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Schooner Days DCIII (603)
By C.H.J. Snider

SUMMER TRIP TO SWAN CREEK

*The Sailor Who Knew He'd be Drowned – Abigail Becker's Home – Buffalo
American War – As Told By a Lady Who Grows Geraniums*

THERE'S a house in Stella, the tiny capital of Amherst Island, to which Schooner Days cheerfully awards the championship for geraniums for Hastings County. In the neighboring County of Prince Edward, on the road to Cherry Valley, there's another house, a farmhouse, which always has a gorgeous display of geraniums in the window, and the model of the schooner *Picton* in the parlor. This is the home of Mrs. Sarah Rorke. With two young and industrious assistants Mrs. Rorke runs a thrifty farm, keeps up a beautiful home – and grows geraniums which merit medals, all the year round.

The geranium lady is a sailor's daughter and a sailor's sister and a sailor's wife. Her father, Leroy Spafford, was coxswain of the Point Traverse lifeboat; her brother, Marshall, sailed in most of the Prince Edward County schooners, and her husband, Edward Rorke, who died some years ago, was mate in many American and Canadian vessels – notably the *Picton* aforesaid.

WORLD TOUR ON PLATES

One of Mrs. Rorke's many treasures is a dinner set, presented on the occasion of their marriage by Capt. Frank McMaster of the *Picton* with whom Edward Rorke sailed many years. The set is decorated with the famous buildings of the world in the gay nineties, Canada and China – both represented along with Britain, France, Germany and the United States.

Apart from family ties Mrs. Rorke has a lifelong love for ships and sails, and can steer as good a trick at the wheel and spin as good a yarn as any lakesman. What follows is what was told in her parlor one evening recently while airplanes droned overhead from the Prince Edward airfields, and practice bombs plopped softly on the water targets which surround the peninsula.

The story begins and ends in Buffalo harbor. The year 1898. somewhere along the first of June. I was making a six-weeks' visit with my husband, who was then my mate, and my father-in-law, Capt. Oliver Cromwell Wilcox, who was captain of the three-masted schooner *L. S. Hammond* of Ogdensburg. Capt. Wilcox had an ancestor who fought and was wounded in the revolution in England, when King Charles lost his kingdom and his head. The *L. S. Hammond* was a stately looking vessel with white top and grey bottom. With a trunk cabin, and she was a good swift sailer, better perhaps than the gilded *Sovereign of the Seas* which cost the Stewart king his crown through the Ship Money Tax. She was owned by Capt. Wilcox and John Hammond of Ogdensburg, where the red Oswegatchie River mingles with the blue and green of the St. Lawrence. She was named after Mr. Hammond's daughter.

As I came out on the deck this morning the captain was sitting on the cabin top smoking. He was a great smoker and a grand man.

I remember saying to him, "Has the air not a peculiar feeling, weird and damp? I imagine we are going to have a storm." He said, "It's a pity you are not a man, you would make a good sailor. You are always studying the weather. I believe we are in for something."

Shortly after he made this reply I asked, "Are we going out?" He answered, "Yes, soon as the tug gets back."

"Will the *Dobbie* go too?" He said, "I guess so."

THE CONSORT

The *Thomas Dobbie* was a big bluff-bowed two-master, with spars so plumb they seemed to rake forward. She was owned in Oswego and often traded in company with the *Hammond*, particularly when part of the voyage was in tow.

I went over to the rail and gave a look at the sky and up the lake. The sky had red angry streaks running across it. The rising sun tried to peep through, but failed.

After breakfast I came on deck again and saw the tug was alongside and our crew were busy getting ready to go out.

The tug towed us outside the piers and let go and went back for the *Dobbie*. It also pulled her outside the piers after us, both vessels making sail for the voyage to Toledo at the far end of the lake.

The *Dobbie* then had her fore-sail and stay-sail up. The *Hammond* had her fore-sail nearly up, but not taut yet, and her stay-sail and one jib set.

Then we heard it coming. It sounded like a hundred trotting horses. When it struck the *Hammond* she careened over nearly to the water's level, but she righted. Every sail came down like clockwork. But the poor old *Dobbie*! It tore her fore-sail to ribbons, the rending sounding like one peal of thunder after another! The tug had not let go of her yet. So, as she was helpless without her foresail, it towed her back inside the harbor. But when the *Hammond* came around they pulled on her foresail again and one jib and I heard the captain say, "Put her over for Port Colborne."

I have seen many high seas, but never such tearing and climbing as there was in this corner of Lake Erie. They pounded like demons over the deck.

I climbed up in the captain's chair in the main hatch and hung on to a rope near the main mast until the captain put me down with my mother-in-law in the cabin, and fastened the door. Before he got it closed one sea dashed down and almost flooded the galley.

It did not seem many minutes, although it was actually one hour or two, before we felt the vessel quit jumping. It was still, and they let us out, and there we were in Port Colborne piers. A passenger steamer came rolling in and the sick people looked as if they did not care to

live much longer.

