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Schooner Days, DCLII (652)
By C.H.J. Snider

Sails Still Shimmer On Napanee River

Who of the thousands who rush through Napanee daily by train or automobile would guess that the place had ever been a port at all – or still is – tucked away seven miles seemingly from the nearest navigable water?

Napanee is the one town in Canada with an attractive approach by train – old mills tree embowered, with their race dammed like the picturesque canal locks on the Thames above London – and a gem of a public park beside the rushing river bearing the town's name. But no one would dream, either from the mill lock or the park brook, that here was a deepwater lake port – and on tidal water, too – owing to the rhythmic inflow and outflow of the Napanee River as it reaches the Bay of Quinte in two-hour respirations.

Napanee has been a lake port for a century or more; perhaps ever since the Indians tried to say “la farine” or “le pain” for the bread flour which has been ground by its merry mills for a century and a half. The French are fond of offering this derivation of the name, but the evidence that they ever had flour to offer the Indians is slender. It was the English who grew the grain and built the mills in Upper Canada, and who opened the continent to the world. Never forget that. The first mill was built at Napanee in 1785 by the Loyalists, twenty-five years after the French had lost their claim to Canada.

Anyway, Napanee, the brisk, modern, bustling county town of the united counties of Lennox and Addington, has been a lake port for a hundred years, although it is miles “inland” from the Bay of Quinte, has no lighthouse or navigation lights, and appears on none of the lake or bay charts. Its river mouth is indicated in the vicinity of Deseronto, where the Z of the Bay of Quinte zigzags southward. But no soundings or navigation marks are given. It is just a blue streak where the map ends.

But Napanee is to-day getting in its coal and to-morrow may be shipping out its flour and tomatoes and apples by boat —steamer and barges – and it was a schooner port up to the time of the very last of the Ontario lakers, the *Lyman Davis*, bonfired at Sunnyside in 1933 to make a hot-dog holiday.

When the *Davis* was trading to Napanee other schooners trading there twenty-five years ago were:

The *Katie Eccles*, whose end at Timber Island has been recounted.

The *Winnie Wing*, sunk in collision with a tug in one of the bends of the river.

The *William Jamieson*, a fore-'n'-after, blown up where she sank above Amherst Island, down the bay.

The *J. B. Newlands*, a three-master, and perhaps other three-masters like the *Grace L. Filer*, *Bertie Calkins*, *George A. Marsh*, *Oliver Mowat*.

Earlier fore-and-afters trading to Napanee were the *Countess of Napanee* and the *Emblem of Napanee*, built in Bronte, and rebuilt after a collision and named *Olivia*; *L. D. Bullock*, which became the *Volunteer* and batted her brains out on the Belleville bridge; the little *Richmond*, built on Amherst Island, and owned by E. D. Dickens.

But the one which will be longest remembered is the *Mary of Napanee*, sailed by “Young Andy” Baird, so-called to distinguish him from his father, Capt. Andrew Baird, Sr., who sailed the *Lone Star*, *Snow Bird*, *W. T. Greenwood* and *W. Y. Emery*. “Young Andy” succeeded him in the *Snow Bird* and graduated from her to the *Mary*, which he sailed so long that he became “Old Andy” to the memory of the surviving generation of lake sailors.

“Young Andy” Baird was a popular Napanee boy. Such was his passion for sailing that he sailed toy boats from the *Lone Star* when the family lived aboard her, and sailed iceboats on the frozen river when he himself owned the *Mary*, and he kept a little sailboat for harbor sailing with his wife whenever he had any spare time. Every' schooner he sailed had a maintopmast staysail, a “fly-by-night” or “fancy kite” not generally used by our fore-and-afters, the mark of an active enterprising captain.

When he was master of the *Snow Bird* his wife insisted on sailing with him all the time, for the *Bird* was then aging, and “if anything happened” she wanted it to happen to both of them. But when he got the newer, larger and stronger *Mary*, she allowed him to persuade her to stay ashore, and that is how he saved her life. She is still in Western Canada, or was a few years ago. But “Young Andy” has been dead those thirty-nine years.

“I'd shipped in the *Mary* as cabin boy, to take Mrs. Baird's place as far as I could, with the cooking,” said Stanley Babcock, of Napanee, the other day. “It was late in the fall and Capt. Andy wouldn't let her come for this trip, although she had often sailed with him. The other boys in the *Mary* were Ben Davey, Ed. Markle, who sailed as mate, Al Humphrey and Capt. Andy himself. When the wind came fair from the eastward to get out of the river, Capt. Andy cast off the lines, but my uncle on the dock wouldn't let me stay on board. He had a queer feeling that he shouldn't let me go, and he acted on it. They had a fair wind and couldn't wait to get anyone else, so out they sailed and I trudged home, bitterly disappointed.”

“They never came back, any of them. The *Mary* got to Fair Haven and loaded her coal. She was last seen running before the gale off Oswego, under bare poles, in a sea too high for the harbor tugs to take.”

This was in November, 1905. But the memory of the four who went out in the trim clipper-bowed *Mary*, white above, lead-color below, with green rail and red beading and a jaunty maintopmast staysail between her gafftopsails, still haunts the waterfront of this hideaway of the lake ports.

Napanee, Though “Inland,” Once a Schooner Port and Still the Haunt of Steel - Steam and Power and Memories of the Lost “Mary”

One of this summer's callers at Napanee with a glimpse of the winding river