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Schooner Days, DII (502)
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PRIDE OF LAKE HURON BRIDE OF THE SEA

BUFFALO ceased to be much of a sailing vessel port about the turn of the century, though the occasional windjammer came in, with the aid of harbor tugs, long after the big new breakwater was constructed. The last sailing vessel to enter the port was the big Canadian schooner *Sephie*, and she came in under canvas, disdaining the aid of tugs or pilots, for the old man walking her cabin top knew *Buffalo* like a book and the *Sephie* like his own child. Peter J. McPhail had knocked away the dog-shores at her launching, twenty-eight years before, and he took her into *Buffalo* harbor like a proud father coming up the aisle with his daughter on his arm and Mendelssohn in the air.

It was indeed a wedding journey. The *Sephie*, last of a long line of freshwater schooners born on Lake Huron under the high hill where Goderich faces the west wind, was becoming the bride of that rough and tough old polygamist, the cold sail-sea.

It was nineteen-seventeen and wartime. Then, as now, tonnage was at a premium. The subs had destroyed half the ships of the world. In Saint John, New Brunswick, they were getting \$5,000 for worn-out old jakes that had been built for \$500 thirty years before. The demand spread to the lakes, and swept away most of the old-timers still afloat. Few of them ever got to the sea. None ever came back. Some, like the old Keewatin, ex-Paragon, from Lake Ontario, and the *Sephie*, stood the uprooting well. It took a Gulf of Mexico hurricane to finish the *Paragon's* sixty-five-year life. Schooner Days never heard exactly what happened to the *Sephie*, but she got to salt water all right, and was bought by an Englishman or Channel Islander and re-rigged as a barquentine. Her Canadian schooner rig, three tall masts with long topmasts and a squaresail yard for a raffee, was taken out of her in Buffalo, so that she could go down the Erie canal without sweeping away the bridges. Probably her spars went with her on deck, and were re-stepped in New York, and got her over to the other side. To change her to barquentine rig would only necessitate re-rigging the foremast and adding two or three yards for additional square sails – upper and lower topsail, and topgallant-sail. She would carry a square foresail or fore course on the yard which had earlier spread her double raffee. On the lakes she had four jibs, three lower sails and three gafftopsails, spread by booms and gaffs, and the three-cornered raffee peculiar to our waters. She seems to have done well under the square rig on the other side of the Atlantic.

The *Sephie* was the last schooner of any size built in Goderich, or for that matter on the Canadian side of the Great Lakes. She was launched in 1889, and a Goderich friend of schooners and Schooner, Days supplies these details. Dominion Day, which we had at the beginning of this week, was the *Sephie's* birthday, for she was launched on the first of July, fifty-two years ago.

“In the year 1889 Mr. Williams, of Goderich, commissioned Wm. Marlton, the well known builder there, to build a schooner. She was designed to be 145 x 27 x 10 x 12 draft, about 266 tons. Peter J. McPhail was superintendent of the job and on July 1st she was ready for launching.

“She was built on the dock at Goderich in front of Lee’s, just to the west of the flour mill. On the official day W.W. Macvicar, who was always interested in orchestration, was amazed to see and hear a large band arrayed in long linen dusters parading the streets of Goderich. When they first came into view, headed by Bill Mornay, a six-foot-four butcher, they were marching to the tuck of the drum. Down the street they went, down the hill, around the corner and out onto the dock. Mornay wheeled his band, formed them in a large circle, raised his baton, and waited for the signal.

“In the meantime Peter McPhail had been waiting, with a maul in his hand ready to knock the dogshores away. At the signal Miss Sephie Williams, the owner’s daughter, christened the boat, McPhail hit the holding blocks and Mornay brought down his baton. The tune of ‘Rule Britannia!’ burst forth.

“Britannia Rules the Waves,” but what music! None of the band could play, for each instrument was attached to a kazoo. It was sufficient, however, to give the new schooner a start, and she slid gracefully over the side of the dock, took a tremendous list to port, righted herself and rode proudly on the waters of the Maitland River, broad-side-launched.

“Mooring lines which had been attached in readiness were seized by the enthusiastic onlookers and she was brought to the dock, and the owner and builders stepped on board, accompanied by Miss Williams, for whom the boat was named. Alex. Pontine, the caulker, had done his work well. She was tight as a bottle.

“She was a centreboarder and 3-masted. She was a beautiful model, fast and neat, and was used mostly in the lumber trade between Spanish River and Goderich, although she also handled lumber for Sarnia and downriver ports.

“Her first captain was Bill McKenzie, of Goderich, followed by John McLean, also of Goderich, and Jim Green. Later she was under Duncan McLeod, of Kincardine, and her last skipper was Hugh Mc-Kinnon, often known as ‘Howling Hughie’ or ‘Squealing Hughie.’