HOME OF CANADA'S GRACE DARLING

The wind hauled around and the sea seemed not running quite so high, so the captain said he would “try for up the lake.” The Port Colborne tug pulled us outside again and let go, and under very short canvas we started up Lake Erie. But we had to run under Long Point when we got that far, forty-five miles from Port Colborne. This is a long narrow stretch of land running out into the lake from Canada’s shore, with the little town of Port Dover nestling in the hollow of the bank.

The waste land was used then for a deer park. You remember Abigail Becker, who saved the crew of the schooner *Conductor* from death on Long Point? “The wind, the wind where Eric plunged, blew, blew, nor’east, from land to land?” Amanda Jones’ poem about that great woman Abigail used to thrill us in the High School reader. We could see the ruins of Trapper Becker’s hut. It reminded me of the little old log cabin in the lane. The chimney was falling down and the door was caving in, and the roof let in the sunshine and rain.

Did it ever blow that night! The sailors climbed in the sails and I slept there for it was dry on the deck. We were around a little curve in the small peninsula. The schooner had out the two anchors. We seemed as safe as in our own beds, except for the heave of the waters. We were there all night and the next day, until about five o’clock in the afternoon. The storm abated then and we got under way for Toledo.

KNEW HIS LAST SUNRISE

Early the next morning, while going quietly up the lake, one of the men spoke to the captain, saying, “Captain, I believe I am going to be drowned to-day.” The captain said, “What makes you think that?” He replied, “I have a presentment that I shall be drowned to-day.” Then he turned and walked forward. The captain said, “He has imaginations.” The wind was aft and blowing with jerky puffs. The mate called the men up to reef the mainsail and foresail. The imaginative young fellow, who said that he was going to be drowned, was the first to jump up on the main boom. I do not know how it was done, but that boom jibed with a sudden jerk and swung out its sheet’s length, and the boy went with it, the jolt throwing him into the lake. He disappeared instantly. They lowered the small boat from the davits on the stern, and the schooner came about, but we never saw him again. It made a gloom aboard that hung over us all the way up the lake.

SORROWS OF SWAN CREEK

As we neared the mouth of the river Maumee, the tug *Squink* came out and towed us in. It was very wonderful gliding in and out of those numerous islands at the western end of Lake Erie. They pulled us up alongside the piers and then left us.

They removed half of the load. I can’t remember what the load was. I think grain or salt. Then changing from one spile to another, they shifted the schooner up Swan Creek, right under

the city workhouse, and finished unloading it there. We spent about three days doing it.

Swan Creek sounds beautiful, but it was a ghastly misery at this time. The workhouse inmates were treated as though they were criminals, each wearing a black and yellow uniform to keep him from escaping, one poor devil did get away. They found his wasp-like garb hidden in the bushes, and suspected some of the sailors of finding him clothes from their own scanty wardrobe to make his escape in, but they could not prove anything.

There were little rafts with small huts built on them, and you could see what it meant to be hungry and poor. In one hut, a woman sat with her head hanging out of a hole, for a window, and a baby cried all day. An official went to see what was the matter, and found the mother was dead. He took the poor little babe away.

FOUR ON A SILVER SEA

We came out from Toledo light, and the same tug, *Squink*, towed out four vessels, the *L. S. Hammond*, another three-master, the *Madeline Downey*, with her bewhiskered captain, the *C. G. Houghton*, Capt. Murney Ackerman, and the *Dobbie*. The tug towed us all the way to Detroit with all their sails furled. It was the most beautiful moonlight night I ever saw. The schooners' lights showed red and green as they glided through the quiet river amongst those islands. The *Hammond* loaded there for Buffalo.

On Sunday we sailed down the Detroit River. I remember seeing the steam barge *Resolute* from Deseronto, Capt. Gillen. The trip down was pretty fast and we got down in the night.

BUFFALO WELCOMES THE THIRTEENTH

That was the year of the Spanish-American War. It was just over. The next morning I was standing talking to my husband, when the City of Buffalo gave the salute to the famous Thirteenth Regiment on its return. The noise was terrific. I could not hear my own voice. All the whistles of fire-tugs, factories, church bells filled the air. I thought of the last trumpet sounding and the resurrection when the grave gives up its dead. I was waiting for my train to go out when the 13th Regiment came in. Six hundred had gone to war and only one hundred came back.

I always remember that six weeks' trip in the *L. S. Hammond*. The storm, the drowning man, the peaceful tow up the river and all things that occurred during my stay on board. Captain, mate and most of the crew, I knew them so well. In addition to Capt. Wilcox and Mrs. Wilcox, my husband's mother, and my husband himself, mate of the vessel, there was Jack Peters, and Andy McGee, the tall fellow, and the other Andy, whose thumb was bitten by a bat, and the boy who "had imaginations" and said he was going to be drowned. They have all passed the lights of the pier and gone over the Great Divide.

(Caption) SCHOONER MATE. A fine picture of a lake mate of last century, typical of the

time and setting when schooner caps and heavy watch chains were the mark of the up-and-coming sailor who had his tintype taken in the big cities he visited. This is MR. EDWARD RORKE of Cherry Valley, when he was mate of the PICTON.

(Caption) Another page from an early notebook of that good marine artist, ROWLEY MURPHY, now on active service with the Navy.