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Schooner Days XXVII (27)
By C.H.J. Snider

White Cedar Yawl Boat

"Red" Macdonald's hair is not auburn. His first name is Redfern.

"Would you like a whitefish?" asked he, indicating the silver hoard which the Margaret Macdonald, of Goderich, and Mac's, of Goderich, had brought in, "You talk the schooner talk and I would gladly give you a good one."

"Indeed I would," said the complimented one, bearing in mind Father Hennepin's tribute to this noble product of the Great Lakes two hundred and fifty years ago, "but even more would I like to see and hear about Azov's yawlboat."

"Here she is," said Redfern, producing a bunch of keys and unlocking and sliding back a door in a garage-like shed on the clean concrete wharf.

The half light revealed a sixteen-foot boat such as every schooner used to swing on her stern-davits in the days of sail; direct descendant, in name, shape and use of the "jolly-boat" of the 18th century and the fiction pages; the stout smooth-skinned straight-stemmed, wide-astern rowboat of tremendous solidity which was used to run lines ashore, and the Old Man when lying to an anchor, and perform all the utilities of a tender in port or at sea. They always had tholepins in the gunwale but were seldom rowed. Instead they were sculled with one long oar, thrust over the flat stern through a sculling-chock; and they were always steered that way.

This boat was old and dried out; patched with tin patches and other makeshifts, painted a barn door red. But her lines were good – sharp enough for speed and full comfort – and under her brindled paint the strong white cedar of her planking retained its incense-like fragrance.

"She's been used around the harbor, fishing," said Redfern, apologizing for her paint and patches, "and you know what that means. And she's thirty years old if she's a day. But I won't let her be broken up."

"This is why.

"Father built her for the *Kolfage*. The *John G. Kolfage* was the first schooner he owned. He was twenty-one years in her, and did well with her. He built this yawl boat of white cedar, to suit his own ideas, and she was so light and strong and satisfied him so well that when he sold the *Kolfage* for a larger schooner he made the bargain he was to keep his yawl boat.

"The new schooner was the *Azov* of Wellington Square. She was all white when he got her. He gave her a green bottom, white topsides, and green trim. She hadn't exactly a clipper bow, but she had a knee at the stem-head. She was a good looker and a grand carrier, but not as smart as the *Kolfage*. He gave her a double raffee, and the squaresail yard to set it was 67 feet long, more than half as long as she was. She was 108 feet on deck.

"The Old Man was a great one to load deep and carry sail. He got a charter to load

deadheads in Gore Bay in Manitoulin. Deadheads are logs that have sunk. On the 25th of October, 1911, he was working down Lake Huron with a full cargo, deadheads in the hold, more deadheads on deck all held down with cross-chains from stanchion to stanchion.

"Fifteen miles nor'nor'-east of Pointe-aux-Barques on the Michigan side of Lake Huron it breezed up hard from the sou'west. He hammered her at it, for she had been on the dock not long before and though she was forty-five years old she was sound as a bell and sweet as a nut. But she opened up on him starting a butt somewhere and the pumps couldn't keep her free. Those waterlogged dead-heads were a heavy wet cargo anyway, and they sopped up the fresh water when it got above her ceiling like so many sponges.

"All hands – four men and the mate and the cook – were at the pump brakes when the *Azov* settled and began to roll over. The boys ran and grabbed their bags. Father's first thought was to get the compass out of the binnacle. He hadn't time to run into his own room in the cabin for any clothes. They all piled into the yawl boat on the stern davits, and managed to unhook the tackles just as the *Azov* went on her beams ends. As they cast off they saw the fly at her maintopmast head getting wet in the water: and the yard, which had been braced square, was up-and-down. That was the last they saw of the *Azov* – that square sail yard sticking up in the lake, like the buoy on a fish-net after all the rest of her had disappeared.

"Night was coming on, and it was bitter cold. They tried to pull for the nearest land in Michigan ten or twelve miles away, but good as she was, the sixteen-foot boat, loaded with seven people and a couple of hundredweight of dunnage, could not make headway against the wind. They were bailing for their lives as the seas broke.

"Father was sixty years old then. He had with him my brother Bert and my sister Ettie, who was just out of her teens but sailed with him as cook; and the three men and the mate. With the set of the sun the wind hauled and came hard out the nor'west in squalls of snow still offshore, though from a different quarter. Getting into the lee of Michigan was impossible.

"As I said, father had built this yawl boat for himself and fitted her accordingly. He had been a fisherman. The first boat he owned was the *Annie Agnes*, fishing out of Goderich. He knew what small boats could do and what they needed. For this yawlboat he had made a mast and sail with gaff and boom. The whole rig was unshipped and lashed along the thwarts, taking up very little room.

"When the wind came away he had them step the mast and set the sail reefed; and off they ran before it, with the whole of Lake Huron ahead of them and the whole of a fall nor'wester behind.

"My sister Ettie never expected to come through that night. Nor Bert. But father was cheerful all the time.

"'We're going home,' he would sing out. 'We'll be in Goderich in the morning. It will be a funny thing for the boat that always hung on *Azov*'s stern to beat her into port.'

"His voice broke when he said that. He loved the *Azov* as he did Ettie.

"It got perishing cold. In the boat they were numb with the freezing lake water and their cramped sitting. When a sea spilled in they would all bail with their sou'westers and then huddle together for warmth. As the night wore on even the splash of stinging spray failed to rouse 'em. They were freezing to death on the thwarts.

"Father would have to wait for a smooth and unship the steering oar and ram them with it or beat them with a bight of the mainsheet to keep them awake and alive. He prayed. He swore. He sang above the gale. He fought off sleep and frost, for himself and them. All he had on was the clothes he stood in as the *Azov* rolled over.

"Never a light in the lake. The night was black as pitch. It seemed as though it would never end. The only difference between sky and water was the white froth of the wave tops.

"It began to get gray. Then light. Then, hard against the eastern sky lumps showed.

"There are the hills of home, boys," father called, 'I told you I'd land you in Goderich.'

"He kept his word. Fourteen hours after the *Azov* rolled over father steered her yawl boat through the breakwater gap into Goderich piers, sixty miles across Lake Huron. As they got the oars out to row up the harbor one of the boys picked up his dunnage bag, snatched at such risk as the forecastle filled, and carried at such cost all the way across the lake and hove it overboard.

"Father's in Maitland cemetery now, with a picture of the *Azov* carved on the stone above him. You can understand how, as long as I live, this old white cedar yawl boat is never going to be broken up!"

[Schooner Days XXVII, was published without illustrations.]