

Toronto Telegram, July 4, 1931
Schooner Days, XXIII (23)
By C.H.J. Snider

Great Gale of 1880

For forty years almost, Capt. David Reynolds was master of the Royal Canadian Yacht club launches Esmeralda, Hiawatha and Kwasind. His trips across the Bay, on their half-hour schedule, would have taken him twice around the world.

"Dave," as thousands of yacht club members knew him, was pre-eminently a sailor of the sail. Ere he got his steam certificate he was in the forecabin and on the cabin top of many a lake schooner, as sailor, mate and master.

For a time allow some of his recollections to "spell" the much appreciated reminiscences of the late Magistrate J.J. O'Connor, on the subject of sailing days on the lakes. Here is his story of the Great Gale of 1880, as told to the writer in 1898: -

Well sir, the worst I ever saw was that night all them vessels was lost, the year I was married. All the old hands along the front know about that. On Lake Erie that night the water raised twelve feet at Buffalo, piled up by the push of the wind. Up at the other end of the lake it was lowered eight feet. I've heard tell how the *Clara Youell* was loading grain at Toledo. In the morning the mate got up and thought the grain shovelers must have been trimming her by the head through the night and putting a bad list in her, for the cabin doors wouldn't swing. He looked over the side and saw she was hard and fast on the bottom of the river, although he had sounded and got twenty feet alongside when the trimmers knocked off the night before.

I was in the *Baltic* then, with Jack Andrew of Oakville, Captain Jim's brother, as master. The *Baltic* was a fore-and-aft that would carry 300 tons or so of coal; a good sized vessel, even in 1880, though they had outbuilt that tonnage and doubled it, with the Welland Canal enlargements.

We left Toronto lumber loaded for Oswego on Friday – Guy Fawkes night, I think it was, the fifth of November.

At any rate we left with a head wind and beat all night, and next day, Saturday, we were down on the south shore.

In the first dog watch, just as it was getting dark, it freshened some, and we took in the jibtopsail and gafftopsails. I mind that when I was in the crosstrees, riding down the main gafftopsail, there were sixteen vessels in sight in the twilight.

"Inshore of us was the *Norway* and *Oriental*, two big sister schooners, loaded with square timber on their way from Toledo to Garden island. They were full canal size, 700 tons, and were square rigged forward. They were hanging on to all their canvas, bucking their way down the lake. Then there was the *Azov* of Burlington, about the size of the *Baltic*, and the *Wood Duck*, a little smaller, sailed by Capt. Marks, of Frenchman's Bay, and his sons. And another family schooner, the *Belle Sheridan* of Toronto, sailed by Capt. James McSherry and his four boys. She was bound up the lake for home, coal laden from Charlotte. I mind too there was the *Great Western* of Port Hope, a schooner that had been built in Dundas, on the old Desjardins Canal, and called after the new railway when it went through; she's afloat yet, but renamed the *F.H. Burton*.

(the *F.H. Burton* went down off Prince Edward nine years after Captain Dave told this story). And there was the little *Vienna* of Port Burwell, and the *Thomas E. Street*, and those two hard-steering twins out of Picton, the *Speedwell* and the *Twilight*. I can't think of them all. The *Marquis*, a big three-'n'-after sailed by Capt. Wilson, must have been in that fleet too, and on the horizon, against the red stripe of western sky, was the smoke of the propeller *Zealand*, coming down with grain out of the Northern elevator in Toronto.

I was in the captain's watch. About eleven o'clock that night we were getting down below Oak Orchard, and there was a little lump of sea, with less wind. The fly at the main truck fouled the rigging. I went aloft to clear it, and while I was in the crosstrees Andrew hailed me. 'You might overhaul them gaskets, for if it don't freshen up before midnight I'll be getting them light sails on her again.'

Well, sir, it came down hard from the southwest in half an hour. We squatted the mainsail, pulled off the flying jib, and kept her away.

Andrew, you see, didn't want to risk taking Charlotte, which was a hard port of refuge to get into, and he couldn't take no chances on Oswego, which was worse, so he run down the lake.

