inches square, and spaced close, with the intervals between filled with softwood. Her deckbeams were like the foundation sills of a house, of cedar, twelve and fourteen inches square. Her planking was six-inch oak, inside and out, and thicker in the wales and bilges and garboards.

When the news of her building was authenticated the Americans were in a panic. They realized it was too late to try to match her, for their end of the lake would be frozen up long before they could get such a mighty ship built and launched.

Nevertheless, they started on two, each to carry one hundred and twenty guns.

But, meantime, they perceived this whole fleet which floated on one keel was going to

destroy their shipyard and arsenal and whatever was being built there. So they tried to blow her up before she could take to the lake.

They hired the Pirate of the Thousand Islands, William Johnston, an Irish settler with a bitter hatred of all things British. In his light skiff he carried into Kingston harbor at dead of night an American midshipman, with the forefather of that deadly modern weapon, the torpedo. This first torpedo was so crude one can almost pity the optimism of the inventor and one must admire the courage of the devoted operators.

The boat had to creep up, unobserved, to within, a few yards of the victim. Then an iron harpoon had to be fired, point-blank, at the ship's waterline, from a blunderbuss or musket in the small boat's bow. The harpoon had a loop near the head, to which was attached a short light line. The other end of this line was fastened to a powder-keg, which had a copper cylinder to buoy it up. The torpedo-man had to light a slow fuse in the cylinder, fire the harpoon into the ship, heave the line, keg, cylinder and lighted fuse overboard – and row away, if he could, before the sentries riddled him with musket balls or the exploding powder-keg blew him and the ship he was trying to destroy to Kingdom Come!

Pirate Bill Johnston rowed Midshipman McGowan, U.S.N., around and around Navy Bay in the darkness until the first streaks of dawn began to light up the frowning face of the Stone Frigate.

Never a man-of-war but this stationary one on the shore had they discovered in all this time, neither the great big one they had heard of nor the little ones they had been fighting year after year. The whole fleet seemed to have vanished. They realized that, like ghosts at cockcrow, they themselves would have to vanish or else be shot at sunrise. So they pulled for the shadows of the Thousand Islands.

Here, when the October sun came up, they had revealed to them the mystery of there being no ships in Navy Bay. Its first rays flashed back from the ensigns and pendants of the entire British fleet in the Upper Gap far above Kingston harbor, boldly taking the lake, as though there was not an enemy to be feared between Kingston and the Gulf of Mexico.

And there was none. For in the midst of the British fleet, like a sovereign among her servitors and a vassals, towered the new three-decker, topmast high above them all. She had been launched a few weeks before and had been christened the *St. Lawrence* in honor of the river which began to flow when she began to float. She loomed above the original fleet like the Royal York or the Bank of Commerce above the Toronto viaduct.

A thousand men trod her decks. She was on the way, not to destroy the American fleet and naval base at Sacket's Harbor, but to relieve beleaguered Niagara. Into that war-torn peninsula she poured troops and stores; and, as everybody knows, the last invader was driven from British soil ere the old year died. And this was possible because Britain, though with painfully few soldiers, had now complete command of the waterways, which enabled her to place those soldiers where they were needed.

“The war,” said Commodore Chauncey bitterly, when the Pirate and the Midshipman came back to Sacket’s Harbor, “the war is over.”

He was right. There was nothing for the Americans to do but to assemble all their fleet – sixteen vessels of war, besides transports – behind the shoals of Sacket’s Harbor, and pray for an early winter. So terrified were they of a visit from this silent angel of destruction that they laid the keel of the second ship with which they hoped to meet her four miles inland, up Black River Bay. How they would have got their own super-dreadnought down to water deep enough to float her is a problem unsolved, for they never finished her.

They had the first ship they began, the one at Sacket’s Harbor, almost planked by the following April, and they had picked a name for her – *New Orleans*, celebrating the British repulse at that city.

But, before the launching, word came across the Atlantic and up the quaggy roads and swollen rivers of New York State that Commodore Chauncey’s bitter words were true.

The war was over; had been over since Christmas Eve. The commissioners for peace had arrived at agreement in the neutral city Ghent on that date. News travelled more slowly then than at the time of the Armistice of the Great War.

It was said that at the launching of the *St. Lawrence* Lem the Dreamer, the hardest working of all the shipwrights, died of his exertion and that his last words were:

"Her shotted guns shall never speak. Without a word she ends this strife. And there shall be no more war."

