

**Toronto Telegram, March 1, 1941**  
**Schooner Days, CDLXXXV (485)**  
**By C.H.J. Snider**

## **Wind Wagon's Lucky Friday**

CAPTAIN! you'll never be going out this day, and it's Friday and all. They're bad!"

"What's bad?" asked Johnny Williams of the breathless telegraph operator, who had come running down the Port Colborne pier. It was the morning of Guy Fawkes' Day, Friday, the 5th of November, 1897. Capt. Williams, in the *Straubensee* now for his sixth season, was waiting only for the Buffalo weather forecast before starting up Lake Erie for Cleveland, for a load of moulding sand for Hamilton and Toronto.

"The probs," said the operator, "gales from the southwest. The message has just come."

"Well, the gales haven't, and if they do I can get back here, I guess," said Capt. Williams. "Single up your lines, boys, and pull down the fly for the tug."

"Not goin' out, Cap?" asked the tugman, as his craft grunted by.

"If I have to come back you'll get another bill," said Johnny.

He never saw any difference in six days of the week, did Johnny Williams. Sunday he kept when he could, doing no unnecessary work then, but in the schooner trade work on Sunday was often imperative. As for Friday, it was his lucky day. He paid so little attention to it on that or on any other account that he sailed into Whitby and loaded the *Greenwood* with grain, the first trip he had her, and sailed out again for Oswego, and it was only when he noticed other vessels lying idle there, with their holiday colors flying bravely, that he realized it was not only Friday but Good Friday at that, the most unlucky day in the year for the superstitious sailor-man. The voyage so begun was a lucky one for the *Greenwood*, and so were many others, begun or completed on a Friday.

What he did notice as he towed out was that the harbor stakes were slanting to windward; sign that the water was "running up hill," that is, from the foot of Lake Erie, where he was, towards the head, where he was going.

By the time he had the gafftopsail sheeted home and the raffee drawing she was bowling along at a good clip and weathering up on the Sugar Loaf instead of sagging down on Point Albino as he feared she might. The wind was canting from northwest to southwest and blowing fresher with a crisp little sea.

Capt. Williams resolved to hold the north shore pretty well, so as to get back to Port Colborne easily if need be, and every time he got five miles off shore he tacked and came back on the northerly board. Those "Old Canallers" seldom made good better than five points off the wind, and the *Straubensee* was a typical bluff-bowed product of Louis Shickluna's built-by-the-mile-and-sawed-off-in-lock-lengths formula. Capt. Williams was surprised the way she horsed

up the lake. By noon she had weathered the Mohawk and was looking for the Grand River Bluff at Port Maitland. In the afternoon the wind freshened until the gafftopsail had to be stowed and the jibtopsail downhauled. Three-'n'-afters as a rule could not do much more than sail across the wind and back, if they were light and had to reduce canvas to lower sails, but every five-mile tack the *Straubensee* made she was a mile or so to windward of where Capt. Williams expected her to fetch.

Undoubtedly a strong current was running up Lake Erie against the wind. This could easily happen, for strong west winds sometimes pile the water twelve feet above normal levels at Buffalo – there is a record of schooners being carried up into the old Market Square. All of this piled up water cannot escape over Niagara Falls soon enough to prevent a backflow to the west end of the lake, in water's lifelong quest for its level.

By sunset of this short, bright, windy November day the *Straubensee* was looking the tall shaft of Long Point Lighthouse right in the lantern. It was blowing so hard now that the gear boxes and moveables on deck were sliding to the leeward, and the water was smoking in the lee scuppers when she heeled in the heaviest puffs. Time to either reef or run back, or perhaps both. But she was going to windward so well that the bold skipper hung on, for she was now smoothing the water with every mile of her inshore tack. She was heading into the huge bay to the north of Long Point, which is a lake in itself, and the forty-mile sandbar was stretching out like a breakwater between her and the roughening waves of Lake Erie.