Four o'clock in the morning I took the wheel, though it wasn't my trick.

"Keep her away all you can," says the captain, and I knew he was going to let her go clean across the lake for Long Point. He would have to clear that to keep going.

"Well sir," I says, "you'd better let her come up some and then jibe over when you get under the land." You see the wind would shift as much as three or four points either way, and it was all I could do to keep the sails full on the right side.

"Keep 'er away all you can, I said!" was all Andrew answered.

I got tired of being nagged at.

"You're going to have that mains'l over!" I snapped. The mainsail should have been furled altogether, but instead it was lowered half way down and billowing out like a hoop-skirt, eased off on about twenty feet of sheet.

"Let 'er come," says the captain, "only you keep her away!" Meaning to keep the *Baltic* right before the wind.

Next minute the sail jibed over. Though the mainsail was pretty well squatted she made everything ring when she came.

"Leave 'er there, sir?" says I.

"Let 'er come back," he answers.

Next roll she jibes back with a bang. The sheet-traveller parted, though it was an iron ring an inch thick. The boom flailed clear to the main rigging, snapped at the jaws, and fouled up in two pieces.

"Cut away!" called the skipper, and the mate and crew went to work with shi-axes and slashed everything clear. So we lost mainsail, boom, gaff, and lifts; we were left as bare as a barge.

On towards morning, when we were well down the lake and twenty or thirty miles from either shore, that sea was a fright! I never see the like of it. I'd squint aft and have to look away

up, up, up to see the tops of the waves chasing us. Then one of them would strike and looking forward I'd see the planks of our deckload rise right up on end and go overboard ahead of us and come bumping back under our bottom.

"It took the mate and three men two hours to get a stop on the flying jib, flailing around out on the horn. She'd dip her jibboom down into the sea – and her jibboom speared up twenty feet above the water level, when she was on an even keel, loaded – and then she would rise up and the maddened sail would blow out and in the thick blackness of early morning you would see the sparks fly from the chain pennants of the thrashing jib-sheets.

By keeping her away as Andrew ordered we fetched clear of Long Point without having to jibe her and take the foremast out of her. Once we got below Long Point and the Ducks the sea wasn't so bad as before, but it was still frightful.

"When it began to get light down abreast of Nine Mile Point near Kingston, we saw the first of them – the fleet we'd lost the night before. This was the *Great Western*. She had only one piece of canvas left – her flying jib. She had got down as far as Oswego, funk'd taking the piers in the sea that was raging; and had run across the lake all the way in a trough, losing all her canvas and rolling her deckload overboard. Like us, she was heading for Kingston. The others were as bad or worse. The *Belle Sheridan* we couldn't see, but she was then driving on to the beach at Weller's Bay, an unmanageable wreck, her after canvas and yawlboat gone. Every man on board was lost in the breakers, except young Jimmie McSherry, sixteen years old.

The *Zealand* – she was a propeller – had broke up off Presque Isle and drowned all hands – sixteen or seventeen. She went to pieces right under their feet, in deep water. Vast masses of wreckage from her were scattered all over the lake, but not one piece measured more than forty feet long. She had broken up in the trough.

The *Azov* lost her canvas, and the *Twilight* lost hers and her deckload. The *Thomas E. Street* had crossed the Atlantic Ocean, but she was pounding into staves on Long Point that morning as we went by. Her crew got ashore. The *Wood Duck* tried Oswego, and was lost under the fort, though the tug had passed her a line and was towing her in. She drove up so high on the boulders that her crew could drop off dry-shod from the jibboom end, and Capt. Marks sold the wreck for \$300, though she had a brand new suit of sails. There was no hope of getting her off. The *Snow Bird*, of much the same size, followed her in onto the beach, barley loaded, and the Oswego papers were full of cracks about Canada birds and their queer taste in roosts.

