

**Toronto Telegram, November 16, 1931**  
**Schooner Days, XXXI (31)**  
**By C.H.J. Snider**

## **OAKVILLE'S GRAND OLD MARINER**

*Capt. Maurice Fitzgerald, of Oakville, is one of the last of the splendid old timers who sailed the lakes when sailing meant handling canvas, hauling on ropes, and complete dependence upon the breath of Boreas for motive power. Here is told something of his experience.*

"His cruise is ended. The Pilot picked him up and took him across the bar." So a snowy-haired ex-master mariner announced the death of Captain Maurice Fitzgerald Saturday.

"He was a wonderful man with sailing vessels. A real Great Lakes-man. One of the best of 'em." The aged schooner skipper paid Captain Fitzgerald the highest tribute of words that he knew.

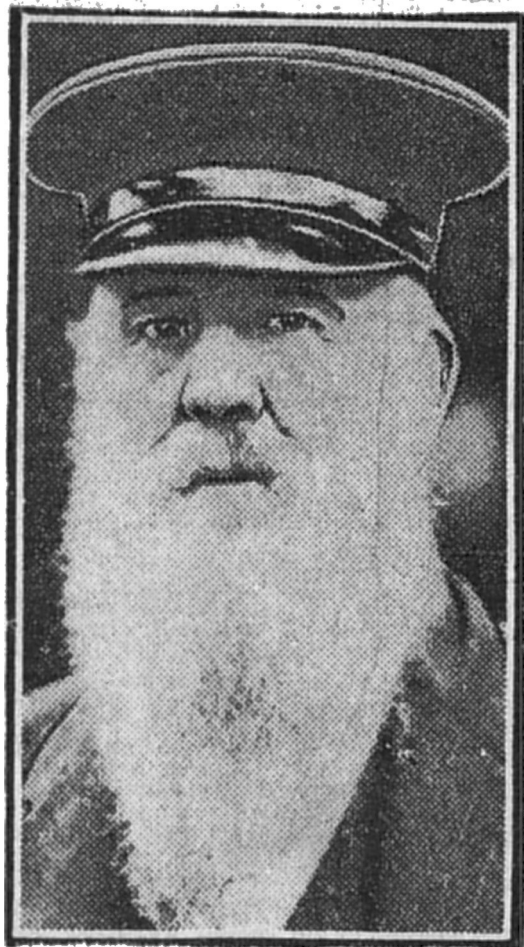
Maurice Fitzgerald of Oakville was one of the great men of the old marine of the Great Lakes, and a familiar figure in every lake port from Chicago to Montreal. "A masterly man and a master of lake craft," his friends and acquaintances characterized him. "A captain that never cost an insurance company a nickel," the vessel owners said.

Boy-before-the-mast, able seaman, mate and master, Captain Fitzgerald worked his way up through the harsh school of the sailing marine. Eventually he achieved the goal that was the ambition of every lakesman. He became an owner, and sailed his own craft, the little fore-and-after *Marcia A. Hall*.

His first command is said to have been the bluff-bowed, awkward "Smith and Post" of Thompson Smith's line of schooners. He sailed in several vessels of the Thompson Smith fleet and was master of the "*Monarch*," the "*Jessie Drummond*," and the "*Duncan City*."

Captain Fitzgerald is credited with having brought the first full cargo of lakewise coal to Toronto, in the *Duncan City*, a fore and aft schooner of four hundred tons burden. The coal was unloaded at the old Queen's wharf and as no such cargo ever before had been handled at the port of Toronto, special arrangements had to be made for the

### ***Veteran Skipper Dead***



*CAPTAIN MAURICE FITZGERALD, one of the last of the wind ship sailors on the lakes, father of J. P. Fitzgerald, Sporting Editor of The Evening Telegram, died at his home on Navy st., Oakville, on Saturday, after an illness of nearly two months.*

unloading, special sheds had to be built for the stowage of the coal, and the first crew of Toronto coal heavers had to be organized. The four hundred tons cargo was taken out with a horse-bucket and whip, and it is a matter of record that the unloading took more time than the carrying of the coal from Oswego, and more time than was ever devoted to the handling of any other bulk freight cargo that entered Toronto harbor.

A capable and resourceful sailorman, Captain Fitzgerald was blessed with the lakesman's most precious attribute. He was weather wise. "In twenty years of sailing lake schooners, he never made one bad guess of the winds," an old timer says of him. "When he shortened a vessel he took off just exactly the canvas that she couldn't carry through what was coming. He never was known to shake one up to take in more muslin after he'd snugged her once. If he carried his light stuff when it looked to be breezing up, you could bet your Sunday morning socks that it wasn't going to blow very hard, and he knew when snow or rain was coming as well as any Finn or Laplander that ever lived."

