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Schooner Days CDLXXV (475)
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GREAT LAKES IN WINTER II - HOMEWARD BOUND

INSPECTED AND INSURED
Fort William and Port Arthur
Monday, Dec. 9th

INSURANCE runs out at midnight, or takes a jump that knocks the freight into a cocked hat. It covers ship and cargo for the voyage providing the voyage actually begins before 12 o'clock.

The *A. A. Hudson* is well under the wire. She has discharged 1,100 tons of salt and her Ontario pastry flour since her arrival at noon Sunday, passed an inspection like a candidate for the air force, and loaded 115,620 bushels of grain, a war cargo for winter storage at Goderich, by half past ten, Monday night.

You should see that inspection. The decks have to be flushed down with hot water, so that no particle of ice may conceal a leak, and then they are examined from the underside, to detect the slightest dampness around any rivet hole. The bilges are scraped clean and O.K'd before the heavy timber bilge-boards are allowed to cover these steel corners, although naturally the grain cannot get near them. Every rivet-head inside the ship and the ship's tanks is examined for a trace of leakage. Where our grinding through the ice has jolted a cement patch that covered one rivet in a frame, loosened by contact with canal bank concrete, repairs have to be made. Everything, down to or up to the heavy tarpaulins that cover the hatches, has to be perfectly watertight. Dampness, even the sweat from steel plating, would damage a cargo. So all the plumbing which passes through the cargo holds forward of the engine room bulkhead at the stern is cut off and ice traps are winter-sealed against the frost, lest they might burst in zero weather and later thaw and spoil the grain.

Being a package freighter the *A. A. Hudson* has four steel cargo doors, two on each side, through which freight is trucked to the tween-decks. For a grain cargo the tween-decks as well as the three divisions of the cargo hold are used. These steel doors close upon rubber gaskets and are screwed tight with clamps and reinforced with strongbacks, so that they are actually stronger than the rest of the ship's side, and, of course, completely watertight. They have to be, for they are partly under water when the ship is fully loaded. There is a danger, if the vessel is used for winter storage, as the *Hudson* will be this winter, that ice forming at the waterline between the wharf and the moored vessel might spring these doors in, by its expansion. Consequently the vessel will be "dipped" at the elevator before going into winter quarters; that is, enough grain will be removed to bring the sills of the doors above water level. Before any grain goes into the between-decks the fastening of the doors has to pass rigid inspection.

Finally the bug men get busy. They are government entomologists and take samples of

the very sweepings of the hold, to detect the presence of any stray, weevil or traveling corn-borer. When we get a clean bill of health it is clean.

Before we leave Port Arthur and Fort William permit the acknowledgement of a Boy Scout message from Frank C. Irwin. ``Fort William,” quoth he, after looking at the picture of the *A. A. Hudson* with snowbound decks, “never, never looked like this! This is Port Arthur.”

Right, good scout. The picture was taken at Port Arthur, where we unloaded some of the salt, before loading the wheat. But, as godfather of twins myself, tell me, how do you tell Twin Cities apart?

DOWN LAKE SUPERIOR

Tuesday, Dec. 10th

WHEN we crunched our way out of Port Arthur Monday night just before midnight and the expiry of the insurance deadline the air was full of doleful reports of seas that would roll us and winds that would wreck us, and it was blowing pretty fresh anyway from the northwest, after a low barometer and heavy preliminary squalls.

On the radio telephone we heard the mates of bigger vessels back-fence chatting about Lake Superior being no place for “that rabbit” this night, meaning us. As we passed the *Riverton*, lying in shelter anchorage under the Welcome Islands, outside the harbor, her master very politely reported conditions outside as he had found them and as reported to him by the *Bayton*. She had turned back after tussling all the way down to Cape Porphyry and we could see her lights as she came hunting for a place to hole up. Capt. Hudson wanted to go on, but it seemed maybe foolhardy to rush in where these angels feared to tread, so we reluctantly rounded to and anchored within a mile of the big *Riverton* for the night.

Six next morning, with the Twin Cities spread out by their street lights like a tray of gems on black velvet in a jeweler’s window, we hove up and got underweight in the bitter cold before the first glimmer of dawn. The *Goderich* had started out from the elevators, and the *Riverton* and *Bayton* hove up their anchors as she came. All three steamers passed us during the forenoon, for though the *Hudson* might be a rabbit she certainly was no harefoot. The *Goderich* seemingly went down the middle of the lake, this being the shortest course to Whitefish Point, 231 miles away, and our common destination, the Sault, below which we would separate for various destinations.

