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Schooner Days CLI (151)
By C.H.J. Snider

Matching The "Mary Celeste" – Strange Case Off The Galloos And – "Ida Walker" Tragedy

Sir – Your "Schooner Days" story of the loss of the *Jessie Breck* recalls the subject of vanished vessels, which you recounted some time earlier, and again in the recent story of the missing *Maggie Hunter*.

After the *Jessie Breck* was lost, Capt. Booth, her owner, was telling a group of us masters about the perils of Lake Ontario as compared with other lakes, and cited several unexplained disappearances. One was a good match for the *Mary Celeste* mystery which the magazines are always rehashing.

Capt. Booth related how a three-masted schooner was found floating off the Galloos, at the foot of Lake Ontario with no sail set, no boat on the davits, and no crew visible; nor, from that day to the time of telling, had anything ever been heard of the master and seven or eight souls who were with him.

The schooner's jibboom had been unshipped, and it, or a new spar, lay on trestles on deck, where the carpenters had evidently been at work. The shavings from their planes were scattered about the deck and were dry.

The vessel was loaded with a grain cargo. It was evident that she had not been abandoned in heavy weather, for any sea would have washed the shavings away from the deck of a laden vessel.

There were a great many guesses of what happened, one being that the schooner had been lying some place on the shore, either to pick up the remainder of her grain cargo, as was sometimes done, or to dub down and rig a new spar; that all hands had got into the yawlboat on some such job as carrying out a kedge, or clearing away the old jibboom; and that she had gone adrift on them. But the fact that the yawlboat was never reported, and there was no weather to account for it being lost and the whole crew missing, baffled all who attempted a solution.

– SPEEDWELL.

"SPEEDWELL" is a master mariner well known to the compiler of *Schooner Days*, and of unimpeachable veracity. He had been in command of vessels ten years before the *Jessie Breck* was lost, and is still going strong. The *Mary Celeste*, which he mentions in passing, was a Nova Scotian brigantine, often erroneously called the *Marie Celeste*, which was picked up by the British brig *Dei Gratia*, at sea, with all sail set and crew missing. The crew was never found.

How a crew could vanish, as in the case of the schooner found off the Galloos – there are two, the Big and Little Galloo – or as in the case of the *Mary Celeste*, is indicated by what happened once aboard the schooner *Ida Walker*.

The *Ida Walker* was a smart fore-and-aft schooner of some 300 or 400 tons carrying capacity, an American bottom, but owned at the time of this incident by Capt. John Allen, of Oshawa.

Capt. Allen was a genial Cornishman, very quiet in manner; a smart man with a vessel, his greatest evidence of excitement being a little nervous cough. He sailed the *Magdala*, the *Bermuda*, the *Marysburgh*, the *Annie Minnes*, and the *Ida Walker*, all fine fore-and-afters. He was a pillar of the Oshawa and Port Whitby communities. On Sundays, if he were in either port, he would appear on the wharf in full go-to-church regalia, tall silk hat, frock coat and all; and his vessels would display their colors at each masthead.

One Saturday night in the '80s the *Ida Walker* dropped out of Oswego loaded with coal for Whitby, and wafted on a fresh southeast breeze; a fair wind which promised a quick run and a Sunday at home.

She sailed at 9 p.m. The night was intensely dark, but no bad weather was in prospect. She was one man short, but she was not a heavy handful for the crew she had – Capt. John Allen, his son, Alfred, twenty years old and shipping as mate, a younger son, Willy, aged sixteen, before the mast, and two other sailors, one of whom was the late John N. Bowerman, of South Bay. The wind was dead astern for Whitby, and, in order to make the sails draw, Capt. Allen, after getting two miles offshore, decided to wing her out. Winging out, or running wing and wing, involves getting the foresail on one side of the vessel and the mainsail on the other.

One sailor was sent aloft to the fore crosstrees to the gafftopsail tack and sheet, so that the foresail could come over.

“Now Alf,” called Capt. Allen to his son, the mate, who was at the helm, “put thy wheel hard down, lad, and shake the wind out of the mainsail, and take up on the boom pennant while John and Willy and I shove the boom out to leeward. He was fond of theeing-and-thouing and it was always an evidence good humor with him to do so.

Alf rolled his wheel over and ran forward where the pennant was led while the other three jumped up on the cabin top and commenced to push the boom out to starboard as the sail shook, Bowerman at the after corner of the cabin-top, Willy Allen next him and the captain further forward.

Alas for human frailty! The *Ida Walker*, left to herself, kept rounding up until she brought the wind on the other side of the shaking main sail. The three on the cabin-top pushed in vain. The 60-foot main boom had too much leverage against them. Before Alf could catch a turn with the pennant it was slowly and irresistibly pushing them off the cabin-top. He rushed aft to the abandoned wheel, to swing the vessel off and fill the mainsail the right way. Before he could do so the sail came over. Johnny Bowerman dropped to the deck; as he did so the boom struck him a hard blow on the head, and swept Capt. Allen and his younger son overboard.

