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By C.H.J. Snider

The Blower Boys

"While the hookers were here, the Blower boys sailed 'em"

These words, coming from the lips of an old sailor, are possibly the most concise summing up of the history of the Blower family, of Port Credit, the members of which were in and out of the little lake schooners for almost a century. Mostly in the stone-hooking trade, they sailed, owned, built and rebuilt their vessels as required, until the white wings disappeared from the lakes. Capt. Mark Blower was one of the best.

FUNERAL of Captain Mark Blower at Port Credit this week cut one more name from the generation that saw schooner days in the height of their glory. Of that generation in this family there remain only Jim Blower, many years retired from the lakes, and Mrs. Rachel Howard, of Beaverton. The last gap in the ranks occurred when George Blower, brother of Mark and James and Abram, was killed in an automobile accident four years ago.

The family name appears variously as Blow, Blower, Blowers and Bloores. The latter spelling is from the first Dominion register. It may be connected with that of the Bloors, York pioneers, who gave their name to Bloor street. Blower is the form now favored. Thirty years ago Blow was the fashion in Port Credit. "Markie Blow" was the name by which the late captain was fondly known on the waterfront and along the shore.



CAPT. MARK BLOWER

After the funeral, Captain Abram Block, full cousin to Captain Mark, and one of the oldest of the old-timers, indulged in some reminiscing on his quiet verandah overlooking the mouth of the Credit.

The first Blower to come to Canada, he said, was his mother, Sarah Blower. She came over from Sussex in 1834 – in May to be exact. The family remembers that because Toronto was named in the previous month. With her came Abram Block, a young man of 23, who already had the salt in his blood, having made one trip across the ocean and back at the tender age of 15, a three-month voyage, and had served six years with a Yarmouth fisherman.

They were married and lived at Lansing, and young Abram was one of the volunteers who left his home, rifle in hand, when William Lyon Mackenzie and his rebels gathered at Montgomery's Tavern.

In '36, Thomas Blower came out to join his sister, but preferred Peel County to York and settled at Port Credit. The Blocks followed, first to Sydenham, now known as Dixie, where the

present Captain Abram Block was born, and then down to the growing Port at the mouth of the Credit.

It was not long before all hands had joined in the schooner trade, and Mrs. Emily Blower, wife of Thomas, had the honor of seeing her name on the first Dominion Shipping Registry, as the owner of the schooner *Catherine Hays*.

The *Kate Hays*, as she was familiarly known, was a contemporary of "Fisty" Masterson's famous smuggling schooner *Christina*, which that redoubtable tar got rebuilt, at government expense, in the government docks at Niagara, because he could show bullet holes in his bulwarks where the Mackenzie rebels had fired on him while carrying the Queen's mail.



Port Credit When the Hookers Were There

The *Kate*, like the *Christina*, was built at Toronto (then York) in 1833; and like the *Christina*, she had a square stern and outboard rudder. She was 41 feet on deck, 12 feet beam and 3 feet 10 inches deep in the hold.

Several of the family, including Captain Mark, sailed in this *Kate*, which was rebuilt in 1869 and rechristened the *James Abbs*. Other schooners passed in and out of the family's hands. George, Mark, Jim, Tommy and Abe, sons of Thomas Blower, owning several, and the younger members of the family taking each other's places before the mast and with the afterguard as they grew up.

Abram Blower, brother of Capt. Mark, was nicknamed Handsome in the fleet, and merited the honor.

There was the *Elizabeth Ann*. She came from Rochester, but was found too deep to work close inshore, being a straight keel boat instead of centreboard, so she was sold to one George Johnson. She was one of the last of the standing keelers on the lakes, and ended her days on the shore above Bronte about 1895. Then there was the *Rapid*, also from the States. The Blower boys sailed her for several years, until she "went bad on them," as Captain Block puts it. Then she was laid up, and finally broken up. She was a shapely craft but slow, despite her name and appearance.

The *Pinta*, commonly known as the "Pinty," was another. She was a scow, built for S. H. Cotton at Port Nelson in 1869, the year the James Abbs was rebuilt at Port Credit. She was 58 feet on deck, 14 feet 4 inches beam, and 4 feet 8 inches deep, Captain Mark sailed in her, under Captain Jim Quinn, of Oakville. Her end was tragic. Coming down from Oakville one cold morning, with a nor'west wind hoofing her along, she tried to go about and stand in for the land off Marigold's Point, the wind following its usual practice at that point by hauling to the north.

The *Pinta* had a big barndoor centreboard. The box was open slotted and came above the deck. The board was new and buoyant. It should have been ballasted until it was sufficiently waterlogged to sink of its own weight. When the snow squall struck the *Pinta* she luffed and got in irons, and as she lost way her board rose so high in the box that it caught the foreboom and would not let the foresail come over. That doomed her. A second puff caught her canvas aback and rolled her over. Men who were shingling a barn on Marigold's Point saw her in trouble. She was blotted out by the snow flurry. When it disappeared she had disappeared too.

"She was loaded too deep," said Captain Block. "I guess her hatches just filled when she tried to go about." All hands were lost, although one man managed to get into the scow towing astern. The offshore wind carried him across the lake and the scow was picked up on the beach at Winona, his frozen body jammed under the thwarts.