Before dark she passed the lighthouse to port, being thus well within the bay, and worked up to an anchorage in smooth water, off a clay bluff to the westward of the light. When she rounded to it was blowing so hard the sails banged like bullhide drums, and the sheets smoked in the blocks as the booms flailed back and forth. But she settled back comfortably on her cable, and rode like a duck in the early twilight. Across the sandbar Lake Erie was streaked with bursting breakers and the smoke of steamers hurrying to this same shelter under Long Point. By Saturday morning not a steamer could be seen outside on the lake, but sixty-four of them were tugging at their anchors under the Point, ahead and astern of the *Straubensee*.

Forty-eight miles from Port Colborne in November daylight against a headwind was incredible speed, but she had done it. It meant six miles an hour made good, and few yachts would do that on any terms.

NOW we turn back the clock to late afternoon of this Guy Fawkes Friday, and to Buffalo harbor, where the package freighter *Idaho* has been loading for Chicago.

She was an old-style wooden propeller, high in the bows, especially when, cargo-empty, the weight of her engines pull her stern down. She has a wheel-house with a funny cupola top, like a Victorian mustard-pot. Above it is a gilt eagle as big as a man. Aft this birdcage is a stout spar, lowermast, topmast and gaff with peak-halliards and vang, spreading a sail like a schooner's foresail, only it brails to the mast when furled. The sail is much taller than the tall smokestack aft. A long row of cabins with skylights on the hurricane deck, runs above the

'tween decks, for she carries passengers as well as freight – when she gets a chance. The passenger business is pretty well shot. She has none for this trip. She is strung around with flagpoles, but her most remarkable feature is the pair of wooden arches, a hundred feet in span, rising ten feet above the upper deck, and supported on eleven stout stanchions. They are supposed to truss her together and keep her from breaking her back. Pharaoh had the same idea for the ships of ancient Egypt, so the tomb carvings show.

Down to this quaint survival of the wooden age in steam – quaint even in 1897 – comes a messenger from “the office.” He is a captain himself, and he tries to be nonchalant when he asks Capt. Alex. Gillies, of the *Idaho*, when he is going to pull out.

“She’s not going up the lake tonight,” says Capt. Gillies.

“Well, that’s up to you,” says the messenger. “All I was told to do was to give you this paper. But they said, well, they said if you didn’t take her up the lake there was them that would.”

Neither captain said another word. Soon afterwards the *Idaho* cast off her lines and ploughed out past Buffalo breakwater.

We have this bit of detail from Capt. John Williams himself, and he got it, years afterwards, from a haggard man at a meeting of lake captains in the old King Edward Hotel, before the skyscraper was built.

“Yes,” said this one, “I’m the man who carried poor Johnson his death warrant. I only did what I was told to do, but I don’t blame you if you won’t drink with me.” He called him Johnson. The papers gave the name of the captain of the *Idaho* as Alexander Gillies. Maybe Johnson was a nickname.

William Gill, mariner, of 137 Kent street, Rochester, told this story of what happened after the *Idaho* cast off her lines:

“There was a big sea, and before we had gone far she struck us pretty high, and we made little headway owing to the run of the waves. About midnight we were abreast of Long Point, with a bit of a moon peering from the deep black clouds and lighting up the big seas that were forever striking us. The wind, which had been southerly in Buffalo, kept hauling round until it blew dead down the lake, with a tremendous run of sea. She was making considerable water. From the sound of the waves I thought we were out of our course and near a reef.

“When we were about fourteen miles west of the Point the Old Man decided to run back. We were all glad when he told the first mate, and the engines were let out. Her head commenced to turn lakewards. When it pointed diagonally to the seas a big roller struck us forward, and swept us fore and aft. I heard some poor beggars howling above the gale as they were swept overboard, but I was too busy holding on to the rail, to count how many went.

“And there we were, rolling rails under in the trough of the sea, and we couldn’t get her out of it. Everybody was ordered below to the pumps, for the water was coming into the engine

room fast. It was bitter cold, but we worked so hard that we had to strip to shirts and pants. It was let those fires be drowned and be drowned ourselves.

“We worked like devils and got the water down an inch. Then one pump broke and we worked all the harder on the other. In about an hour after we started to go about the other pump clogged.

