

Toronto Telegram, October 3, 1931
Schooner Days, XXXII (32)
By C.H.J. Snider

THE EARLY BIRD

Telling of Capt. Jas. McCannel, master of the C.P.R. steamer Assiniboia and leading collector of harbor master's hats on the Upper Lakes, Mrs. Champney says, in the Detroit News, that the custom of presenting the first arrival of the season with a silk hat began with the Toronto harbor office sixty years ago. Probably. The ancient tile with which first arrivers are annually crowned looks of that vintage.

Did you ever hear the story of Johnny Williams' education of the Port of Rochester authorities in this matter?

Capt. John Williams, master mariner in steam and sail, present address Ilesworth avenue, Toronto, and member of the great Kew Beach clan, would probably shake his honest fist at the narrator, but he is witty enough to have been the hero of the episode as told, bless his Irish-English-Canadian heart, and this is how it goes: –

If there ever was an early bird it was Capt. John Williams, of Toronto; master in turn of the schooners *P. E. Young*, *W. T Greenwood*, *Speedwell* and *Sir C. T. Van Straubenzee*, and of the steamers *J. H. G. Hagarty*, *E. B. Osler*, retired of late, but still going strong.

When he stretched his cash to the cracking point and took on the job of buying the *Speedwell* from the Ewarts, of Cobourg, he had to get up very early in the morning indeed, for the *Speedwell*, in addition to steering like a truck with a flat tire, took a lot of money to run. Yet she proved very profitable.

In the course of voyages to Rochester to load coal Capt. Williams had noticed that breweries flourished in that vicinity. In pre-prohibition days between the city of Rochester and the village of Charlotte, as the harbor was then named, was a brass rail nine miles long, connecting the numberless lager beer and pig-knuckle emporiums. Capt. Williams concluded that so many bars meant many breweries. Many breweries must need some ice. Where did ice grow better than in his native Canada? How better could it be transported than in his wild-steering *Speedwell*?

So he saw some people in Rochester about it.

As a result, one bitter February in the late 1880's, he got a telegram stating that if he went to Presqu'isle and loaded ice there of such-and-such thickness he could have \$1.50 a ton for it, delivered at Charlotte.

Presqu'isle was a long way off – a hundred miles to the eastward to Toronto. Winter navigation of Lake Ontario was very chancy. It was possible to get out of Toronto Bay from where the *Speedwell* was lying, but that was all. What would happen on the morrow or the next mile none could tell.

Capt. Williams said nought. He just fitted the *Speedwell* out, cast off her frozen shorelines, and sailed down the lake with some cross-cut saws, axes, planks and pike poles in the hold.

The day was the 19th of February.

By the early dusk he was off Whitby, with seventy miles of the perishing hundred still ahead of his squirming schooner. (The *Speedwell* demanded a three-point sheer from her course as a regular thing, and four points on Sundays. Off the wind the only way to steer her was to double-reef the mainsail and get the sheet aft and hook on the crotch-tackle).

By some such magic Captain John coaxed her into the mouth of Whitby harbor with no more recalcitrance than a vicious thrust at the light-house with her jibboom – which fortunately missed – and called it a day.

Trudging up to the railway office a mile inland he wired Rochester. “Weatherbound. Splendid ice here such-and-such thickness. Williams.”

Next morning, before daylight, he turned the gang to with their one-handled cross-cut saws and other paraphernalia. After daylight he hired a half a dozen woollen-mitted helpers. Port Whitby harbor is a large clean bay. It was frozen over for almost its whole extent. By dinner time he had the ground-tier of choice blue-white crystal blocks laid along the *Speedwell*'s floor-ceiling. Before supper a shivering telegraph boy brought him the message he expected “Load and come.”

He loaded and came. The weather was not bad. The *Speedwell* had a good run to Charlotte. Her customary zigzags made it all the easier to scrunch up the shell ice in the Genesee river. In the third week in February here lay this Canadian snowbird by the dockside railway tracks, filled to the rail with prime Canadian ice, a \$600 freight earned before other navigation had turned over in its winter sleep.

