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Schooner Days DXCII (592)
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RUDDERLESS RIDE THROUGH SNOW OF BYGONE DECEMBER

Up in Kapuskasing there's a motor boat builder with a grey hair or two – that's from worrying over war time priorities, prices and precedents – and two sons serving his country, one overseas in the army and the other over more seas in the navy, and four nice girls, all married. T. H. Mitchell is his name. Forty years ago he was Capt. Harry Mitchell, lake skipper. Earlier than that he was "Teeter." We all had nicknames in the stonehooker trade, just as we all did at school, and as at school, most of us fought hard to avoid them and equally hard to retain them.

Harry Mitchell's first remembered appearance in lake life was in 1896, when he was seventeen and master of the 17-ton – certainly no more and possibly less – schooner *Minnie* of St. Kitts. She was so enrolled because St. Catharines was too long to spell out across her tiny transom; a sweet little thing, with four lower sails and no tophammer, a sharp clipper bow and regular schooner's stern, although she was not much over 30 feet in length.

She had been built for the fruit trade when the Niagara peninsula began to grow more than apples, and she was the first arrival in Toronto harbor in 1884 and again in 1885, although the "fruit" she then carried may have been orchard prunings for firewood.

She was too small for the stone trade, being only able to carry a toise and a quarter, cash value \$10 or \$11, but Harry Mitchell made a living out of her that way.



The KATIE ECCLES in the Bay of Quinte, 1923. Her foresail was black with age, ill fitting, reinforced with strain-bands, and she had lost her sheer, but her mainsail was new and good and it steered across the lake, as the story herewith tells. [Photo W. Metcalfe fonds, NMA.]

REMEMBER THE MAINE?

Before he was 21 he had sold the *Minnie* for a firecracker, she being blown up to represent the Maine at the Exhibition of 1898. With what he got for her he plunged upon a much larger venture, the standing keel sloop *Viking* of Port Dover, built for a fisherman on the Atlantic coast, with no takers. She ended her days in Whitby as a dejected stonehooker, being too deep for the close approach to the shore which was necessary, and hard to handle, because of her heavy rig.

Harry Mitchell had done well with her, however, with his aged father and a growing boy for crew, and sold her profitably and made another advance in the lake trade. He went out of stone, which was looked askance upon, and into general freighting, which had all the respectability which goes with “papers,” customs clearances, harbor tolls and tug bills. Coal was then the principal freight on Lake Ontario. There was a little grain still to be carried, and some lumber. There was always stone, sand and gravel to fall back upon, if one did not fall too hard.

BELLE OF THE BAY

The schooner young Capt. Mitchell bought and sailed was one of the prettiest ever built for Lake Ontario, the *Katie Eccles* of Lakeport. She suggested high school curls and party frocks. She had a sister, the *Blanche*, and a brother, the *Wm. Jamieson*, born at the same place, but she was the belle of the family.

Mill Point, later Deseronto, in the Bay of Quinte, was her place of building in 1877. She was 95 feet on deck, 24 feet beam and eight feet depth; 122 tons register; a little larger than the *Eliza White* of last week’s story, and 10 years younger. She was “getting on” when Capt. Mitchell bought her in 1907, but still carried her jaunty sheer, with a profile curved like a piece of melon. She was straight of stem and neat of quarter, tall sparred and fast, a great advance indeed upon the humble little ex-fruiter *Minnie* of St. Kitts, whose cargo she could swallow 20 times over. The *Katie Eccles* could carry 30 tons of coal.

And did. Capt. Mitchell had her for 15 years, and he took her wherever there was a dollar to be made, in grain, lumber, coal or stone. He worked her hard, for he had married and had a family to raise, as well as his parents to maintain.

One summer in 1922, returning home in his schooner yacht *Haswell*, with her cabin full of trophies from the Lake Yacht Racing Association regatta at Belleville, Commodore Aemilius Jarvis passed the *Katie Eccles* loading stone in the Bay of Quinte, near Twelve O’clock Point. For him the schooner was a sorry sight. She was by this time in her forties and had certainly lost the bloom of youth. Her springy sheer was gone, straightened out by years of heavy lading which had left her with scarred sides and sagging quarters. She was gaunt and grizzled, and the schoolgirl grace had faded like the roses of yesteryear. Ah, why cannot we all stay always young?

The contrast between the trim Herreshoff designed mahogany schooner yacht and the rusty fore-and-after was all the more poignant to Aemilius Jarvis because he had known the real

Katie Eccles, who gave the schooner her name, when she was a little girl looking forward to her first ball.

