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Schooner Day CCLXXXIX (289)
By C.H.J. Snider

Last One Built on the Lakes

In Oswego N.Y., it is a civic boast that all streets lead to the water. Those running east and west reach the Oswego River, those running north and south Lake Ontario. When we rolled into Oswego that bright March morning we were talking about a week ago, our first and only port-of-call was neither the police station nor the yacht club, but John S. Parson's ship-chandlery store on Water street, right beside the bridge.

It was just where it was forty-two years ago this summer, when I first came to Oswego with Capt. John Ewart, of Cobourg, in the *Vienna*; and John S. Parsons was there, just as and where I first saw him typical steel – grey, clean shaven Yankee business man of the second generation, keen and kind, twinkling-eyed, but affable, up and coming, calling everyone by his first name and very polite to the ladies.

John S. Parsons has personally handed out 1,716,298 cigars in his time, and passed the hat almost as often for shipwrecked and distressed mariners, Canadian and Americans, and he has carried hundreds of shippers on the cuff when times were bad.

Forty years ago there weren't so many ladies to be seen at the ship-chandlery. Maybe a schooner's cook who wanted a new bake-pan or a canalboat captain's wife who needed flowerpots for the geraniums - but no general customers. In the first half hour three ladies came in while we were there this time, for household wares, and a fourth telephoned her order. John himself, undoubtedly greyer than forty years ago, but not looking it, confessed that half his trade is now with the women. In schooner days he used to sell a hundred thousand feet of rope in a season to horny-handed masters and mates. Now he may not be asked for it at all, although the place is still filled with single, double and triple-sheaved blocks, sidelights, shackles, the pungent scent of Stockholm tar from oakum, spun yarn and marlin, and the fresh flavor of new manila in its great coils. Steamers use wire now for everything. And mates and men wear gloves. Masters don't have to. You never hear the mate bawling about hawsers or line now: it's "Walk that wire up the dock!" or "Ease away on that after wire!" The steel-stranded ropes so designated are all handled by steam or gas winches, except for the casual task of dropping their eyes over the niggerheads.

Time was when you could really buy anything from a needle to an anchor in Parson's – and lots of them were bought, three-cornered needles for sewing double-O canvas with palms, fine needles for hemming handkerchiefs, and grapnels, sheet, bower and kedge anchors by the pound, hundred weights or tons. Now the trade runs more to paints, oils, varnishes and enamels, and domestic hardware of all sorts. Oswego is still a port of great importance, with a lot of steamers using it and Parson's supplies. The old days when sailing vessels filled the harbor so that you could walk across it, dryshod, on their decks, and flat faced canal boats, their cheeks

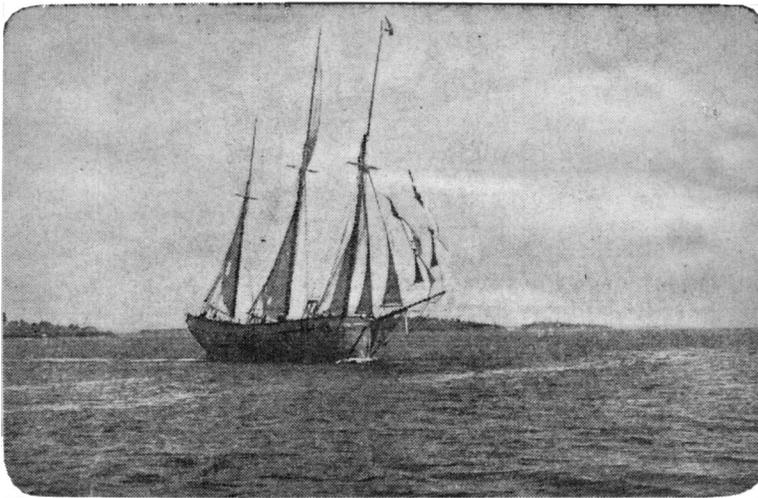
corrugated with waling crowded the river from the Oswego Canal and the Erie Canal, those days have faded into the past.

