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**By C.H.J. Snider**

## **LAKE FISHBOATS TYPE-OF-THEIR-OWN FISHED ALL WINTER**

### **STANLEY BABY TO THE SHELLBACKS**

THE SHELLBACKS sang Rule Britannia with their chanties at the meeting in the Ellen Bradley Grill Wednesday, for the war news was good. And the yarn of the day was the best of the season yet.

It was spun by Stanley Baby, who is an enthusiastic admirer of the sailing fishboat, which survives in a few yachts, and Mr. Baby has one of them. She used to flourish in hundreds, on all five of the Great Lakes.

“As handy as a fishboat; why, she’d tack under a reefed foresail.” That used to be the lake sailor’s highest encomium for a big lake schooner of particularly fine performance. It was praise indeed.

Yachtsmen recognized the fish-boat’s merits, and forty years ago yachts were built on their lines. J. H. McCaffrey’s big black *Carlotta*, 40 feet long, was the finest we had in Toronto. The National Yacht Club brought down a fleet of five Collingwood skiffs in one season. In addition there was the *Herring Gull*, and the *Merry Mac* and W. J. Comerford’s *Tainui*, and the Clark brothers’ *Papoose*, and the *Elk* and the *Maybelle* and Fergus Kyle’s *Billy Kid*. And others.

They had the advantage of being able to go wherever a rowboat could row; two feet of water would float them. They were not expensive, they provided plenty of room for their inches, they were fast, except working to windward, and they were safe if properly handled.

They had to be sailed on the rigger, with someone always ready to let the foresheet and jib sheet run and get the ballast to windward. That needed more crew than a ballasted keel boat, where you could clear the sheet down and let her take it till the mast went out, the sale blew out of her. Two men could and did handle any “mackinaw,” as they were called down here. But a dozen men found room in one.

That sort of pleasure sailing went out as the motor car and auxiliary engine came in. There are a few macs or near macs, some of them just schooner-rigged lifeboats, around Toronto yet, and a revival is going on where pleasure boats of the “Collingwood skiff,” “Huron boat” and “Mackinaw boat” type are being built. '

### **THEY WERE ALL “MACS” TO US**

Because we thought they originated in the Straits of Mackinaw we called all our clinker-built two-masted craft of the fishboat type macs or mackinaws, whether they were sharp sterned like the Collingwood skiffs, square sterned like the true mackinaws, or with overhangs like the Huron boats. The preference here ran to the square stern and, straight stem or clipper bow. Mr.

Baby described one boat which he found an excellent sailor, and was a variant on the prevailing type. She had a flaring spoon bow and was designed to trim by the stern, so that she had a raking keel and was deeper aft than forward. Most macks were as level on the keel as a lifeboat.

Mr. Baby's talk was a most interesting one, and he is not responsible for any errors which may appear in this report of it. If there are any they are uninformed additions to what he said.

## **HUNDREDS OF FISHBOATS**

In their heyday their number was legion, the speaker said, and they flourished in sizable fleets until the advent of the first Great War. They constituted a factor of lake shipping for more than a century.

Their modeling was developed for the work in hand and for the waters of their plying. The ultimately developed types were fast, weatherly craft of beautiful lines, fore and aft rigged and most of them spared with two masts. Their foremasts were stepped well forward in cat-boat style and their mainmasts just aft of their centerboard boxes. They had long bowsprits and were often innocent of forestays and usually only one shroud or leg of rigging was sufficient staying for each side of each spar. They were shallow of draft and on occasion could be run ashore on sand beaches.

There were several hull types, Mr. Baby said, and those of Collingwood skiff model were probably the most numerous. He surmised that most of the lakes fish-boat models were evolved from English or Scotch types by British boat builders who had migrated to Canada. There were also flat-bottom pound net boats on Lake Erie and square-stern mackinaw boats that were chiefly used on Lake Huron, and sloop type that was used only on Lake Michigan, of Scandinavian origin, for the mainmast was almost amidships, as in the old long ships of the Vikings and Norse fish cutters yet.

The square sterned boats were not called mackinaws by the fishermen. That solecism arose with yachtsmen.