Bowerman recovered from the blow quickly, to hear Capt. Allen calling “Alf! Alf!” and to see the mate, fully clad, leap from the rail.

He heard a nearer voice crying "Help me! Help me!" and, leaning over the bulwarks, saw Willy Allen dragging alongside at the end of a line. It was so dark that he had to feel for the rope before he could get it in his hands to haul him in.

The sailor who was in the fore crosstrees could only guess at what was going on in the dark, and scrambled down to find Bowerman and Willy busy at the boat tackles.

With all possible haste the three lowered the yawl from the stern davits. Willy Allen jumped down and slashed the tackles in the effort to save seconds. He sculled into the blackness where he could hear his father and brother calling. "Willy! Willy!" He knew that his father, although a sailor from boyhood, had never learned to swim.

Guided by the cries he drove the heavy yawlboat until, as he judged, he was within ten yards of the spot whence they came. Then they ceased. It was so intensely dark he could not see the waves, except where they broke against the boat's bow and the schooner, was invisible.

Frantically he sculled back and forth, calling and listening, and all in vain. After a long search he made out the loom of the schooner, her sails shaking in the wind, quite close by. Broken-hearted he came back alongside. They burned distress flares, and the tug *James Navagh* came out from Oswego, passed a line, and towed the schooner back to the port she had left a few hours before.

NOW it might very easily have happened that four men of the *Ida Walker's* crew might have been swept overboard from the cabin top instead of two; it was only by chance Bowerman dropped to the deck, and that one man was aloft in crosstrees. And it is more than probable that that heroic boy, Alf Allen, would have plunged to his father's assistance, even knowing that the effort was quite hopeless; and so the entire crew would have vanished, leaving the schooner under full sail, with her yawlboat still on the davits. It is quite conceivable also that, the accident happening as it did in its first stages, the survivors might have, all three, leapt into the yawlboat to get it clear of the schooner's stern, and might have been drowned. Dropping a yawl from a vessel under weigh in a fresh breeze is a maneuver always fraught with peril and Willy Allen's gallant slashing of the tackles and painter may have been what saved his own life if it failed to rescue his brother and father.

Some would be inclined to say that it all came from the schooner being one hand short. Had there been another man, Alf Allen would have remained at the wheel and kept the vessel falling off before the wind as the emptied mainsail was pushed out by those on the cabin top.

Possibly. And again, if Capt. Allen had used his capstan and boom-pennant or tackle, to heave the mainboom out, instead of the "armstrong winch" on the cabin top, no tragedy would have resulted. It is often easy, after the event, to see how simply it could have been avoided.

The *Ida Walker* sailed for some years afterwards and was wrecked more than forty years ago on Bald Head, Prince Edward County. The rescue of her crew was one of the epics unfolded at a recent Mariners' Service at Cherry Valley.

It appears that the *Ida Walker*, in company with the *Queen of the Lakes* and other schooners, was loading barley in the vicinity of Wellington, and had to get out for shelter when the wind came down the lake. It was usual in those days to work up to Weller's Bay or Presqu'isle, or even run down to South Bay Point, if it blew too hard to lie at the exposed piers of the west shore of Prince Edward County.

The *Ida Walker* failed to beat clear of Bald Head, at the entrance to Weller's Bay, and sagged into the breakers. Capt. Hugh McCullough, in command of the Wellington lifeboat, loaded his craft on to a special train, run down from Trenton, and within two hours had her on the beach at Weller's Bay, near the wreck. The schooner was then all under water and breaking up. The mate is said to have picked up the cook in his arms and leapt overboard with her and reached shore. The life-saving crew lashed themselves to the thwarts of their boat, and volunteers ran her out into the surf and through the breakers, while women and children prayed in the stinging sand.

All that showed above water was the *Ida Walker's* cabin top where her crew were huddled, wrapped in blankets against the cold. Her bulwarks were gone, and her hull was breaking up plank by plank. Three times the lifeboat wrestled its way out beyond the wreck and was hurled past her by bursting seas, without the crew being able to catch or hold the lines flung to them. The agonized looks on their faces, as the heaving lines eluded them and the frail support of the cabin top shook under the battering of the billows, scalded the hearts of the rescuers.

For the fourth time they rowed around the wreck and came past on a comber. This time their line was caught, and they took off the entire crew. Immediately afterwards a great sea swept the tottering cabin away from the wreck. It washed ashore in small pieces.

The life-saving crew were: *Capt. Hugh McCullough, Wm. McCullough, Horatio Curlett, Edward Cleary, George Insley, Selem Palen and Edward Bedell, all of families well known in Prince Edward County.* The *Ida Walker* was commanded at this time by Capt. Jas. Savage, of Picton, who, by coincidence, later owned and sailed the schooner *Annie Minnes*, which had been owned by Capt. Allen, who was drowned from the *Walker*.