

Toronto Telegram, November 13, 1943
Schooner Days DCXVI (616)
By C.H.J. Snider

FLOTSAM and JETSAM of the GREAT GALE

“YOUR account of the loss of the steamer *Zealand* in The Telegram of Saturday, November 6th, most interesting,” writes W.W.D. McGlennon, of the West Assurance Co., Colborne, Ont.

“In 1880 our family lived on the point at McGlennon’s Cove between Lakeport and Grafton. They resided there for many years, but no storm such as the Great Gale of 1880 had ever been experienced.

“I have been looking through some old records and have found notes regarding the storm and reference to the loss of the *Belle Sheridan* at Wellers Bay.

“My father on arrival home on, Saturday evening, November 8th, 1880, went about his usual chores. He found the cattle in a wild state of excitement as though they sensed something unusual. They were finally stabled and the work done up. It was a wet night and very dark, but the weather was warm.

“The family retired as usual and at one o’clock on Sunday morning, November 7th, the gale really broke, the wind coming down the lake from the west with hurricane force. During the night the whole family arose and dressed as it seemed certain the house would be blown from its foundation, so fierce was the wind.

“My father, thinking of the stock, attempted to go to the barn, but found it next to impossible. While outside he looked out over the lake and saw lights of a vessel. He watched through the trees, and as she rose and fell in the tremendous seas running, he could see she was traveling east and not far offshore.

“A number of Cat Hollow relatives were then on the lakes, and fear was felt for their safety, but they were schooner men, and those lights were without doubt those of a steamer.

“It was always felt this was the propeller *Zealand* in her last struggle to keep afloat, and your account would seem to bear this out, as she undoubtedly sank somewhere off Lakeport. Wreckage identified as belonging to the *Zealand* came ashore between Lakeport and Presq’Isle Point and it was rumored that a chest similar to that described by you was found in this locality which contained ship’s documents and a considerable sum of money. This always remained a mystery. The fact that the wreckage drifted in an easterly direction would bear out the conclusion that she went down somewhere off Lakeport as you suggest.

“That night chimneys were blown down, barns and sheds unroofed and fences leveled. A steeple was blown off a church northeast of Colborne and vessels damaged in Cobourg and Brighton harbors.

“The records show that the fall of 1880 was a wild season on the lakes, but navigation continued on into December. On Tuesday, November 30th, two large propellers went west past our place in the forenoon very close to land and on Friday, December 3rd, several schooners also passed to the west not far offshore. It was beautiful weather by this time with good sleighing and the records close with the notation ‘calm starlight night.’

Gallant attempt at rescue

NOW NINETY, Capt. James H. Peacock, of Port Hope, vividly recalls the same great gale.

He had a Belleville-built vessel then which alternated between a two-masted scow and a three-masted schooner, and between the names *Mary Everett* and *Sarepta*. When she was rebuilt and rerigged her name was changed, but the old one was not removed from the register, and registrars, being very crusty, woke the *Sarepta* up one morning and told her she was still Miss Everett, instead of “the widow woman in the Bible,” as Capt. Peacock called her. She went back reluctantly to her maiden name, but kept her three masts and changed appearance, and ended her days in dignity in a boneyard near Chatham.

But she was just plain *Mary Everett*. With both anchors and all her chain, she hung on in the shelter of Presqu’isle harbor, off Brighton wharf, and rode it out with no damage beyond what another vessel did to her as she dragged past till her own anchors got a grip.

By daylight they saw the reeling spars of the *Belle Sheridan*, three miles away, lurching across the tossing grey backed horizon to her death on the beach at Weller’s Bay. That was six miles southeastward as the gulls fly, fifteen or more by horse and buggy from Brighton. Capt. Peacock and the captain of the other vessel and one or two more daring spirits joined with the crew of a questionable sampan sheltering in Presqu’isle Cove, and sailed her across to Weller’s Bay where the gale shifted enough to let them out. By this time it was early twilight, and all that was left of the *Belle Sheridan* was a battered hulk, stripped of decks and bulwarks and spars and crew. Jimmy McSherry had been washed ashore on a plank, his father and three brothers and the mate and another sailor had all been drowned and washed away.

The little schooner Capt. Peacock went across in was no bigger than a fishboat, but she rode the big seas magnificently. There was one little Presqu’isle vessel which Sim Weaver had, called the *Eugenie*, pretty as a yacht, but it wasn’t she, and there was another called the *Experiment*, half as wide as she was long, and it wasn’t she, and it wasn’t the *Alice and Mary*, nor was it the little trap where they used to make the counterfeit money, nor the other one which used to carry sports to the races for the purpose of “shoving the queer.” Nor was she one of the smugglers.

Old Presqu’isle was a harbor of refuge for sinners as well as saints in those days, before the Murray Canal was cut through. Unfortunately Capt. Peacock doesn’t now remember the name of the gallant little craft which made such a bold bid at rescue.

Storm warnings of those days

It must have been weather like we have been having this autumn which preceded this gale, whose gusts still roar through the reminiscences of old sailors. A mild open fall, at times even unseasonably warm, and not much wind till the hurricane came. You know we had some almost hot days this October, and a heavy thunderstorm at the beginning of November.

The Great Gale of 1880 broke without warning, because there was no way of transmitting warning except by telegraph, and telegraph wires would not stretch to vessels out in the middle of the lake. There was no radio, and no ship telephones, and barometers were rarities. Lake skippers relied on their pet corns and accumulated observation to forecast the weather, and while their observation and their corns were often acute, their conclusions were confronted with the necessity of having to keep moving to keep out of the hole.

After watching the weather for fifty years, the most accurate forecast this particular observer can make is based upon the data of the Toronto weather bureau. "Probabilities" are not infallible, they are only probable, but with these and a good barometer no one should "run into a sudden storm." That newspaper phrase is absurd. Only air-planes are able to "run into" storms. Sailing craft cannot travel fast enough to run into or out of a storm. The storm runs into them and past them.

I am old-fashioned enough to take account of the moon's appearance and condition, and whether the wind is backing or veering, and what the sunset and sunrise look like, and whether the water is glassy or darkening by wind flaws. When the flies swarm aboard and bite like can-openers, when the flags flicker and toss straight up in the air, when the waves all around are popping up irregularly, and the old shingles bother again – then there will be wind. Shorten down and stand by.

If you watch your barometer you will see that it is going down, down, down with these signs. When the wind comes, the mercury will start to rise. A sudden rise, like a sudden dip, brings heavier wind than a gradual rising.

But even the barometer's warning would have been too late for those schooners caught in the gale of November 6-7, 1880. They were in mid-lake, and could not reach the nearest shelter in less than one watch, four hours. By that time it would be blowing so hard that entering ports like Charlotte, Oswego, or Sodus, on the south shore, would be more dangerous than running it out in the open lake, and the north shore ports were impossible to reach or enter.

(Caption) PRESQU'ISLE LIGHT, towards the northeast corner of Lake Ontario, which watched the wreck of the BELLE SHERIDAN in the Great Gale.

(Caption) "ENTERING OSWEGO WOULD BE MORE DANGEROUS THAN RIDING IT OUT IN THE OPEN LAKE" – Capt. Bob Bartley bringing the DELAWARE into Oswego about this time, with it blowing so hard the tugs couldn't get outside the breakwater.