The *Oriental* got into Garden Island, opposite Kingston, that Sunday morning, and reported she had parted company with the *Norway* at midnight. Next day the *Marquis* came in, and Capt. Wilson said that twelve miles off the False Ducks he had passed the *Norway*, dismasted, floating bows under and stern high in the air. Later on the tug *W.T. Robb*, whose old bones are now in the gravel at Victoria Park, came into Kingston, towing the wreck of the *Norway*, not a stick standing in her, not a soul left alive, even her anchors gone from the bows. She had capsized in the gale, drowned her crew of eight, and righted herself when the deckload slid overboard after her broken masts.

We got into Kingston ourselves that Sunday forenoon; and it took us nearly three weeks to finish the trip from Toronto to Oswego. We put in nearly a week bending a new mainsail, gaff, boom, lifts, sheet and halliards, all at the expense of the insurance company. Then we made four different tries for Oswego, and each time we had to run back in a snowstorm.

Fifth time, Andrew says: "Well, here goes, hit or miss," and out we went again. Again it blew hard as soon as we cleared the Ducks, but we held on. There was a huge sea running as we drew in on Oswego light and headed for the breakwater.

"Andrew called the cook up and told all hands to stand by for the pier-head jump. I had to go down into the well in the deckload of lumber to wind up the centreboard – you know how they pile up the planks in a deckload around the centreboard winch. Well, I got down in the hold and commenced to wind, just as we neared the cribwork.

"The breakwater was throwing off some pretty big seas, and one of them came clean over us, I tell you. I was in an awful fix – covered right up and over my head with freezing water, and dashed from side to side of the square walls of the lumber-well. I managed to hang on to the centreboard winch, and the water drained out through the centreboard slot. The tug luckily caught us just inside the piers and towed us over to the breakwater there by Smith and Post's cove, but we had to lie there while he went ahead and broke the ice for us, for by this time November had run into December, and everything was freezing up.

Andrew did a thing this time I only knew him to do once, for it's all wrong, that idea that the large schooners sailed "by compass and log and a pot full of grog." Some skippers never started out without a five-gallon jar of whiskey, and never came home without it being empty, but there were the exceptions, and Jack Andrew, like his brother, Jim, sailed a dry ship. But this time, as soon as we got the lines out and made her fast, he called us all aft and gave us a drink of brandy neat all round. It did us good, too, for the wet clothes were freezing on my back and the rest of the boys were not much better off.

Sir, —I read with appreciation, your article in last Saturday's Telegram, on the proposed destruction of the old schooner, the *Julia B. Merrill*.

It seems a pity, that some useful place could not be found for such a relic of other days (not necessarily this one) and I would like to pass on to you a suggestion which occurred to me, whilst reading your article.

Why not enlist such organisations, as the Kiwanis, Lions, Shriners, and Big Brothers, in a consolidated effort, to build, or produce some such standard replica of the sailors of other days, for the training of our youth (problem cases, etc.), where they might be taught all matters pertaining to good seamanship, the ship might even be fitted with motors and machinery for the teaching of more modern methods also.

Such a ship, if built and equipped, could also be a reminder of the ships, and sailor men of other days, who helped blaze the trail of Canada's greatness, as well as become a useful part of our social endeavor to guide the growing youth of our Province, to decent manhood, and also foster that greatest of all British institutions, The love for the sea.

It could be placed in the lake convenient to or near the city, or built on a land foundation, as was one, I saw many years ago in Scotland from the train windows, between Glasgow and Greenock.

I have no doubt but that the Dominion, Provincial and Civic Authorities might do their bit, if it was considered advisable.

Again thanking you for your able article. R. McGARRIE.

(Mr. McGarrie's friendly letter reflects the interest of thousands of readers. Further proof of that is the multitude of paid admissions at Sunnyside, where the old schooner is still on exhibition. The difficulty about his suggestion is a financial one. It would cost \$25,000 or \$30,000 to build a replica of the *Julia B. Merrill* to-day, and about \$5,000 per annum to maintain her. Experience of the Navy League in this regard has not been encouraging.)