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Schooner Days, LIII (53)
by C.H.J. Snider

Gold Hunters

How many know that in the times of the Fortyniners, when San Francisco and fortunes were in the making, lake vessels left their fresh water homes with eager gold diggers from inland ports, and delivered them, months afterwards, at the Golden Gate? Here follows the frame of the story. Further details will be welcome.

"Don't you cry, Susanna,
Don't you cry for me,
For I'm off to Californy
With my banjo on my knee."

So sang the gay young blades of eighty years ago, the Fortyniners, victims of the gold bug, whose bite gave this continent a backdoor as brilliant as its front.

It was not sunshine, but gold dust, which "made" California, with its skyscraping cities. Before 1850 San Francisco was a shacktown, with one-plank sidewalks down its streets of sand. It had been a dump for hides, where New England ships picked up pelts from the western plains. Discovery of gold produced a rush thither, frantic and feverish, but leisurely as Rodin's *Le Penseur* compared with modern travel. It is possible now to go from London to San Francisco in ten days. Fortyniners with bushy whiskers, red flannel shirts, and blazing ambition, sometimes took ten months. It was faster to beat around Cape Horn in the old wooden sailing ships than to plod across the United States by railway, stage coach, covered waggon, burro, and shanks' mare, through mountains, deserts, plains, bandits, and bad Indians.

The Great Lakes district, then still in the process of pioneer enterprise, heard the clink of the nugget and the seductive sizzle of the dust, and packed up for California. W. A. Adair, of Cleveland, Ohio, fitted out a vessel to catch the flood tide of fortune. In keeping with the discovery of the precious metal she was named *Eureka*, which in classic Greek corresponds to the modern "gotcha" and the ancient "I-have-found-it."

There was another *Eureka* on the lakes later on. a two-masted schooner owned in Toronto by Giles and Sylvester in 1864. This *Eureka* was built in Wilson, N. Y., on the far side of the lake, in 1858. She was 102 feet long, 24 feet beam and 9 ft., 6 ins. deep in the hold and measured 193 tons. Among other adventures, she served as a training ship and patrol vessel for the Volunteer Naval Brigade formed here by Capt. McMaster, at what time tension over the Trent affair, the uncertainties of the American Civil War, and the threat of the Fenian Raid, made it look as though Canada might have need of hearts of oak.

Some books speak of the Cleveland *Eureka* as a schooner also, but she was a barquentine. She was of the type of Great Lakes vessel common in her day and later; about 130 feet long, shallow, blunt-ended, with three masts, fore-and-aft rigged on the main and mizzen, and square

rigged forward.

Mr. Adair loaded his *Eureka* with knock-down houses, picks and shovels, pans and provisions, and passengers. Fifty-nine men, women and children found accommodation in the wooden pens or rough shelves built in her hold above the cargo. They had the run of the deck in fine weather, and there were a few choice berths in the cabin for gold-diggers de luxe.

They all sailed for California by way of Lake Erie, the Welland Canal, Lake Ontario, and the St. Lawrence. They reached Quebec in October and left there in November and steered down the Atlantic, past the West Indies, across the equator, and down the east coast of South America. They either wormed through the Straits of Magellan or rounded Cape Horn, both of them still the terror of steel sailing ships of ten times the *Eureka's* tonnage. Next they worked up the west coast of South America and Mexico, finally sailing up the Golden Gate and anchoring off San Francisco, in a bay crowded with sailing ships. They started in 1849 and got there in 1850, seven months on the voyage.

This was truly an epic trip for the inland argonauts – though everything is either "epic" in these depressed days, or else it is a "saga" – but there was no Bret Harte to immortalize it.

Encouraged by the success of Mr. Adair's venture, in the following year, 1850, the propeller *Ontario* left Buffalo for California, following in the *Eureka's* wake with another crowd of gold hunters. The *Ontario's* venture was a notable one for a shoal draft lake vessel, held together with huge wooden arches. But it was less noteworthy than the *Eureka's*, for the *Ontario* had steam power, with sails as auxiliaries, but the *Eureka* was entirely dependent upon the winds of heaven.

Several steamers named *Ontario* have plied on the Great Lakes, and at this time the American Line, between Toronto, Kingston and Oswego, consisted of the *Cataract*, *Bay State*, *Northerner* and *Ontario*. The latter may have been the propeller which went to California. She was running on Lake Ontario during the American civil war, so if she went to the gold coast she came back safely.

Emphasizing the appeal of the gold rush to the imagination of lake mariners is the name *Goldhunter*, borne by two lake schooners. One was a fore-and-after hailing from Picton. She was built at Milford or Black Creek by John Tate in 1862, and was owned by James H. Hickman of Toronto in 1874. She was 114 feet long, 24 feet beam, 10 feet deep in the hold, and measured 219 tons. Capt. Bob Shanks sailed her in 1871.

The other *Goldhunter* was a large American schooner of 386 tons, built by Quayle and Martin in 1856 in Cleveland and owned by Wm. Mather of Chicago, whence she hailed. She often carried grain to Collingwood in 18,000 bushel lots.