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LAST OF THE BUCKOS ON LAKE ONTARIO

Tribute to Belleville Sailor by Only Survivor of the Crew of lost Schooner *Picton*

CAPT. JACK SIDLEY seems to have been the last of the bucko dynasty for Lake Ontario. Mild-mannered and polite ashore and at home, and beloved by his family, on board ship he ruled by fist and marline spike, treating rough customers rough and making fast friends of all who could and would do their work well.

He was as explosive as a bombshell and as effective. One quiet night he turned in at twelve, at the change of the watch. The *Picton* was whispering her way along in so little wind the naked match burned itself down to the mate's calloused thumb and forefinger as he held it after lighting his pipe. The air was close, the lake smooth as quicksilver. Before 2 bells (1 a.m.) Sidley burst out of his room with a crash. "Get those men forward up and get the canvas off her!" he roared to the mate. He never paused for an answer but ran forward and let the fore gafftopsail halliards go by the run and downhauled the outer jibs.

By the time they had the light sails gasketed and before they could get started on the mainsail a screaming squall burst upon them. Balls of fire chased one another along the triatic stay, down the flying jib stay and into the lake, landing with a smack like heavy stones.

Sidley had looked at his weather glass before turning in. Wakening half an hour later by instinct he had glanced at it, noted its phenomenal drop and shot out on deck to shorten sail without asking any questions.

Jack Sidley was a bucko because he had to be. He was a graduate of the "long haul," the hard driving schooner trade of the Upper Lakes, where sailors might be rough and tough "board-pen boarders" from the mines and lumber camps or the Barbary coasts of Michigan cities and canvas might have to be carried from Chicago to the Welland Canal without reefing, because the sails were too big and heavy to get up again in the lake once they were hoisted in harbor.

Both the men and the vessels needed the heavy hand – and got it, but Jack Sidley did not delight in serving handspike hash and belaying pin soup. After years of hard driving under hard driving owners he gave up the "long haul" to come back to Belleville-on-the-Bay to get some little vessel of his own which would give him a livelihood and not keep him away from his wife and family and the little house and lot for which he had to yearn at a thousand sailing miles distance, eight months out of every twelve.

He found what he was looking for in the black, red hawse-piped white-bottomed hundred-foot fore-and-aft *Picton*. She was then ripe in her thirties and dried out by two years' lying in Cobourg, idle and shut up, with her cabin musty and everything in it covered with damp grime. He knew what he was getting – old sails, old gear, old wood, old iron, old oakum. Some

of her butts were so slack he had to horse two inches of caulking into them. But the runs on Lake Ontario would be short, about a hundred miles of open water, often less than that, and he hoped for work in the sheltered Bay of Quinte where he was born.

He was industrious and went in for “double freights,” however low, loading ties and posts and lumber in Deseronto and the Bay, and grain where he could get it, to pay the expenses of the voyages to Oswego, Charlotte or Sodus on the south shore, where he could get coal cargoes for Kingston or Bay of Quinte ports. Instead of finding Capt. Sidley the “stemwinding hellbender from up above” which he feared, Nolton Sanford, Hastings-born vaudeville artist and ball player, who was persuaded to come up to Cobourg as cook, found him the gentleman he was. Nolton knew nothing of sailing, and Clark Taylor, the mate, had warned him of what he might expect.

When they got the *Picton* fitted out again and spread her time-worn wings for the first flight in two years, Nolton sought to solace the labors of the day by tap-dancing on the cabin top. He had packed his professional vaudeville kit in his turkey. Clark Taylor was horrified, for the heel tapping was clattering right over the head of the terror of the Upper Lakers. The captain had just turned into his stateroom after supper for a nap in preparation for the first “long watch out.”

When the companion slide moved the mate waved to Nolton to jump into the lake or over the crosstrees or anywhere out of sight. Up popped the pompadoured sandy head of Jack Sidley, his eyes like saucers, his mouth wide open. “Don’t you dare stop!” roared he. “That’s the finest tapping I’ve ever seen. I’ll stand your watch myself any time you’ll put on a show like that.”

From then on they were the best of friends. Sidley taught the tap dancer seamanship and the cook I taught the captain tap dancing. Nolton became familiar with deck work and could take his trick at the wheel with any.

