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Schooner Days, XXI (21)
By C.H.J. Snider

The JULIA B. MERRILL

Something about the old schooner ending her days as a Sunnyside attraction.

There has been much sympathy for John Currie's warmly worded letter from Mimico on the subject of the *Julia B. Merrill*, now nuzzling the sea wall at Sunnyside.

Such a letter, and the support it receives, shows how close to the hearts of thousands of Ontario folk are the old "wooden wagons" that bore the commerce of the country in the days before the railways, and which put up a gallant battle for generations after the iron horse invaded the field.

Mr. Currie asks if it would not be more sensible to preserve the *Julia B. Merrill* in memory of the old days of sail on Lake Ontario rather than burn her for the momentary amusement of whoopee-makers.

It has often occurred to the writer, and perhaps to many others, that a province like Ontario, which maintains such a splendid institution as the Royal Ontario Museum, ought to show more interest – and show it financially – in preserving the evidences of the quaint, and heroic, manner in which the foundations of this fair land were laid.

It is interesting to see the wainscotting of a Tudor home in the Royal Ontario Museum. It would be equally interesting to see a completely furnished Ontario of a hundred years ago or a replica of the cabin of one of the Ontario ships this province built and sent around the world, like the *Sea Gull*, in 1865.

Our zealous Museum curator rejoices greatly over the acquisition of another bit of Indian lace or the securing of a Chinese print. It is said, with pride, that the Royal Ontario Museum, contains some of the finest known "antiques" of foreign lands. That is satisfactory, because these things have a high monetary value as well as an educational one, and it is comforting to know that Ontario has been laying out its cash well.

But is Ontario's own life history equally well served?

If the *Julia B. Merrill* were carted bodily to the front door of the Royal Ontario Museum, what would happen?

The truckman would get a ticket for blocking traffic on Bloor street, and the consignor would have his head read.

Quite rightly, too. The Royal Ontario Museum is not the place for such relics.

But there ought to be a place.

There is a nucleus of this sort of collection of Ontario life in the Exhibition grounds already. The little log cabin of the Pioneers, down by the shaft marking the site of old Fort Rouille, first of Toronto buildings.

This nucleus needs a lot of development. The little cabin is far from an ideal exhibit. Its contents are huddled together, the place is deserted fifty weeks in the year, and swarmed for a

fortnight. It all requires much more attention, much more accommodation, more love and more money. But the idea is good. It would cost a great deal less to reproduce completely Fort Rouille with its stockade, blockhouse, and cabins of 1749 than it is costing to build the new horse palace. Such a reproduction would be a show place for visitors all the year round. Such a reproduction might spur on the proper preservation of the Old Fort – which is younger than Fort Rouille but very venerable, dating from Simcoe's time, and being the scene of the giving of brave British blood and brave American blood, in the wrestle for this country.

Fort Rouille restored, or the Old Fort restored, cared for, and made easily accessible, would provide a centre for a splendid museum of pioneer life in Toronto and Ontario. While about it, why not provide harbourage, afloat or in cement docks like the Victory at Portsmouth for the *Julia B. Merrill* and other craft spelling the long story in transportation achievement? This province had a fleet of a thousand sail during the old schooner days. Toronto alone owned hundreds of sailing vessels in the ten decades of the nineteenth century. Mr. Currie's idea that one should be preserved for posterity is a good one.

That the *Julia B. Merrill* should be the one may be open to debate. Pathetic and quaintly interesting as she is, lying there at Sunnyside now with warped sheer and drooping shoulders, her rigging slack, and shorn of her mizzen mast and squaresail yard, she would not be the writer's choice for preservation as a typical Toronto or Ontario "three-n'-after."

First of all, she is a "foreigner."

She was built in the States. That is no crime, but neither is it a recommendation for consideration. Her register gives Wenona, Michigan, 1872 as her birthplace. This sounds like Wenona Beach, in Saginaw Bay, off Lake Huron, near Bay City, where were built many tail-sparred schooners in the days of the great Michigan lumber trade.

But the *Julia B. Merrill* has all along been believed to have first kissed the waves at Manitowoc, Wis. on Lake Michigan. The Merrills were a family of shipbuilders and shipowners in the lake trade sixty years ago. Whether they derived from the New England Merrills of Pilgrim Father days is not known, but they are believed to have had interests in Chicago. The *Julia B. Merrill*, named after one of the daughters, traded between Chicago and Collingwood in the great grain and lumber traffic of half a century back. She was registered in Chicago. She was later bought by owners in Toledo, Ohio, and was registered there.

In 1910 she was the *Julia B. Merrill* of Toledo, O., and lying in the Maumee River, with the most beautiful springy sheer, or upward curve, to her bulwarks ever seen in a schooner. Those Michigan builders specialized in the theory of "two good ends out, and load till the covering board is wet."

She had also, at this particular time, the worst-looking set of gaffs and booms a long recollection of cracked, fished, splinted and splintered spars recalls. She had already been through hard usage.

Kingston Canadians bought her, replaced her spars, and put her in the coal trade between Oswego and Kingston. Then Capt. Peacock, of Port Hope, and Arthur Way, of Picton, acquired her, and she carried on in the coal, with her springy sheer getting straighter every year, until, at last, she "hogged," and her back bent the other way, and she settled down on the bottom of Port Hope harbor, beside the wharf which she had not been able to leave for several seasons. A survey showed that repairs sufficient to make her serviceable again would be too expensive.

Mr. Currie's vigorous protest at "murdering an old ship to amuse a lot of morons" is a well-intended indictment which does not lie.

The *Julia B. Merrill* isn't going to be murdered. She is dead. It is just a question of what sort of funeral she is to have.

Personally, I have a great sympathy for Mr. Currie's suggestion of a secluded nook in the Bay of Quinte. The quiet coves of that bay are already about as well stocked with such occupants as they are with bass. Have a look from the train windows the next time you come by Belleville.

As for the alternative of a fiery funeral to make a gloamin' holiday, that will doubtless cause many to sit up and watch, and the Sunnyside amusement stands will not suffer by the vigil. That, frankly, was the reason why the "remains" were bought.

Mr. Currie's suggestion that she be broken up for firewood and given to the poor instead of being burned "like a nigger at the stake in Alabama," is commended to the consideration of that astute publicity manager of Sunnyside, Major "Pink" Goudy.

Properly managed, it might draw as big a crowd as a bonfire. Why not a breaking-up bee, or a wood-sawing carnival, lasting for a fortnight? Prizes for the team prying off the biggest pile of firewood by floodlight, every evening from nine to eleven. Drag her out on to the beach, and let the he-men of the hot-dog stands and the dare-devils of the dodgems show their strength and skill as ship shatterers, with a big banquet for the ladies who inspire their efforts.

Meantime, spare a sigh for the poor old schooner, as she lies by the seawall in her faded green paint, with cleats nailed to her maintopmast to make a rough ladder up to a high-diving platform, where the topsail halliards used to sing in their sheaves. She has seen and suffered much and built herself into the life of the lakes.

And take a good long look at her. For soon it will be forever impossible to see her like again.