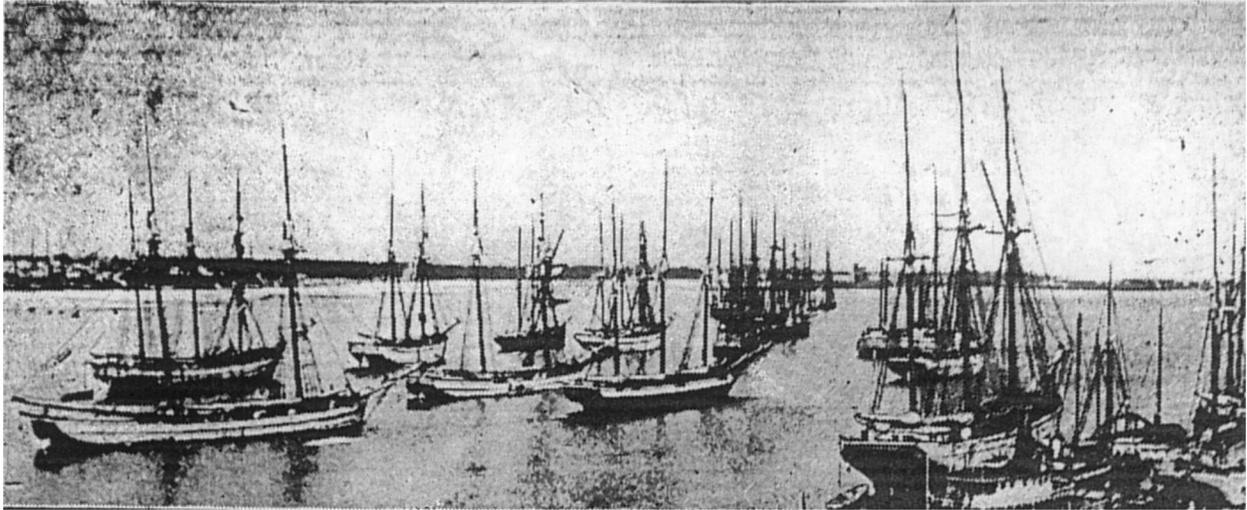


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Schooner Days XV (15)
By C.H.J. Snider

Passages

The Gulnare's and the Wood Duck's – Yacht Atlantic's record has stood for twenty-six years – Who has facts on fast passages under sail on the lakes?



Sarnia Bay in the Schooner Days of the '70s (photo supplied by Imperial Oil Ltd.)

"Now I'll tell one," said Doc, wiping his spectacles after reading last week's "Schooner Days" and the story of Capt. Robert Maw's fast passage across the Atlantic in the *Gulnare*, in eight days nine hours from land to land, with oil brought down from Sarnia.

"This one is true, too. It was in the *Wood Duck*, which Capt. Maw also owned and in which Magistrate O'Connor told of first going mate years afterwards when somebody else had her.

"Spud Shorthorn was a bright young sailor at the time, and he proved it by buying a new knife while the *Wood Duck* was lying in Oswego. He was proud of it, and he had reason to be.

"The knife was a novelty then, though the Boy Scouts and the war made its make quite common afterwards.

"It was a clasp knife with one big blade and a marline spike on the back of it and a ring in the top with a swivel and steel chain. We've all carried sailor's knives with lanyards on them. This was a development of that idea. The *Wood Duck* was loaded for Belleville and got into the sheltered Bay of Quinte one fine summer evening with a very light wind, after a rough passage outside.

"Under an island the Bay traders used to nickname the Isle of Patmos she got going very, very slowly. It was Spud's trick at the wheel, the first night watch. All hands had been at it

forty-eight hours, coming across from Oswego, and were feeling pretty well used up, but Spud kept them awake by his babble about his new knife. He had the ring of the chain lanyard belayed around the other button of his braces, and he swanked it, cutting his tobacco and letting the closed knife fall negligently beside his leg, suspended by its chain.