Capt. Williams came prepared. A temperate man himself he knew that executives, magnates and officials, both of harbors and breweries beneath the Eagle, might have some curiosity as to the “wine of the country” in foreign lands, especially when a cargo of beverage-cooler was being brought in.

So in Whitby he had purchased a stone jar; and with the stone jar he presented himself at the palatial offices of the XYZ brewery firm.

It was not the immaculate Capt. John Williams known to Kew Beach of Sundays who convoyed the jar, but Johnny Williams, ice-cutter, all dressed up in his ragged fur cap, woollen mitts, tallowed boots, and old overcoat girt about him with a heavy-weather lashing. But the Rochester brewery bosses were discerners of men; and things. He and the jar had a royal welcome. They made out his cheque, complimented him on his ice, and showed him the product it was was meant to cool.

Finally he rose to go. Captain John's father was a London sailorman, and his mother was Irish, – the makings of the mischievous twinkle still discernible in his eye. He jammed his torn fur cap on his head, pulled a wisp of hair through one of the holes, thanked his hosts again for their hospitality, and said, in the rich brogue inherited from his grandmother Mrs. McIlroy –

“Sure now there's wan thing I'd be blamin' meself for if I didn't let ye in on, seein' ye've threated me so grand, an' yit I hesitate to tell ye.” “Oh, you must let us know, captain. Out with it, man,” chorussed the jar samplers.

“Well, now, and it's this. Only mind ye, I wouldn't mention it but for the pain it 'ud give me to think how bad ye'd feel afterwards if ye'd find out widout me tellin' ye, for ye might be blamin' yerselves. Ye see, in our country it's the custom, when the first vessel comes into port in

the openin' of the sayson, for to presint the master av her wid a new hat." This was wrung from him with many a reluctant twirl of the battered fur cap and tug at his projecting wisps of hair.

The brewery bosses roared with delight.

"Here, wait!" said one, calling a clerk.¹ There was a muttering of instructions, a minute's delay, and then Capt. Williams was handed an envelope.

"We don't aim to be behind anybody," said his Yankee ice-purchaser. "You take this up to so-and-so's store and get yourself the best hat in Rochester, with the compliments of the XYZ and the whole U. S. A., and come back with another cargo as soon as you can, and we'll give you ten cents a ton bonus."

After again apologizing for setting them right in this little matter of port etiquette, Capt. Williams weighed anchor and stood for the hat harbor. It was the finest men's furnishing place in Rochester, better even than Dineen's, which then topped them all in Toronto.

The clerk was rather abrupt with the customer in ice-cutting get-up.

"What for you?" he asked.

"A hat," said John, meekly.

The clerk showed him a 75 cent "knockabout."

"That's the cheapest we have," said he.

"I could stand something better," John answered modestly.

So they went through the stock of the store, until there were more empty boxes on the counter than there were ice-blocks on the *Speedwell's* deck.

"That's the best hat in New York state," declared the clerk producing a \$7.50 bowler.

"'Tain't quite good enough," said John with a slow sigh. "Ye see, I've got to lead the Sivinteenth o' March parade when I get back to Toronto."

"What you need," said the clerk "is a silk plug. Here's our very best. But it will cost you \$100."²

"I'll take it," said John. "And this'll pay for it."

"Certainly, Capt. Williams," said the clerk, recognizing the order of the biggest customer Rochester boasted. "And what else will there –"

The master of the *Speedwell* went back to his ship, chuckling. He was back in Charlotte with another big ice cargo ere February was out. But slack for the St. Patrick's Day parade! Ere he cut the first block of the second cargo he had thriftly exchanged the imported silk topper at Dineen's for three smart felt hats to match his different Sunday suits.

1 C.H.J. Snider edited out, on a proof, the phrase: "(It was the days before stenographers)."

2 Again, Snider initialed an edit for this, down to \$10, but the typesetters were obviously running late.