The other two hugged the shelter of the north shore, for smooth water in the northwest wind, and we went with them for a while, until we had left Hardscrabble and Porphyry on the port quarter. Then we rather compromised and steered for Otter Head, on the northeast shore where a 90-foot cataract leaps into the lake. We would have gone the whole hog, down the middle, but had to make sure of clearing that mystery hill in the bottom of the lake, the dreaded Superior Shoal. After we had done that the next thing to do was to steer so as to pick up the west end of Michipicoten Island, and get a good departure that would carry us clear of Cariboo, before squaring off for Whitefish.

With all the aids to navigation in full swing, lighthouses, gas-buoys, radio beacons, stake buoys and all, Lake Superior is still a difficult piece of navigation. In the fall of the year the aim of the Department of Marine appears to be to get all the lighthouse keepers removed and all the aids to navigation taken in and stored according to a schedule fixed in the summer, with no regard to the convenience and safety of all the vessels which may still have to navigate. For us the north shore of Lake Superior was almost a lamp-less wilderness. If there was a winter light left on Cariboo even, we did not see it as we passed by day. That was why we were doing such primitive pilotage, relying only on compass, log and eyesight, plus that godsend to mariners the radio.

Tuesday was a cloudy cold day in Lake Superior, the barometer rising and sea going down. We took no water on deck, with our five foot side out. Well before midnight we sighted the loom of Michipicoten's snowy shores in the clear darkness. We could see the island many miles off. So as to pass its calf, Cariboo, which Michipicoten seems to tow as a yacht would a dinghy, we hauled up on a course which would take us to Big Two Hearted River in Michigan, had we stayed on it long enough.

LIFELINE TO BREAKFAST **Wednesday, Dec. 11th**

THIS brought the wind, which had swung to the west, on our starboard side, and slapped the sea against us. By six o'clock Wednesday morning the waves were leaping our five-foot freeboard occasionally and shooting high in spray on bow and quarter at times, so that the one half of the deck was under water continuously, and we had to shift the lifeline over to the other side so that the boys forward could get aft to breakfast.

This lifeline is a stout wire cable, set up with a tackle, above the main deck, from the bridge to the after house. On it are a dozen short lengths of rope, with rings spliced into each end. One ring is around the lifeline, and the other is free.

To get forward or aft along the open deck, which is protected only by cable and stanchions, a man grabs the free ring of a rope length, shortens it in his hand until it hangs straight from the wire cable above, and runs.

If the weather is very bad he makes a bight through the ring and pulls this over his shoulders and under his arms, so that he cannot be washed away even if he loses his grip. If a sea sweeps across the deck he either hangs on by the overhead support or swings himself up onto the tarpaulin of one of the steel hatches, thirty inches above deck level. With his traveling ring he can swing himself from hatch to hatch until the rise in the sagging cable makes his ring slip back.

Our hatches were glazed with the frozen spray at the time, and the boys did not have to swing up on them on the sheltered lee side. It was, they said in the dark as they scrambled aft at the breakfast bell (5.45) "only a little slop." When they came out half an hour later they found the traveling rings more useful, for by this time snow and hail were coming down thick, coating

the hatch covers and making the lee side very slippery. But even the boy with the wooden foot navigated without falling.

Shortly after eight the wind shifted to the northwest again and we altered course for Whitefish, that great shelter and landfall for the Sault, coming from the westward.

This gave us the sea on the stern, and though it came roaring after us, it never caught us. The snow ceased and the deck drained off, but an hour later the wind and sea were on the broadside again, and icy water was splattering aboard and the snow was again howling in static on the aerials of the radio sets, and whitening the hatch covers afresh. But we didn't mind that, for at noon dinner we breasted Whitefish in a clearing, and repeated the ancient formula of the Frenchman: "Goodby, Superieur! You no get me this tarn once more."

FAREWELL SUNSET

Father Superior, the man's lake, took his beating like a man. He smoothed down and drew aside the curtains from the sun. How low he seemed, and how far south, to us, a long day's travel to the north of where we belonged, and within ten days of the shortest day in the year, too. Gros Cap lightship shone bloodied in the low hung light. The high rocky shores, powdered with pale blue snow, became raw gold, dusted with diamonds. Most beautiful was the stretch of Pointe aux Pins, a long marble bank of pure white snow richly, robed in millions of deep green pine trees, so thickly needled they seemed like plush.

For good measure Father Superior threw in a winter sunset, flames of gold in a turquoise sky, above cloud bars of pewter grey, resting above great caves were burned fires of deep rose, crimson and purple, in furnaces of sooty slate.