"For the love of the Lord stow that and let somebody get a wink of sleep," said the Old Man, making a good natured pass at Spud, who ducked and hopped up on the rail.

"I mentioned the other button of his braces. That was right. He had only two. As he jumped this highly important member of his sartorial equipment parted company with the pants. The trousers stayed up. But the knife didn't. Dangling on its chain it struck the rail, opened, and spun overboard with a splash.

"If Spud had been eloquent about it before he was positively inspired now. The Isle of Patmos was the only place fit for him. The way he orated about that lost knife would have shamed the angel of the last trumpet. He spun the useless wheel hard up and hard down, bemoaning his luck and praising the late lamented blade, spike, handle and chain.

"Finally the Old Man got so fed up that he said 'Get forward, Spud, and turn in. I'll take your trick.

"Spud departed for the forecandle, still babbling. But the thick atmosphere down below soon put him under, and between that and the lack of sleep the night before he was dead to the world for hours.

"He woke with a sunbeam tickling his nose. Everything was as still as a church. The watch had not been called all night.

"Panicky that something was seriously wrong Spud turned out instanter. The sun was up. The sails were full. There was a gentle little summer breeze going, but the shores of Patmos and Prince Edward were where he had seen them in the late twilight.

"He slithered aft. There, hunched over the wheel, hung the Old Man where he had left him. Sound asleep, like everyone else on board.

"It was like the enchanted garden of the Sleeping Beauty, with everything motionless and unchanged. The shores of the island and the mainland kept exact pace with the *Wood Duck*.

"Spud could not help going first thing to the exact spot in the rail where he had lost his beloved scimitar. He looked over. And as true as I am telling you, there it was, right alongside in the clear brown Quinte water, with the chain stretched out behind it.

"For an instant Spud thought the whole works bewitched; the land gone adrift, and the steel knife afloat. Then he grabbed a pikepole, stuck it, down, and got bottom in a quarter less twain. In a jiffy he caught the chain of his knife on the pike and had it up and over the rail.

"Then he woke the Old Man. The *Wood Duck* had sat on the bottom all night. She had smelt the ground when Spud was fooling with his weapon and left the wheel. It was too dusk

and too still for them to notice it.

"They kedged her off without difficulty. She was only held by the heel of her centreboard. But it is the slowest passage on record; from sunset to sun up, under full sail, to go no farther than the edge of a knifeblade."

Capt. Maw's fast passage in the *Gulnare* has been a lively topic of conversation among vesselmen for half a century and more. Publication of it last week revived the discussion. Some have declared it impossible, but there is no reason to disbelieve Capt. Maw's account of it. The Telegram first printed it years ago. and Capt. Maw was speaking in all seriousness to one who knew him well.

The passage was what sailors call "from land to land," a different thing than from port to port. Time was taken from losing sight of the coast of Newfoundland to raising the coast of Cornwall.

That Capt. Maw's passage in eight, days and nine hours has ever been bettered may well be doubted. The record port-to-port passage of the western ocean was made by the schooner-yacht *Atlantic* in 1905; twelve days six hours from the starting line of Sandy Hook to the finishing line off the Lizard. In the German Emperor's Gold Cup race the *Atlantic* took 11 days 16 hours and 22 minutes from Sandy Hook to the Bishop's Rock in the Scilly Islands. She was a three-masted schooner, much larger than the *Gulnare*, and she is still going fast and strong.

Capt. Samuel Samuel's packet ship *Dreadnaught* is generally credited – but quite erroneously – with the fastest passage of the Atlantic ever made, 9 days and 21 hours from New York to Queenstown. Capt. Samuels himself never made such claim or passage and examination of the *Dreadnaught's* log book shows that she was never nearer than 400 miles to the coast of Ireland on the tenth day after leaving New York. Her best Atlantic passage really was 12 days 12 hours from Sandy Hook to Cape Clear, which is not as good as that *Atlantic's* unbeaten record by very wide margin. The *Atlantic* passed Cape Clear on the eleventh day out.