The lake fishing boats were picturesque in their numbers and in the manner of their faring; and they went unchallenged until about 1880 when steam tugs entered the Great Lakes fishing trade. The tugs could fish five or six miles of nets as compared with thousand-yard sets of their smaller sailing sisters; but the cost of their building and powering was disproportionately greater than the cost of equipping and operating the sailing craft. So the tugs did not at first make any great difference. Later they ousted a good part of the sailing fleet from Lake Erie waters, and eventually gasoline boats ousted both from all the lakes fishing grounds, and romance from the fishing industry.

## **JOLLY OLDTIMERS**

The old-time sailing fishermen, he said, were a jolly, hard-working, unaffected breed. Superb sailormen in their chosen calling, who loved to race and to test each others' seamanship, and who feared neither winds nor weather in their staunch, speedy fishboats; home-loving,

church-going, trustworthy, and respected members of their community.

William Watts, of Collingwood is credited with developing the Collingwood skiff type of boats to the greatest degree of excellence. He built a great many of them and his son, Frederick Watts, carries on the boat-building business that he established at Collingwood. The Watts principle of boat building was to build a half model, shape and mould it to perfected design; then scale it accurately and build the boat from the laid-down scale. The McGaw Brothers of Kincardine built many of the square-stern Lake Huron fish boats, but not as many or as famous ones as did Henry Marlton, of Goderich.

The Marlton boats, Mr. Baby said, were considered standard of strength, weatherly qualities and sailing ability. They were designed for a trade that took them many miles off shore on the "spine" which runs down Lake Huron, north and south, and often when they were beating back from their fishing grounds in the teeth of a snarling northeaster they needed all the excellence of build and design that their creator had lavished on them; and their crews blessed his handiwork as they battled fierce gales under close-reefed foresail and with two men steadily baling to keep their boat afloat.

Henry Marlton also built fine large clipper-bowed schooners, and he is said to be responsible for the innovation of the clipper bow or cutwater stem in fishboats. Originally all had plumb stems, with a rounded forefoot, and slightly raked sternposts, so that they were almost as long on the keel as on deck, and the rudder was hung outboard. Marlton also built fishboats with overhanging sterns, the rudder coming up through the transom. The *Belle Jean Anne*, built by the McGaw brothers in Kincardine was on the lines of the Marlton boats, cutwater stem and overhanging stern, but she was a distinct novelty. She had three masts, all of the same height, with a pole topmast on the main, on which she set a large lug topsail on a yard, crossing the topmast, like Breton fishermen used in the English Channel. And she had two centreboards, one ahead and the other abaft the mainmast.

Poletopmasts for racing kites were not unusual with the fishboats, but the *Belle Jean Anne* was the only three-master ever heard of, and the only fishboat with two centreboards.

## **BRONTE'S BIG FLEET**

The last of the big fleets of lakes, fish boats sailed out of Bronte on Lake Ontario. Mr. Baby knew a fleet of twenty-two there. Bronte men fished Lake Ontario in sailing craft for at least one hundred years. They were sturdy, courageous lakesmen who proved their mettle and their seamanship at once when they chose December 25th for the day of their annual fish-boat racing. Withal there were remarkably few mishaps or casualties amongst the sailing fishermen.

In its century of fishing history Bronte knew only of two losses of boats and the drowning of only four men. In the second of the two fatalities a Bronte boat foundered in a snow squall and no slightest trace of her or her crew ever has been found, although a fish boat always had much in her that would float – fish-boxes, oars, floorboards, and her spars of pine or spruce. Masts, gaffs and booms were, of course, solid. The bowsprit might be of oak or hickory, often

flat instead of round. It's only support was the long bob-stay, and it was usually well hogged down with the tension of this rigging. The jib was often set flying, although in later years it was sometimes hanked to a forestay.

It was the beach stone ballast, which had to be carried for the sake of stability, which made the Bronte boat sink. She had torn her jib, and had borrowed one from a neighbor. It was a little too large for her, and the luff was so long that the head of the sail hoisted block-and-block. The halliard probably jammed with the wet and the sleet. The jib was always considered an extra sail in a fishboat, and was the first to be taken in if she had to be shortened. Then the mainsail would be reefed, and last the foresail. Lake Huron and Georgian Bay boats – they ventured up to Lake Superior at times – would beat home against a full gale under a three-reefed foresail.

When this Bronte boat failed to reach the piers in the squall fishermen who had put in ahead of her close reefed their foresail and went back to look for her. They kept the lake for hours, cruising around where she had been, under this storm sail, but found nothing. When the gale died down they went out again and dragged the lake, but got no results, and they never found any trace of her in their nets. Two of the Gillam family of Bronte and some others were lost at this time.