The December moon came out as we floated into the lock of the American canal No. 4; we were too deep-laden to come down by the Canadian. The moon, so young when we left Goderich with our upbound salt, was almost in full bloom now, like a water lily in the sky; lighted by those two companion stars one small, one very bright, which have claimed attention every night since first seen in September. They are so faithful to one another, wherever they are in the sky. Who would believe that the bright one was Jupiter and the smaller Saturn, whom Jupiter ousted, in the old Greek mythology? Or that they were not "stars," but planets? And now they were matching up with Lady Luna. Stars fire more than stars, when you see them in Superior. They are samples of heaven.

UNCLE SAM KNOWS THERE'S A WAR ON

No. 4 lock was patrolled by an American guard with a loaded rifle on his shoulder, so zealous he would not even allow one of our own mates ashore to examine our own draught marks. By great control he did not shoot the purser as he swung off with our papers, on the landing boom. Well, better safe than slack. We were flying our black balled inspection flag "I", too, which certified we had no bombs planted aboard us. But the lockmaster was very polite, and suggested moorings for the night as he promptly lowered us, toll free, to the level of Lake Huron. Twenty minutes from the time we had entered the lock we had left Father Superior twenty feet

above us and twenty miles behind. Between the two lakes there is sixty-five miles of navigation on the St. Mary's River, including canals, cuts, lakes and approaches, and the lock is about a quarter of the way down.

RUNNING THE FROZEN RIVER

Often this pays. Sometimes it has to be paid for. One late trip, running the frozen river at night, Capt. Hudson got stuck in the ice, and it cost him and three other unfortunates \$2,000 for tugs to break them out. Should the steamer get out of the narrow channel at night and go aground, thousands of dollars damage might be done in a few minutes. Most of the markers had by now been thriftily removed, or were covered by the ice, all lights were darkened except a few range lights and the glittering illumination of fueling docks.

Nevertheless we tried. At first there was no ice. Then patches.

Then solid sheets from shore to shore, but not very thick. Heavy with cargo the *A. A. Hudson* sent hundred-foot cracks radiating from her round bows, like spokes from a hub. Cakes of ice as large as our hatches would leap from our straight stem and shoot sideways across the parent field for a couple of rods at high speed. Inside the ship the noise was like a boiler factory.

It clouded over, but the moonlight was diffused, and we would hang on to range lights for miles, the wheelsman steering backwards from the forward side of the wheel for an hour at a time, to keep his lights in line over the stern. By 11 o'clock, with difficulty, we ground our way into the fuel dock at Lime Island. They blew the whistle and flickered the lights at the tiny settlement, to bring the gang down to fuel the unexpected customer, and we filled the bunkers until 80 tons of coal rose high around the smokestack.

The other steamers with the greater speed had reached the river long ahead of us. To tell the truth we were a tortoise rather than a rabbit, but by keeping on we always got there. Any other skipper, with Superior safely behind him for the year and night coming on, would have moored or anchored at the Sault and gone on next morning. But the moon shone so brightly, the wind had dropped, and four steamers had churned the ice in the St. Mary's river this Wednesday, so it could not be very heavy yet. Capt. Hudson pushed on.

HOME STRETCH DOWN HURON.

Thursday, Dec. 12th

BELOW Lime Island the ice was less, and at twenty minutes past one Thursday morning we cleared Detour and entered Lake Huron on the homestretch.

This was the writer's fourth December trip to the head of the lakes, and his eighth essay at Lake Huron. That stormy body of water was never seen so smooth as at breakfast time on the morning of Thursday, Dec. 12th, 1940. It was so still that the ever-winged gulls came and sat on the mirror like brooding hens, and the reflections of their black-tipped wings came down in long straight lines to the steamer. Our course passed the west shore within a few miles, at Presqu'isle, and gave this voyager his first glimpse of the two Presqu'iles, False and True, and of Middle

Island and the Thunder Bay Islands, Sugar, Sulphur, Scarecrow and so on. Off Thunder Bay, Michigan, a duplicate of Superior's Thunder Bay, a fish tug came out to visit his nets, and we could see the tiny red bob of his line a mile away. When the gulls saw him they rose in a cloud and rushed up for breakfast, They soon settled on the water again. One fellow perched on the head of our mainmast and rode with us for miles.

“A skipper I was with,” said the young first mate, “told me he had never known it to fail, that when the gulls sat on the water and flew low and perched aboard the vessel the wind would come from the eastward.”