It was in the slack summer season in coal, and Capt. Mitchell, unlike his schooner, still in his prime, was thriftily filling up with a chance cargo of stone, raked from the Bay banks. His well worn purchase was still serviceable, and when the frost-nips of the fall sent coal freights up he got back into that trade.

LAST TRIP OF 'TWENTY-TWO

The afternoon of the 4th of December, 1922, saw the *Katie Eccles* sailing out of the almost deserted harbor of Oswego, with a last load of winter fuel for Canada. The once huge Oswego coal business had dwindled considerably with the dwindling sailing fleet (at this time there were only half a dozen schooners left) and there was no longer a single tug at Oswego, where once they would race out in procession to pick up tows. It was certainly late enough in the season for all navigation to fold up.

There was a good southwest breeze blowing, promising a quick run home, but when the *Katie Eccles* was five miles out, as the early dusk settled, her rudder dropped off. The stout triangular structure which had swung door-like on its pintles for forty-five years, through three hundred thousand miles of lake water, just dropped off and sank like a cast shoe. One moment she was obedient to her helm, the next she wandered off her course and kept wandering; the wheel which had brought her back so many millions of times spinning idly, with no result no matter which way it was turned.

It took some time to understand what had happened, for with the schooner loaded her rudder was out of sight under water, and darkness was setting in. By manipulating his sails, working one against the other, Capt. Mitchell got his vessel turned back towards Oswego. He could not make her head for the port, but she pointed for Mexico Bay, about five miles to leeward of it. There was no anchorage there, and no tug to come down for him. But in the lake she had lots of room and deep water, and Capt. Mitchell bravely resolved to let her run across for Canada while she had the southwest wind to drive her home.

The nearest Canadian soil was the False Duck islands off South Bay Point, the southeastern extremity of Prince Edward County. Under the False Ducks, or Timber Island inside of them, or in South Bay, she might find temporary shelter, as Commodore Yeo's fleet did in 1813; or she might even blow through to Kingston or the Bay of Quinte, whither she was actually bound. Headed this way she made better time, and although she sometimes would steer northeast and sometimes northwest, it began to look as though she was getting somewhere. The question remained whether she would fetch up east or west of the False Ducks, or right in the middle of them, which would be the end of all.

About 10 o'clock they got a snowstorm, very thick, with lots of wind. Capt. Mitchell found he could keep her to something like a course with the mainsail set and the sheet well slacked off, and that is how he steered her all the way across.

HOME LIGHT IN THE SNOW

Just at midnight they saw a light, as the snow lifted for a bit. They thought it was a steamboat, but it turned out to be the tall, bright light on Swetman Island in the False Ducks. They were glad when they recognized it, but still anxious about which side she was going to take, for the sea was now running high, and, rudderless and steered by her slacked off mainsail she made what they called “furihy weather” of it.

At the right time they cleared the snow out of the downhauled jibs and hoisted all three of them. This made her pay off to the northeast, which was the safe direction. Had she gone west of the light she would have struck on the Duckling Bar if close, or South Bay Point if wide – unless by a miracle she threaded the Traverse passage between them.

It was hard to tell just how close they were to the light. Sometimes it shut out completely, and when they would see it again it would look as though it was right on the bowsprit end, and again it would seem five miles away. But as they neared it looked as though in spite of all efforts she was going to go to the west of the light and pile up on the Duckling shoal, which tore the bottom out of the *Jura* and many another schooner. And there was nothing they could do to prevent it.

With half a mile to go, the wind struck down the shore more westerly, her head paid off, the light shone on the port bow, and hope revived.

CLOSE SCRAPING

How close they fetched the light they could not tell. One moment they thought she was going to pile up on the big round boulders immediately around the lighthouse. But the water on the northeast side of the light is bold, that is, deep, and that saved her, though she came very close. In the snow the light looked so close that Capt. Mitchell thought he could reach it with a heaving line – a hundred feet at most. But the light and the immediate danger were soon astern. They were now out of the heaviest of the sea. Then Timber Island, black and lightless, loomed up less than two miles away. They got the big anchor over the side, and overhauled a great quantity of chain, as the water is very deep off Timber.

“We kept the lead going,” said one who made this voyage, “and when we got fifteen fathom of water we pulled off the headsails and hauled aft the mainsail. Well, she rounded to as if she had her rudder, and down went the pick!

“We gave her more chain, till it seemed a good lead. Just as we were lowering the sails, there right over our stern was Timber Island, all covered with snowy woods.”

It was not yet the end of the day for the *Katie Eccles*, though it was past midnight, and two bells in the graveyard watch – one o’clock in the morning – when the weary crew gathered aft in the galley-warmed cabin for a bite of lunch. What happened afterward will be told next week.