“‘Get the fire buckets!’ ordered the captain and we worked for another half hour, bailing with the buckets. The water rose and rose. It made a dark line around the fires and the ashes and cinders commenced to sizzle. The firemen heaped on the coals, to keep the fire-beds hot. The dark line got wider, and closed in, and the red coals hissed and got black, and steam filled the hold. In another fifteen minutes the fires were out and we were bailing away in the darkness of despair, with the ship rolling in the trough, on her beams’ ends now and again. All at once we felt her stern dip, and we threw down our buckets and rushed from where we were bailing, down in the water in the hold, to the ladder.

“The hatch was small, and we fought each other in getting out of it. One fellow was killed, and some were crushed down and drowned in the hold. When I got on deck her stern was under and her bows in the air. I saw the second mate, Louis Laforce, jump into the main rigging – the *Idaho* had only one mast – and I followed him. She went down, stern first, just as I reached the cross-trees. The water was not very deep, and she settled down on an even keel and then listed over to starboard. We hung on to the spar, about ten feet above the level of the water, drenched by the seas, and rain. It was sleeting some, too.

“The seas broke continually over the cross-trees. We got so numb we couldn’t hold on, and we locked our arms round the spar and let them freeze into 'position. I calculated that it was about three o’clock when she went down. The four hours till daylight seemed like a week. But at last a pale blue light glinted from the clouds on the horizon, and the day slowly dawned on the freckled seas – green and yellow and grey and white. I saw lots of wreckage, in small pieces, but never a one of the nineteen fellows I shipped with in Buffalo. When I followed the mate into the rigging I thought I would find a crowd there, but only three reached the cross-trees.

“As it grew quite light the mate commenced to laugh as he pointed away up the lake to a smudge of smoke. We watched and watched, and a steamer hove in sight. Oh, how we longed for her! But she passed without noticing us, leaving us more benumbed and chilled and helpless than before.

“Again we saw a smoke smudge, and a dot, and an on-coming steamer, and again we were left more dulled and numbed and helpless than before. We didn’t say anything.

“It grew on towards, eleven o’clock. I should say, and I hung there, scarcely feeling the cold and the water, when the mate shouted. I looked around and saw a big steel steamer close to us, rolling around like a little skiff. Now her propellers twirled high in the air, and her bows would sink in a white smother. Again she would soar up half her length, and lurch towards us, showing her shining decks one time and broad white bottom the next. There was no doubt about

it. She was coming toward us, and would save us!

“It was the *Mariposa*, Captain Frank D. Root. He was a smart man, that captain. First he lowered a boat. It was smashed into kindling wood. Then he steamed past us, close, and hove lines, but he might as well have been on the south shore, for we couldn’t budge.

“Never mind, we’ll take you off!” Root bawled from the bridge, as the *Mariposa* forged past.

“Then he did the riskiest thing ever a steamboat captain did. He bore down square for us, and then put his wheel hard over, so that our spar would foul his rail. He missed us, and lucky for him and us that it was the far side, for if he had come too close he might have taken the bottom out of his own vessel.

“Then he made for us again. The spar bumped along his forward rail, and brave fellows leaned over, grasped us, and tore us from where we had frozen on to the spar. We were saved!”

We shall be back to the *Straubensee* next week.

[Transcribed G.D.M. Sept. 10, 1976.]

## **PASSING HAILS**

On The Bridge - In The Med. - “Darn That Hat!”

We get some good snatches of letters home at the Shellbacks weekly luncheons at the Ellen Bradley Grill, for instance this one from Paul McLaughlin, who is making Mussolini sick of his Mare Nostrum.

“It was the first time most of us had ever been in action in a surface engagement and it was really impressive. On Wednesday morning at about ten o’clock we received a report that the Italians were about seventy miles away, but did not think much of it as we had often before had similar reports of Mussolini’s navy, only to find them vanished when we arrive, at the spot.

### **The blank and the blanket**

“We were the leading cruiser of the flotilla, which included the — ; and steaming full speed ahead in line abreast, we looked very imposing. The Italians were sighted at noon, and a few minutes later their larger ships opened fire. The — had been left hopelessly astern, and until we managed to run into extreme range, were rather pushed about a bit. The —, lying off our starboard beam, was hit twice during the engagement, but we escaped unscathed. The Italian shells fell all around us, but the fleet was very lucky, and even the shells that whistled overhead crashed into the sea, between cruisers, always close, sometimes straddling, but seldom hitting.