Capt McKinnon was an excellent seaman with a high-pitched voice and acrid humor. His aphorism on the youth of his succeeding generation is still cherished along the Huron shore:

“Ay – learn to drink and learn to chew,
Learn to curse till all is blue,
Lose your pants in Buffalo –
And call yourself a sailor!”

Sometimes his humor bounced back on him, though he was well-liked and highly respected. When he had Black Dan Macdonald for mate in the little *Ariel* they were groping their way in a light air and pitch darkness with Hughie at the helm and Black Dan keeping the

lookout, for they were somewhere near Half Moon Island.

“Can ye no see the Hawf Mune yet, Black Dan?” Hugh would call forward, and Black Dan would hail back, “Neither the Hawf Mune, Hughie, nor yet the first quarter,” till suddenly the centre-board grated and the *Ariel*'s jibboom began parting the boughs of the trees on the island and showering their leaves in the forecastle head.

“Ecod, Hughie,” hailed Black Dan, beating his superior to the draw, “if it's not the Hawf Mune ye've hut it's the Fu' Mune hersel', an' ye've made a bullseye!”

“In 1917 there was a shortage of shipping on the Atlantic seaboard and she, still in good condition after 28 years' service, was sold down to salt water. Peter McPhail was resident at Sarnia at that time, and he was asked to ship in her to take her to Buffalo, as he had sailed in her many different years during her life.

“It was snowing and- blowing when she left Sarnia that November, but when they reached the eastern end of Lake Erie the wind shifted to the west. Peter, knowing the Buffalo harbor well, sailed her in with the fair wind, and so said goodbye to the *Sephie*, that he had loved since her keel blocks were laid down.”

The *Sephie* was one of the few sailing vessels to come through the Great Gale of Nov. 9th, 1913, which sent so many lake steamers to the bottom and left widows and orphans from Duluth to Detroit. Maitland Cemetery, on the hill in Goderich, back of the *Sephie*'s launching place, has a big granite monument simply inscribed “SAILORS,” above a dozen plain headstones and footstones, marking the last resting place of unidentified victims of that storm's fury. These were washed in on the shores of Goderich harbor alone. Sailing vessels were few on the Upper Lakes in 1913, and of these few most were in port when the long-brooding storm broke. Indians tell how for two days before the fatal 9th the wild things of the woods, large and small, moose and rabbits, bears and mice, kept trekking in a fearful truce from the tali timbers to the open spaces or thickets of scrub where no trees could fall on them. They knew what was coming.

The *Sephie* was trading north that season, for in June one morning we had seen her in the West Neebish channel near the Soo. On the night of the 9th she made the shelter of Smith's Bay, in Manitoulin Island, laden with cedar posts or sawn lumber. She let go both anchors and hung on like grim death. Foot by foot the force of the hurricane shoved her back on the beach until she touched. In the sheltered cove she had chosen the sea could not run high, but the straining she got waterlogged her. Two days after the gale broke – she had been given up for lost with all hands – Capt. James McCannel, of the C.P.R. steamer *Assiniboia*, reported passing her off Cove Island, deep in the water but all well on board, in the tow of a tug which had pulled her off the bottom. Her cargo kept her afloat, and she was repaired and saw four years more service on fresh water and an unknown number on salt.

Once, on an unknown date but early in her career, the *Sephie* missed the pier at Kincardine, knocked her jibboom out and drove sidewise into the breakers, much as the

Singapore and the *Ann Maria* did, when they broke their backs at the same spot. The *Sephie* was lumber laden, and she fell over on her side on the shelf of the bottom, but did not capsize. She was refloated by jettisoning some of her lumber cargo. She was always a lucky vessel.

Her model, which may be taken as the latest for any Canadian laker of over 100-foot length, shows the strong influence of the American design which had proved successful on the Upper Lakes, especially in the lumber trade, for which she was intended. She was sharp and fine-ended, but wide on deck, two feet wider than the “Old Canallers” of Lake Ontario of the same length. This enabled her to carry a large deckload and saved time loading and unloading. She was not deep in the hold – 10 feet 1 inch, officially – and the 12 feet draft attributed to her may be questioned. Her stern, carried out clear of the rudder-stock before turning up to the taffrail, was an American improvement on the older Canadian design, with its deeper transoms.

(Caption) ASHORE AT KINCARDINE IN HORSE-AND-BUGGY DAYS. THE SEPHIE loses her jib boom and some of her deckload.

(Caption) BEFORE SHE GOT HER SQUARESAIL YARD AND RAFFEE. THE SEPHIE standing up the St. Clair river on her way to Lake Superior.

(Caption) SHE HAD A SWEET SHEER AND WAS SHARP AND FAST. THE SEPHIE in Collins Inlet, with booms topped up for loading.