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**By C.H.J. Snider**

## **JANUARY PASSAGE of the ELLA MURTON**

Talk of the time Capt. John Williams fitted out the *Speedwell* in February and won the harbor master's hat, or its equivalent, with a cargo of ice for the Rochester breweries, suggests other "early arrivals," or late passages on the lakes. Kingston Harbor is still open, or was a few days ago, the latest on record. Toronto Bay has been open, too, all winter. These facts recall G. H. Williamson's account of a winter passage across Lake Ontario by the schooner *Ella Murton*.

Capt. John Saunders and Capt. Tom Donnelly, the wrecker, owned the *Ella Murton* in Kingston forty years ago. In the last days of 1890 there was a great glut of grain waiting for export. It all couldn't be got out before the freeze-up. Saunders and Donnelly were offered a charter at four cents a bushel to carry barley from Kingston to Oswego, only 60 miles across the lake.

Steamers run with their tongues hanging out now for such freights, though they have to haul the grain all the way from Fort William for it. But it would take more than \$680 to tempt most men to make a mid-winter trip across Lake Ontario in a bucket which could only carry 17,000 bushels, and was entirely dependent upon the winds of heaven for movement.

However, Saunders and Donnelly took the chance and the charter.

Insurance companies turned them down cold, and cold on the Kingston waterfront in the middle of January is very cold indeed. The insurance men would have nothing to do with either vessel or cargo.

Capt. Saunders appealed to Capt. Joe Parsons of the schooner *Queen of the Lakes*, a three-and-after, which had laid up for the winter.

"I'd go," said Capt. Joe. "Gimme your charter and I'll fit the *Queen* out and deliver the barley, if you make it worth my while."

"I know you would, Joe," said Capt. Saunders. "I don't mind saying I'd have more confidence in you taking her out than if I did it myself. I'll tell you: You go as master in the *Murton*, and I'll go along as mate. What d'ye say?"

"All right," said Capt. Joe.

They lay for some days with the grain below decks and the ice forming on the *Ella Murton's* mooring lines. They were waiting for a fair wind to take them clear of the Ducks.

On the morning of January 18th 1890, the air came from the northwest. By daylight they had the covers off the lower sails, and up they went to a spanking breeze.

Away flew the *Murton* from the shelter of the elevators, out past Snake Island and Nine-Mile Point, flung to racing speed by skiffs of snow on the wings of the nor-wester, Kingston

Harbor freezing up behind her.

There was no turning back.

Off the Ducks, in the open lake, it came on to snow in earnest. The only thing which made it useless to shovel the beautiful off the decks was the wash of the seas. The slush choked the scuppers and before long, the Murton had a deck load of ice eight inches thick. Every rope, ring, block and spar was coated. The reefpoints became blobs of ice as thick as your arm. Snow piled in drifts in the belly of the mainsail. But for the schooner's rolling, and the industrious application of salt shovels, everything would have frozen solid.

Early in the afternoon she was off Oswego, with a screaming wind behind her. A great deal has been said and sung of the heroism of the Oswego tugmen, and some day it is hoped to relate concrete instance of it. But, on this occasion, as on many another, the tugs lay inside Oswego Harbor, and let the sailorman break his own blank dashed neck if he wanted to.

Perhaps the tugs were all laid up for the winter. But everybody in Oswego knew the Canadian hooker was making this midwinter passage, and they swarmed down to the port as soon as she was sighted. They crowded the wharves and the wintering vessels, and blocked traffic on the lower bridge that spans the river at the harbor head.

In came the *Ella Murton*, steering like a yawlboat in all that smother of spray. Joe Parsons kept the duds on her to the last moment. He was not going to be caught in the backwash of the northwester and the outset of the current, and driven on the beach under Fort Ontario, whither so many of the brave fore-and-afters fared and left their bones.

"By Jiminy, he's done it!" yelled the crowd, as the Murton's ice-coated jibboom poked in past the pierhead, and they commenced to cheer.

"Let go throat and peak halliards! Man your downhauls! Haul down your jibs and everything else!" roared Joe Parsons.

But saying it was one thing and doing it another. Everything aboard the Murton was iced up to the height of the second reefbands, and trying to furl sail was like folding corrugated iron into bundles.

She walked up the harbor at eight miles an hour, and the crowd on the bridge scattered east and west like buckshot. They remembered the time in '88 when a schooner went clean through it.

Every wharf and vessel the *Murton* passed, the boys tried to get the bight of a line on to spike or timberhead, but some missed and others slipped through the mitts of the men trying to catch them, and two that caught and held, broke.

"Hard over your helm then!" yelled Joe Parsons, and the *Murton* swung towards the shoal below the bridge pier. When her jibboom was within ten feet of the bridge she began to smell the bottom and slowed up. Before she stopped, with her forefoot deep in the mud, sparks and icicles were flying from the bridge, and she had ripped away twenty feet of the iron railing. But

the damage was trifling., and the river current made it easy to warp her off the shoal and berth her at the elevator.

The port collector of Oswego came aboard the *Ella Murton* with her papers all made out.

"And here's a box of cigars for ye, captain," said he. "And a free clearance when you want to take her home."