### **“Lucky break!”**

“As you know, my usual action station is in the after control tower, near the stern, but owing to the departure of our four senior midshipmen to write their exams to become subs, our R.N. sub was removed from the bridge. The flying officer replaced him, but he was needed for

his aircraft, and so I was called up to the bridge at the last moment to be officer of the watch during the fight. There were only the Captain, the navigating officer and myself on the bridge, besides the two signalmen and the telephone operators. When all twelve six-inch guns go off together, it really staggers you, and my tin helmet was blown off continuously until I finally threw it away.

“It was a lucky break for me to be on the bridge then as there were only three officers in all, and we had a perfect view of the fall of shot, and the whole display.

“By 12.30 we could see from the bridge the bridge and superstructure of the eight-inch cruisers and of the two battleships, and the funnels of the cruisers and destroyers. It was an extremely long engagement, fifty minutes of continuous firing and dodging before the Italians had given up, turned away, and dropped over the horizon. The ordinary eight-inch shells seemed to whistle and scream as they passed, but the big projectiles from the fifteen-inch guns of the Italian battleships really thumped through the air, and thank God they never landed.

“And it was our second and third salvos that hit the cruiser before she burst into flames, although the — pounded her long after we were outranged.

“Later in the day our F.A.A. planes torpedoed the enemy and did still more damage, and so between that battle and last month’s raid on Taranto, I think we can just about say good-bye to the Italians for this war – at sea, anyway, maybe.

### **Couldn’t hit the *Ark*.**

“In the afternoon the fleet was bombed again by the Wop’s air force, but as usual, they didn’t hit anything, although they smothered the *Ark Royal* in bombs, just astern of us. Between this great race and my boarding trip last week, I have had an extremely busy month, but have enjoyed it a lot.

“P.S. I got back to the after tower from the bridge in time for the bombs. For about thirty-hours I was stone deaf and [...] hear fire gongs, fall of shot, hooters, cease fire bells, gunfire all rolled into one.”

### **Luring us to steamer days.**

Sir, – I was much interested lately in the suggestion of one of you of your correspondents that it would be well if some information were forthcoming in regard to many of the old barges and propellers as they were often termed which plowed the waters of our Great Lakes during the past 70 years or so.

As a boy living on Toronto Island for the summer months of 1880 to 1885, I used to watch with interest their coming and going, to and fro, in fair and stormy weather and had a long list of at least their names. Some I have forgotten, but these I recall: The *Armenia*, *Cuba*, *California* lost on Lake Superior, *Persia*, commanded by Capt. Scott and arriving in Toronto harbor every Sunday at midnight with a whistle like the last trump; *Calabria*, a large freight carrier, painted grey, the *Lake Michigan*, also a flight boat, *Dromedary*, *W.A. Haskell* plowing a

furrow from Chicago to Ogdensburg, and being rather an unusual boat, having two smoke stacks astern instead of the usual one. She came to Toronto only occasionally. There was one called *Dominion*, a freight boat. The *Zeeland* wrecked off the port of Grafton, the *Resolute* wrecked off the west shore of Toronto Island, subsequently raised and named *Ralph*. The *Asia* wrecked in Georgian Bay, and many others. They were all small sized boats to suit the canals of those days. There was I believe a *Lake Ontario* but I seldom saw her, and a *Little Armenia* which ran for a time from Toronto to Grimsby about 1883. The *Bickerdike* came on the scene a few years later; she was a larger boat than any of the ones I have mentioned.

Of the sidewheel boats, their name was legion, *Chicora*, *City of Toronto*, *Rothsay*, *Southern Belle*, the last named thus, after being raised from her collision on the boilers of the old *Monarch* – previous to that she was always *Rothsay Castle*. Of the old Richelieu line, the following kept the water boiling between Toronto and Montreal: *Passport*, the oldest, *Corsican*, *Algerian*, *Sparton*, *Corinthian*, the thunder of whose paddle wheels would be heard, on a still morning, long before the boat appeared herself. There were others, but I cannot recall them.

May we hear more of these old boats, as well as the “Schooner Days” of which we never tire and which in their day and generation led the way on the Great Lakes.

– A. R. GILMOR.