From Port Credit harbor, a tug was seen going up the lake in a futile attempt to render assistance. It was the *Mixer*, a Toronto boat owned by Frank Jackman. And Port Credit sailors still curse the well meant action of the men on Marigold's Point, who saw the disaster and hastened word to Toronto, when the schooner *Morning Star*, sound and almost new, with Abe Block and half a dozen others right there to handle her, lay at the dock in Port Credit ready to put out at a minute's notice hours nearer the disaster in those pre-telephone times.

It was not until next day that word of the foundering of the "Pinty" reached Port Credit. The victims of the tragedy were William and Joseph Quinn of Oakville, brothers of the owner, Capt. James Quinn, and Bus Howell. Capt. Jas. Quinn and Capt. Mark Blow had left the *Pinta* some time before her fatal voyage. Oakville sailors had begged the younger mariners not to make a start, for the north wind threatened snow before they left.

Twenty years later, in 1902, the *Wood Duck* sailed over the sunken wreck of the *Pinta* off Marigold's Point. Her fatal centreboard box was still discernible down in the clear green water amid the remains of her deck cargo.

The *Morning Star* was built right in the Credit for Capt. John Miller and was bought by Jim and George Blower. They eventually sold her to Whitby, where she went to pieces on the mud.

The *Minnie Dunn* was another Blower scow, owned by Captain Mark. She was distinguished from another *Minnie* among those present by calling the other *Minnie* the "Fenian Spy." That was a sample of blunt sailor humor perpetrated by Alex Blakely, Captain Block's brother-in-law, for the second *Minnie* was owned by two Irishmen, and the Fenian Raid was

fresh in people's memories.

But the *Reindeer* was the sweetheart of the stonehookers. She was not so when she was bought from Billy Bond, of Oakville, and brought to Port Credit, under the name *Ida May*, but she was rebuilt by Captain Mark Blower and Captain Block. She was "getting tender," so they went over her from stem to stern.

When she entered the water again her sides had been widened, and she had a beautiful spoon bow and springy sheer that were not there before. The remarkable thing, however, was her new planking. Forty-four feet in length was the boat, and the planks ran all the way in one piece. Beautiful 44-foot lengths of clear pine they were. Captain Abe wanted to rechristen her "Buttress" on that account, but Captain Mark preferred *Reindeer*, and *Reindeer* it was.

The job of getting pine planks 44 feet in length can be imagined, but Captain Abe dismisses it casually. The operation, as explained by him, consisted of picking the tree you wanted, felling and trimming it, and hauling it to the slip. Then you hauled it upright with the aid of a three-legged derrick, marked it off into planks, and let brawny arms and a whipsaw do the rest, cutting clean from top to bottom. Clear planks 50 and 60 feet in length were not out of the way, says Captain Abe.

With the *Olympia* and the *Coral*, the *Reindeer* ended her days laid up in the Credit and after the Great War was finally broken up by order of the village council.

The stonehookers thus passed completely from Port Credit for a while, until the *Lillian* came back. The *Lillian*, an American bottom built in Henderson Harbor in 1859, was George Blower's, although he lost possession for a couple of years, trading her to Jack Hinds for the *Northwest*. He traded back, however, finding the other too big. His three sons sailed her, but all are now ashore, Floyd, in Toronto, Norman, in Port Credit, and the third in Hamilton.

The *Lillian* was rebuilt during her last stay in Port Credit, new oak planking throughout, new stern, and a new stem, giving her a straight bow instead of clipper.

All ashore now, the Blowers still treasure their reputation as sailors. Of Captain Mark's seven sons, Captain Block says, without qualification: "They all know how to sail"; and lets it go at that. The other member of the family in the village, Jim, was driven off the lakes by crippling rheumatism many years before his brothers, and is now a shoemaker, "and a right good one, too," is his cousin's tribute.

"Why should the Blowers not be sailors?" urges one who knows them all. "Weren't a lot of them born 'out there'?" indicating with outflung hand a point about 30 feet from shore. There was a time when the land extended "out there," and the Blower home was on Lake street, now non-existent. The house is now the third from the lake, having been moved back twice. It is no longer occupied by Blowers, but few of them live where it is impossible to dive off the verandah, given a good running start.

The Misses A. and J. Andrew of Oakville, appreciative readers of "Schooner Days, "

courteously point out two discrepancies in recent accounts of the adventures of the schooner *Baltic* in this column. In regard to Capt. John Andrew, who sailed her (or Three-Finger Jack as he was popularly known among the sailors of his time), the Misses Andrew write: that the accident to his hand happened when he was a boy about eleven years old. His sister, who was on the scene of the mishap at the time, is still living in Oakville. Young John was valorously competing with another boy to see who could chop kindling best with his left hand, when the hatchet gashed a middle finger. The other point is that he never worked on the rebuilding of the yacht *Merrythought*; it was a nephew John T. Andrew, who did so, for which the Misses Andrew have proof in the handwriting of their brother, the late Capt. James Andrew, the well known yacht builder, in 1907.

Accuracy is ever our ideal.

(Caption) CAPT. MARK BLOWER

(Caption) Port Credit When the Hookers Were There