

Toronto Telegram, January 9, 1932
Schooner Days, XXXIII (33)
By C.H.J. Snider

Steelstem

The old lad's cable had run out past the seventy-fathom shackle, but he appeared to have another whole shot in the locker. He was deftly knotting gill-nets in a Bronte fish house, and at the same time looking over last Saturday's Telegram, which told of the inroads of the lake upon Bronte burying ground. What follows was in substance his commentary. Correct or not as to its facts, it was delivered in a manner extraordinarily convincing.

It says here Jimmy Baker's grave is one of those in the old cemetery threatened by the waves, and that he was one of those drowned with John and Jesse Belyea, Bronte sailors all, on the night of November 8, 1878.

That's right, in the main. There was more than one John Belyea, all of them lakesmen. There was old Captain John and young Captain John, his son, and another Captain John, his nephew, generally called Johnny to tell them apart. Johnny Belyea wasn't drowned. It was his cousins John and Jesse and half a dozen Bronte men. Johnny Belyea escaped that time and died here little more than three years ago.

In the year 1873 a pair of schooners was built in St. Catharines from the same moulds. The *Magellan* and *Manzanilla* they were called. They measured the same to a ton; 137 feet on deck, 23 feet beam, 11 feet 8 inches depth of hold, 330 tons register. Fine three-masted schooners they were, good carriers, bluff in the bow and flat in the floor, and regular bulls-of-the-woods to steer, like most of the Old Canallers.

That same year another schooner was built at Port Robinson on the Welland Canal on the same beauteous lines, only she went the others a few tons better. This was the *Gulnare*. Not old Capt. Maw's *Gulnare*, that crossed the Atlantic from land to land in eight days, nine hours, but another. Thomas Myles owned her in Hamilton. She was 142 feet 6 inches on deck, 23 feet 7 inches beam and 11 feet 2 inches deep in the hold; a little shallower than the twins, and, if possible, still harder to steer.

Capt. John Belyea, of Bronte, sailed the *Magellan*, and his cousin Johnny, was with him as mate for years. Other Belyeas and other Bronte men sailed in her, for lakeport sailors were a clanny lot, and though the *Magellan* might not come into Bronte once a season, there was always sure to be a Bronte crowd in her forecabin because she was sailed by a Bronte man.

In the fall of '78 freights were good, and the *Magellan*, like many another Lake Ontario schooner, was making money in the grain trade on the long drag from Chicago to Kingston. That paid as much as \$7,000 freight on a single full canal-size cargo at times. The run was made once in eight days by the schooner *Twilight*. The round trip could be made in a month; but headwinds, gales, calms, and most of all long delays loading and unloading at the grain elevators, spun out

the time.

Many's the fight with fists and feet that was necessary to establish a vessel's turn at the loading spouts near the old Twelfth street bridge in Chicago.

Captain John Belyea was hove all aback when his cousin Johnny, at the end of October, said he didn't think he'd make the next trip with him. He didn't feel like it. He had an offer of a master's berth in the *Gulnare*, but after watching her once go sideways through the canal at Burlington, he didn't hanker for having her to handle. Still he was "set against" going in the *Magellan*, and all his cousin's eloquence, which was powerful, couldn't budge him.

The *Magellan* canalled up the Welland for Chicago with a new mate. Some time later the *Gulnare* reluctantly poked her blunt nose into old Lock No. 1 on the same voyage, with Capt. Johnny Belyea roaring orders as to the disposition of the spring, snub, breast and other lines which smoked around her timberheads.

In the first week in November the *Magellan* claimed her turn at the elevator on the Chicago Creek, where the water ran so thick and foul with greasy filth that the fire brigade was called out again and again to hose it down and save the wooden bridges and wharves. Chicago was only four years over the Great Fire, and "nervous" as a newly-insured – well, you can guess the rest.

Dozens of vessels were hurrying to load, and the *Magellan* had the bad luck to incur the curses of Steelstem Ratsey, master of a big steam barge, who claimed her turn.

Steelstem was a hard-driving, hard-drinking ruffian who would have crashed the gates of hell for pure ugliness. He got his nickname from his barge's build, and the use he made of it.