John S. Parsons and his long stone store, needing three street numbers to address it, are magnificent survivals.

"I guess, said he, I'm about the only one left on our side of our old schooner days. How about my old friend Johnny Williams of Toronto?"

"I guess," said he, "I'm about the only one left on our side of our old schooner days. How's my old friend Johnny Williams in Toronto? Eighty and spry as a colt? Good. And how's Sir Oliver Peacock, of Port Hope? Over eighty and still working to windward? And how's the Preacher, you know, Capt. Nelson Palmateer of Picton? Over eighty too? That Canada climate certainly keeps 'em young. Please give him my regards when you see him at the Mariners' Service at Cherry Valley."

John S. Parson's father, also John by name, came from Great Yarmouth, in England, eighty-seven years ago. He was a master mariner, and commanded steamers and sailing vessels for the Dean Richmond railway and transportation people. In steam he was in the propellers *Evergreen City*, *Araxes*, *Euphrates*, *Toledo*, in sail, he commanded the schooners *Charles T. Richmond*, *K. Richmond*, *F. M. S. Richards*, *Algerian*, *Charles Brooks*, *Osprey*, *Emu* and *Henry Clay*. He also sailed tugs out of Oswego and founded this ship-chandlery business. The Parsons owned the last schooner built on Lake Ontario or any of the Lakes. This was the *John S. Parsons*, launched at Chaumont Bay northeast of Oswego, as late as 1892 cut down to a barge in 1910, and now out of commission.



Schooner John S. Parsons tacking or coming to anchor in the Thousand Islands.

about the time his namesake schooner was built.

"There she is" said John, pointing to a fine picture of a small three master, raffee and all, with the tug in the foreground, a favorite composition with the marine artists who once flourished on Oswego's waterborne traffic. There was another picture over his desk of the same vessel without the raffee, coming to anchor above Brockville, in the Thousand Islands. Mr. Parsons entered his father's chandlery

The store is heated after the old style, with bright nickle-plated coal stoves, with big galvanized pails on top, filled with water to restore the humidity. The March day we revisited it

the heat was very comforting after six hours in the keen bright air. The office was where it had always been within our memory on the bright side overlooking the swing bridge, at the core of Oswego's business centre, and the swift flowing brown river, tumbling down from Oswego Falls. That office is the finest marine museum, private or public, on the Great Lakes. It is better even than the marine section of the John Ross Robertson collection of Canadian Historical Pictures in the Public Library in Toronto in these two ways: everything is on display on the open-shelf principle, and the "atmosphere" is perfect. It does not have to be reproduced. It is there, always has been. Stockholm, tar paint, putty hardware and all.

There is a builder's model of the \$10,000 schooner *Olive Branch* of Oswego, Capt. Preston, Bond and Co., being the owners, lost on Toronto Island in a snowstorm Nov. 14, 1875. Builders models of schooners are becoming rare now, and this is a good one. Builder's models look very little like the finished vessel, for they end before the characteristic details such as figurehead, taffrails, bulwarks, spars and deck fixtures begin. But they are invaluable in showing the exact shape of the hull and how it was arrived at. They are made in layers of different colored wood of even thickness called lifts, each cut to scale. When these lifts have been roughed out they are screwed together and worked down to the final desired shape. When they are taken apart the curving waterlines, or horizontal planes of the ship at fixed intervals, can be drawn by tracing around the outline of the lifts. Straight lines run across these at right angles give the curves of the cross sections of the hull. From these extended according to scale the mould for the shape of the frames or ribs can be made full size on the draughting floor.

There are other models more picturesque from a full-rigged clipper ship now doing duty in the film industry to a partially completed model of the *K. Richmond* schooner which John Parsons, Sr. once sailed. And the desks are covered and the walls are lined, ceiling high with hundreds of pictures, about which let's have a conference next week.