Bound for Toronto, coal laden from Oswego, three schooners raced up Lake Ontario in the fall of the year; the *Fearless*, 450 tons, Captain Ferguson of the firm of Ferguson and Duffy, Yonge st. wharf; the *Olive Branch*, 300 tons, American owned and sailed by an American master; the *Duncan City* of Oakville, 400 tons, Captain Maurice Fitzgerald. They were all fore-and-afters. Varying slants of wind brought them abreast of each other off Darlington at dusk of a November day. All three were "wung out" to a good easterly breeze. It looked like anybody's race.

Taking the deck in the dog watch, made John Andrews, ("Three-finger Jack" of Oakville) squint alow and aloft and at the eastern horizon.

"It's going to be dirty tonight," he told Captain Fitzgerald. "We better drag all the cloth we've got and crowd her into Toronto before we catch the worst of it." The three-pointed race occupied the mate's mind more than the weather.

Captain Fitzgerald looked to the eastward and sniffed long and comprehensively. "It's going to be mighty clean before long," he announced. "Get the light sails off her."

Almost dumbfounded by the skipper's paradoxical observation, Three-finger Jack ordered the crew to clew up and stow the gaff topsails, the jib topsail and the flying jib.

"Call me when you want me, mister," Captain Fitzgerald said and he went down for his four-hour watch below.

Within the hour snow came, thick, smothering, white masses of it: a record-breaking snowfall. Three-finger Jack called the Old Man. "Snow thickern' the hair on Billy Bell's dog's tail," he announced.

"It's clean, isn't it?" Maurice Fitzgerald countered. "Take the standing jib and stays'l off her. Shake her up and take a single reef in the fores'l and two tucks in the mains'l. We'll ride this out hove to."

With her sheets flat aft and her wheel in becket, hard down, the *Duncan City* lay hove to throughout the snow-smothered night. The wind rose to a full gale from the east. In the morning the snow stopped falling. The air was suddenly clear, the sun was shining and the east seas were running high. "Get some head sail on her," Captain Fitzgerald ordered. "Start your sheets and we'll run her." The *Duncan City* fled up the lake to shelter under Gibraltar point.

Meantime the *Fearless* and the *Olive Branch* had driven on through the night and the thick snowfall, taking a chance of fetching the east or west channel to Toronto Bay, and running in to safety.

One of the *Fearless's* crew heard surf breaking ahead of her. "Hard down yer helm. Let her go 'round," he yelled. "She's goin' on the beach. For God's sake hard down yer wheel."

The *Fearless's* mainsail was off to the starboard shrouds. Her helmsman spun the wheel hard over. The foresail jibed all standing, carried away the fore topsail gear on the triatic stay, parted its sheet and tore out the lanyards of the backstay when it fetched up. The *Fearless* came in stays with her gear thrashing and flogging. Her wheel bucked savagely and hurled the steersman away from it. Before he scrambled back to his post the schooner was in irons. Her jibs flogged out in ribbons.

"Leggo both anchors!" Captain Ferguson shouted, "we'll hold her with the hooks."

She was in three fathoms of water. Her ground tackle failed to stop her. She dragged ashore stern on at a point opposite the foot of the present Lang street.

The *Olive Branch* missed the eastern gap entrance by a few scant fathoms and drove ashore on Toronto Island about 500 feet to the west of the present west pier of the channel. Her foremast sheared off at the partners when she struck and crashed over her bow with all its gear and rigging. She was a total wreck.

William Ward, of Ward's Island, with his robust sons and his tough-bitted fishermen took the *Olive Branch's* crew off the wreck in a Mackinaw boat.

Tom Tinning of Tinning's wharf was captain of the volunteer life saving crew of the time. He commandeered horses and a wagon and hauled the life boat down to Lang street to take off the crew of the *Fearless*. He couldn't get out in the roaring, boiling surf

Having brought the crew of the *Olive Branch* safely ashore, Old Bill Ward hied him with his crew to the scene of the wreck of the *Fearless*.

"Why in seven short-legged dogs ain't you out there takin' them men off?" he accosted Tom Tinning.

"Blowing too hard. Surf's too high. We'll never get out there. It swamps the boat when we try."

"Swamp the eternal fires," scoffed Old Bill Ward. "Lemme have that boat and me and my boys'll show you how to take her through surf." Thereat Ward smote Tinning mightily on the nose. Tinning was a fighting man and no coward. He had been using honest judgment. They tied into each other with nothing barred and fought for fifteen minutes. Ward was victorious. He manned the boat with his rough Island crew and went out to the wreck.

In attempting to make sure that the schooner's cook was lowered into the boat, Captain Ferguson was hurled into the surf and drowned. His body was never recovered. William Ward brought the rest of the *Fearless* crew ashore.

The *Marcia A. Hall* was the last vessel that Captain Maurice Fitzgerald owned and commanded. He sold her to the Goldring Brothers of Etobicoke Creek and Toronto, who engaged in the then flourishing stone-hooking trade. She was last commanded by Capt. Pat McSherry in the lumber trade between Toronto and Nelson, N. Y.

Retiring finally from the Great Lakes trade Captain Fitzgerald established himself in the fuel business at Oakville and was proprietor and manager of the coal dock there for more than forty years.