Once when they were short handed, he brought his wife along, and she did the cooking while he stood watch and watch with captain and mate. Sidley had three great dreads – losing a man overboard – having a man maimed by the big sails jibing and catching him with their boom or gear – or carrying a passenger. That was why Mrs. Sanford was shipped as “cook.” That was why his little son Vessey was shipped as a “hand.” They were really guests of the good-hearted captain. Walking the deckload for a breath of air after a hot day in the galley, Nolton was surprised to find his skipper keeping pace with him, to leeward.

“I lost a man once in Lake Huron walking the deckload of logs,” said the captain. Nolton took the hint and went below.

This time of the shorthanded trip they had got the light sails off her, before a threatening squall, and were preparing to lower the big ones, when suddenly the wheel was seized from Nolton and the captain roared in his ear, “Stand clear of the coils – she’s going to jibe!” and over came the mainsail with a bang. They got the big sails squatted down without mishap – being old they were always afraid of losing them, and with Capt. Sidley at the helm she answered like a horse, though Nolton had been having trouble with her just before in smooth water, and the sea was jumping now like waterspouts, as the squall broke. Load her an inch by the stern, and she

steered like a charm, load her an inch by the head and she wanted the whole lake. Clark Taylor had got her an inch by the head this time at Charlotte, from which they had towed out a few hours before. But Sidley humored her, and she roared along for Great Sodus.

The steel tug *Katharine Winifred L. Warner* came out for them, jumping the wavecrests like a gull taking off and disappearing from sight in the hollows.

“Keep clear of us, keep clear of us!” roared Sidley, and he ran his schooner in between the Sodus piers, unaided, cleared the islands in the harbor and rounded to in quiet water – with the *Picton* barely afloat, from her dried out topsides and deck taking up the lake like a sponge after her long lay-up.

Capt. Sidley sat unconcernedly on the forehatch and began splicing a wire hawser. He knew the pumps would soon get her dry in the quiet harbor, as they did.

“Why wouldn’t you let the tug take us in?” asked Nolton Sanford.

“She’d a pulled this old bundle apart the first big sea that jumped between us,” said the practical Sidley.

His whole interest was afloat. He had no shore recreations other than his family. He lived the life of his ship, and he could do anything she needed, go into the woods with an axe and come back with a knee, or a timber, or a spar, and he could make his own sails and was adept in marlinespike seamanship. In the *Picton*’s cabin when she ultimately went down was a whole new main gafftopsail which he had just sewn, cloth by cloth, cringled and bolt roped, and had not had time to bend.

Another fine quiet night he came out of his cabin at exactly half past two, in bright moonlight, with a good breeze blowing. He said to the mate:

“Turn all hands to empty the water barrels and then fill ’em again. I’ll take the wheel.”

Raw lake water was then sweet and wholesome, and like all lake schooners the *Picton* got all her drinking, cooking and washing water supply by the simple process of dipping it from over the side. A small barrel, scuttle butt, was kept filled at the forecabin hatch, and a larger one was chocked on deck by the galley door.

Silent and wondering, the men swung the buckets on their long draw ropes and dipped and splashed until both barrels were refilled. They had heard of “Bucko Sidley” on the Upper Lakes. Perhaps this was one of his hazing tricks. Hot from the steady exercise they drank deep from the filled barrels. One and all agreed they had never tasted such good water, cold and fresh and sweet.

“There’s springs in the bottom of the lake here,” said the captain, relinquishing the wheel to the man whose trick it was – “We always used to fill here in the old days. I turned you all to a bucket brigade at half past two in the morning because I knew by our rate we’d be passing over the springs then.”

He always knew where he was, for unlike most schooner captains, he streamed a taffrail log the moment he left port, read it every hour, and noted his compass carefully.

(Caption) SCHOONER *EDWARD BLAKE* OF PORT BURWELL, Capt. Sidley's last command on the Upper Lakes, before he bought the *PICTON*. The *BLAKE* was lost one dirty night on the Duck Islands in the north part of Lake Huron in 1896. It was in this vessel that Commodore Aemilius Jarvis made the voyage to Liverpool from Sheboygan in 1875. She was then new. She was built for the timber trade and made more than one voyage to Britain with squared oak sticks.