Lake Erie once had ninety-seven fishing tugs. This was at the time the fisher cruiser *Petrel* was raising Cain with the fish poachers. The tugs had replaced or were replacing hundreds of sailing fishermen. Some of the Lake Erie sailing boats were smooth skinned or carvel built, which, as brother Roy insists, is the correct term. A few on Lake Huron were also, and probably the sloops on Lake Michigan.

But the great majority of fish boats were built like most rowboats, lap streaked or clinker-built, giving them great strength and lightness. It was their lightness which made them such good seaboats. They were always on top of the water, and their generous beam – about one-third of their length – and their high shear combined to make them buoyant in the roughest water. They were open, that is they had only a narrow strip of decking all round, with perhaps two feet of deck at the stern and maybe one-third of their length decked forward. Those that had trunk cabins were very few, and had been altered for some other purpose than fishing. Gen. U. S. Grant used such an altered fishboat in exploring Lake Superior, and some boats so cabined have made fair cruising yachts.

But the working fisherman had at most only a cuddy under the fore deck for shelter. He had to have a large, roomy cockpit to work in, and stow his gear and fish and ballast. The ballast was piled on each side of the centreboard box and had to be quickly accessible. It was usually shifted to the windward if the boat was beating against a fresh breeze.

This was a danger, for if she missed stays and got in irons, with all her ballast on the one side she might capsize and sink before she could gather way or the ballast be levelled up. That may have been a factor in the loss of the Gillams out of Bronte. With the jib halliard jammed,

their boat, out of control, may have had all her ballast to leeward.

The fishboats carried loose stone ballast, easily gathered on the beach. It could be thrown overboard to make weight for the fish if the haul was heavy enough. The gill nets were hauled over a roller in the stern, or in the quarter, if the boat was not square-sterned. The fish were extricated and tossed gasping into wide-topped wooden boxes or trays. The net, with its sinkers which held it to the bottom and its bobs which floated it like an upright wall, was coiled into other boxes. It usually had to be taken ashore for cleaning, drying and mending on the reels, but it could be reset immediately if in good shape. An anchor and buoy marked each end of it. The buoys were cedar logs, often split at one end, with a flat piece like an oar blade inserted and painted with the fisherman's name or a distinguishing color. These buoys are still to be seen in the lake, though the sailing fishboats have gone. The gas boats use the same nets and the same method of marking them.

On the Upper Lakes most fishing was done through the summer, the boats ranging far and sometimes salting down their whole season's catch at stations on the islands. On Lake Ontario, and at times on Lake Erie, they fished all through the winter, which in an open boat takes fortitude, plus fur pants. The great fishermen's regatta at Bronte used to be held at Christmas or on New Year's Day, with twenty or thirty boats competing, for the Bronte fleet would take on all comers. Leckie's (John Leckie, Limited, in Toronto), who for generations supplied sails, cordage and net twine to the industry, used to offer handsome prizes for the regatta.

Of the Lake Ontario fish boat builders, Mr. Baby mentions Robert Hall of Burlington Beach and the Dorland Bros, of Oakville and Bronte as amongst the best and most famous. He is the proud owner of one of the few true to type Collingwood skiffs that is known to be left on the Great Lakes. She is in measurement, rig and detail, one of William Watts' own models, built by Fred Watts. She was never used for fishing, but is an out-and-out fishboat in everything but the smell. As a matter of fact the lake boats, dealing only in fresh fish and freshwater, never had the fragrance of a Grand Banker or a Yarmouth trawler, which sometimes smell to heaven and the other place at the same time.

*(Caption) This lively lithograph of "C.W. GAUTHIER'S DUCK ISLAND FISHERIES" shows both the Lake Huron sailing fish boats and the tugs which were replacing them, and a steamer which marked the catch. These Duck Islands are at the head of Lake Huron. We also have Ducks, False and Main, on Lake Ontario.*

*(Caption) ITALCA, square-sterner Bronte fish boat built by Robt. Hall, Burlington, made an excellent yacht for Mr. Stanley Baby and his father, Capt. Baby, an old lake sailor from timber droghing times. ITALCA was afloat on Lake Simcoe, though much modified, up to last year. She was supposed to be 65 years old. ITALCA's deep heel or drag and her spoon bow were among fish boats. Her rig was typical.*