The morning was softly golden, without the sun appearing. Indian summer afloat. Coats were almost superfluous.

Before noon there came a ripple, and the golden light changed to grey, and the lake which had been liquid porcelain became ruffled lead. Greycaps showed on the waters. White flakes sifted through the air. It is always hard to believe a snowstorm at sea, for though the snow may fill your decks all around you it leaves no trace. The surrounding water seems an empty pavement and the narrowed horizon its white boundary.

The wind was from the east.

Then the radio telephone and the radio direction finder, those great modern aids to navigation, proved their worth. By taking the receiver off the hook we got an immediate weather report and forecast from the radio stations at Port Arthur, the Soo, Thunder Bay and Point Edward, and vessels on Georgian Bay and Lake Erie. Northeast winds and snow here, east wind., and pouring rain there, northwest and north winds coming on Lake Superior, storm warnings for a westerly gale for the lower lakes.

Capt. Hudson's problem was to shape his course which would (a) get him into his destination as soon as possible, and (b) enable him to reach shelter or ride it out if conditions made Goderich impossible to enter. A north-wester might. Then he might make for Sarnia, for the Point Edward lightship was still in commission. But he might be in the trough of the sea if he went over to the west shore for smooth water earlier. And with his present draught he couldn't be sure of Harbor Beach, that great harbor of refuge opposite Goderich. It was like racing an airplane with a horse and buggy but decided to push on for Goderich at his eight knots, hoping the northeast slant would last out the day, and the snow banks would not get higher than the lighthouse on the hill before he got there.

FRIDAY THE THIRTEENTH

December, 1940

IT was touch and go. All day we ploughed a very broad furrow down Lake Huron from northwest to south east. Our round bows spread a roll of foaming water before us like the advance bore made by a deep-laden schooner running wing-and-wing. Having decided his course there was nothing more Capt. Hudson could do for the time, and he sat in his shirtsleeves – with a full head of steam his room was frightfully hot, and he had the bridge door open –

playing hearts until it was his move in another game. That was much better than restlessly pacing the bridge or perpetually tapping the barometer or nagging the wheelsman, as would have happened in the best-selling fiction. The last game of the season ended with him ten cents up or ten down, I forget which.

From the cosy dark of the wheel-house at 1 o'clock on the morning of Friday the Thirteenth, Goderich showed up like another tray of diamonds, shorter than the Twin Cities but more displayed. It looked as though we would make it. We could distinguish the high lighthouse, flashing on the hilltop, and the high fixed floodlight, and the street lamps coming down to the harbor, and the low flashlight on the breakwater. We were within two miles of the place, fifteen minutes' steaming, and were looking for the red range lights, when the whole picture changed as though it had been sponged from the background of dark sky. There was nothing there but a blank.

"Snow," said Capt. Hudson briefly. "What was the last bearing of the light?"

The wheelsman gave the answer in degrees. There are 360 of these on the compass rim.

"Steady on such-and-such," said the captain, giving a course two degrees to weather of the last, to allow for leeway and the change of wind and sea. We could see it moving the clouds fast.

On he stood, seemingly blindly.

"There'll be an opening," he said, looking at the sky.

Soon there was. The lights all sparkled out, only a mile away. We were heading directly for the narrow gap in the breakwater, the red lights a little to port.

"Work her up to the ranges. There'll be still more current down the lake as she closes in."

The snow came back in showers of small, hard flakes, but the high lights burned through. We even held the red of the ranges. Surprisingly we nosed through the gap in the breakwater, disturbing hundreds of gulls sleeping under its lee. We were bunting ice cakes, each ringed with a fluffy wall of flakes where the edges had ground together. Dead slow we crunched through the narrow channel into the inner harbor, rang off, backed, and got our wire cables out onto the snow-capped pier. The voyage was over.

Then it snowed in earnest, the wind came in from the north and northwest as the gale warnings said it would, and almost blew the gulls from the water. Lying in the shelter of the inner harbor as she was, the *A. A. Hudson* surged so with the cross-sea coming in that we had to shift farther in towards the elevators, where half a dozen steamers were already moored. From two to six it blew a living gale; had we been within two miles of Goderich when this happened it is doubtful if we could have got in, even if we could see the lights, for the backwash from a nor'wester sets up a terrific current across the entrance, but why worry about might-have-been? We were safe in port with winter storage cargo, the "gravey load" of the season.

(Caption) DECK OF LAKE FREIGHTER IN HEAVY WEATHER FOR THE WINTER