Her stem was a particularly formidable oak timber, projecting full twenty inches beyond the rabbet of the bow plank hood-ends. He had shod it with iron and plated the bows with boiler plate, "for ice-work, late in fall and early in the spring" as he said.

What he really used this ram for was to butt his barge's way into berths she had no business to occupy. Most skippers gave him right of way or wrong of way rather than dispute with him.

"Don't try your boiler-plated tricks on me" Capt. Belyea had hailed, when Steelstem came ahead up the creek, nosing for the *Magellan's* berth. "This schooner's well insured, and if you so much as scrape the paint of her you'll pay every cent it cost to build her."

It was a bluff, but it worked. Steelstem gave his engineer two bells and backed up in time to avert collision.

But he blasphemously vowed that he would put the *Magellan* on a lee shore sooner or later if he took all the iron off his barge's bows in doing it.

Steelstem had particular provocation, for not only did the *Magellan* load and get away that night, but his own particular order of grain was not ready, and several vessels were loaded

ahead of him, and when he did cast off his lines Lake Michigan was all white horses in a lather.

Nosing into the northeaster all day after clearing, the steam barge failed to make progress. Steelstem emptied his last bottle of South Clark street snake-juice, but found no help in it. Teeth chattering with approaching delirium tremens, he ordered the quartermaster to change the course for the shelter of the Long Shoal off Manitowoc – and then suddenly began to chase crimson elephants out of the wheel-house.

The first mate and the engineer took charge. They locked him in his room and continued the course.

It was dark by this time, and as they drew in they could see the lights of a number of lake vessels already sheltering at anchor inside the shoal, with the Wisconsin shore to leeward of them. The leadsman was hailing the depth, preparatory to anchoring, when Steelstem burst from his berth and rushed to the wheelhouse.

“There she is” he shrieked, “and on a lee shore I’m going to put her if our stem holds out.”

Hurling the helmsman from the wheel he rang full ahead on the engines and drove the steam barge for one of the schooners riding at anchor in the dark.

He struck her fair amidships. The iron shod stem stove in her side and threw her on her beams ends. She filled and sank, her mastheads going down first.

There was a crying for help from the wind-whipped water alongside. Steelstem Ratsey, leaping from the wheelhouse to the main deck, seized a broad-bladed ship’s axe and slashed and slashed at the sounds. Sparks and white chips flew from the barge’s wale strake. The crying ceased. Steelstem started to shiver and shake and blubber like a babe.

Panicked by what he had done, his mate and engineer dreaded to anchor on the scene of murder.

They first lashed their captain to the cabin table, bolted to the deck. Out into the nor’easter they drove the barge again, washing the splinters from her steel plated death-stem with seas that swept clean over the wheel-house.

She outlived the gale. When they got to the Straits at the head of Lake Michigan they anchored at Old Mackinac and carried Steelstem Ratsey ashore, strapped to the table top. He was a raving maniac. He died that way, years later, in a Michigan insane asylum.

Nobody knew who or what had been hit in the dark. Just that there seemed to have been some sort of collision on the tail of the Long Shoal.

But Johnny Belyea read and reread the “Arrivals and Clearances” in the marine news, each time the *Gulnare* could be persuaded to amble into port, and could see no notice of the *Magellan*.

Then folks began to wonder if she had opened up on Capt. John in that blow of the 8th of

November. They argued against it, for she was a sound, staunch vessel, only five years old.

The other vessels anchored under the Long Shoal could give no light. They had not seen the *Magellan*. Some of them had been in company with her, beating down Lake Michigan. But it was night when they themselves made the anchorage. They had not seen her come to.

All at once a shattered hull came to the surface. It floated, but did not drift, for it was held by two chain cables. One side was smashed in, and the hatches were burst up. All the lake around was yeasty with swollen corn. The cargo had burst its way to freedom, and allowed the empty wooden hull to float.

It was the *Magellan*, with her Bronte crew drowned in their bunks.

All except Jimmy Baker. His body was found with the right arm shorn clean off below the shoulder.