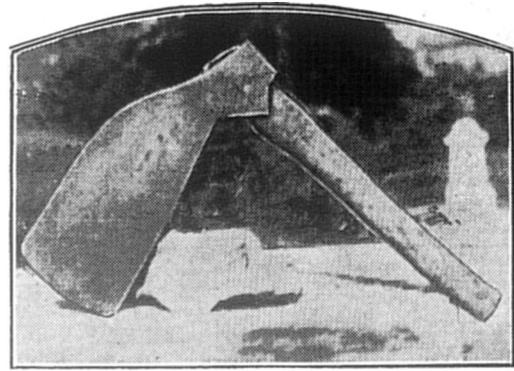
It is a fact that this *St. Lawrence*, the deadliest fighting machine devised, on fresh water, never fired a loaded gun, and yet accomplished more than the remainder of the navies of both nations combined.

She has been nicknamed the "Silent *St. Lawrence*." She not only won the war without a shot, but she won a permanent abandonment of an armament race which, on the Great Lakes and everywhere else, would end in murder or suicide. It was after her appearance that Great Britain and the United States sanely arrived at a “one-gun navy” policy for the Great Lakes. Each country agreed to no heavier armament than one 18-pounder gunboat. That agreement, with reasonable relaxations for such occasions as Fenian Raids, rum-running, and fish poaching, has obtained so long that its existence is forgotten, but anything else between the two countries is unthinkable.

True to her destiny, the *St. Lawrence* was dismantled soon after the peace. After lying idle for 40 years in Kingston harbor, her empty hull was towed westward to the vicinity of the old distillery near Portsmouth. The late Henry Cunningham told the writer, in 1910, a vivid story of how he saw the old side-wheel tug tow her towards the sunset, like the Fighting *Temeraire* in Turner’s picture; and how she was beached, and a wharf built out to her, just east of the distillery pier.

For years and years she served as a cordwood dock and fuel depot for the lake steamers, fueling up for the westward passage, their decks piled with maple and beech and pine. Through Mr. Cunningham the writer had no difficulty in locating the remains of the *St. Lawrence*, although they were then from six to twenty feet under water.

Dr. H.C. Connell, of Kingston, opposite whose fine modern house the old hulk wore down to bare bones and disappeared, frequently finds old Bank of Upper Canada tokens and other coins, on the beach, loose change dropped by the farmers when hauling cordwood to the long-vanished dock. He has the ship-axe which cut the rope holding the dogshores the day the *St. Lawrence* was launched, in September, 1814; and another Kingston physician, Dr. W.A. Jones, has a swivel-gun salvaged from wreck as recently as 1920. It is only a little thing,



*Ship carpenter's axe in the possession of Dr. Henry Calvin Connell, Kingston, Ont. It was given to him by Wm. Cockburn, whose father also named Wm, Cockburn, a blacksmith in the Kingston navy yard, remembered the axe being used to cut the ropes holding the dogshores the day the *St. Lawrence* was launched. The axe blade is six inches wide and fourteen inches from edge to hack, and is marked in the centre W. DODDS.*



*An Emma-Gee, swivel gun, twenty inches long, found in the hull of the *St. Lawrence* in 1920, It has the letters "S" and "L" moulded on the trunnions. It was recovered from fifteen feet of water by a hospital patient and given to Dr. W. A. Jones, radiologist, Sydenham Hospital, Kingston.*

meant for firing signals, or a handful of bullets in close fighting.

The *St. Lawrence's* "working guns," which never spoke, were twenty-four, thirty-two and forty-two-pounders, throwing nails heavier than the weight of the whole swivel gun.

The *St. Lawrence's* intended rival, the *New Orleans*, which never reached the water, stood for year after year under a house built over her in the shipyard at Sacket's Harbor. Sixty years ago ship and house alike began to tall apart from dry rot, and both were torn down.

Deckbeams of the *New Orleans* were carried to Oswego and cut up for remembrances. Capt. Nelson Palmateer possesses one of these, in the form of a red cedar cane. Although he does not need to use this, it seems fitting that, having been associated so long with the Great Lakes and the ships that ply them, and the sailors that man them Capt. Palmateer should have another cane – and, with proper deference be it said, a better one. So the

writer is presenting him, at this Cherry Valley service, with a stout brass-banded walking stick made by Messrs, L.W. Mackenzie and Dean Bros., of Toronto, from a choice bit of oak from the heart of the "SILENT ST. LAWRENCE."