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Schooner Days, XLI (41)
By C.H.J. Snider

Early Birding

With the Ella Murton's January passage to Oswego, as related recently, still in mind, sailors of Hot Stove Harbor may be interested in some recollections concerning a Toronto vessel man who is still hale and hearty, Capt. John Williams.

JOHNNY WILLIAMS, native of Key Beach and present Lord of the Isles, or at least Isleworth avenue was always an early bird.

Five times, when he had the *W.T. Greenwood*, did he win the harbor master's hat for first arrivals of the spring. Some of these were double-headers. Not that Captain Williams possessed the number of heads which is proverbially better than one, but it possible to win more than one harbor master's hat in a season, by coming first into more ports than one.

Captain Williams was master of the *W.T. Greenwood*, of Cobourg, in 1885, 1886 and 1887, for Capt. James Ewart, Senior, the Cobourg patriarch who owned her. He had paid \$750 for a quarter interest in the *Greenwood*, and hoped to buy the remaining forty-eight shares in her eventually. Hence, in part, his diligence and early sailings.

The *Greenwood* was little and lightly framed, but strongly built, and Capt. Williams would keep her going when other vessels had to turn back.

Once he thrashed her up from the highlands to Toronto Point under lower sails in a gale of wind which forced the three-master *St. Louis*, of double her tonnage, to square away. All night long the *Greenwood* pounded at it. In the forenoon she entered the Western Gap and moored at the Queen's Wharf; about the same time the *St. Louis*, with which she had parted company before dark below Scarboro, was coming to anchor under Snake island at Kingston, one hundred and sixty miles from where she wanted to deliver her coal.

When the Port Hope Baby, a schooner captain of great avoirdupois and emphasis, heard in Tymon's bar at Church and Esplanade street what the *Greenwood* had done, he smacked his hand down on the mahogany so hard that the suds in Doughnuts O'Brien's freshly filled glass hit the ceiling. Long afterwards the stain remained to commemorate the *Greenwood's* feat and the Port Hope prodigy's fist.

Captain Williams did better than he had hoped by his industry, for it was not the *Greenwood*, but the *Speedwell*, another larger Ewart schooner, he became master and owner of, in 1888. It was with the *Speedwell* that he went out on February 18th, 1890, for a cargo of ice for *Charlotte*; and got it, and three hats, as hath been told earlier.

That was a pretty early piece of birding or worming, but Capt. Williams did not rest on his laurels.

For the season of 1892 he turned the *Speedwell* over to his brother, Henry, and entered a new venture in the *Sir C.T. Van Straubensee*, of St. Catharines.

The *Straubensee* was a “full canaller of over 700 tons carrying capacity, built as strong as oak and iron and Louis Shickluna, the St. Catharines builder, could make. Launched in 1874, she was one of the fleet that carried supplies for the construction of the C.P.R. around the north shore of Lake Superior. In this work she was driven aground in the small cove off Black Bay, forty miles east of Port Arthur, late in the fall. Here she lay, grinding on a boulder which used to let her tail off the wind as though she were riding to an anchor. The boulder resisted all attempts at releasing her, and she had to be left in the bay all winter.

So strongly was she built that neither the boulder nor the winter’s ice, piled twenty feet high, destroyed her; and in the following spring, or the next, she was floating off and repaired. For the rest of her life she wore a plaster of plank of different thickness, where she had sat so long on the bottom. To this day that little cove is called Straubensee Bay, though few know the reason why.

The *Straubensee* had been a lake “barque,” with double topsail and topgallantsail forward; but when Capt. Williams bought her here on a court order, she hadn’t even a squaresail yard. She was indeed, down to the bare necessities for sailing. Perhaps her salvors or purchasers had gone broke on the job of refloating and repairing her, or perhaps she has been in tow for a season or two. At any rate, she had no compass, no topsails, not even a flying jib.

Capt. Williams borrowed a cheap compass and sidelights and bent what sails he could find. The ice was still in the Toronto Bay, but it was clear where the *Straubensee* was lying, so he let her go out. He went down the lake with a fine March nor-wester, loaded coal in Oswego, and in forty-eight hours after leaving was back in Toronto.

The Bay was still full of ice, but he managed to get into the old Queen’s Wharf. That night the east wind brought him home, took all the ice out, and he towed down to the foot of Church street to unload.

Freight on this 48-hour passage paid the whole cost of a new outfit. By the time spring was really under way, the *Straubensee* was shining in black jacket and red kilts, with a pale blue covering board, pale bulwarks inside, a bright yellow bead line under the rail, new gafftopsails and maintopmast staysail aloft, four jibs forward and a double raffee and squaresail.

Capt. Williams kept her for twelve years, and for him she was a most profitable vessel. She was run down in 1909 by the steamer *Eastern State* off Port Colborne, five years after he sold her, and her master, Capt. Dolph Corson, her mate, Johnny McAllan, and half her crew were drowned.