

**Toronto Telegram, March 15, 1947**  
**Schooner Days DCCLXXXVII (787)**  
**By C.H.J. Snider**

## **A Prince of Prince Edward**

Drowsing while the March sunshine stirs the sap in Prince Edward County's sugar trees, all-but-vanished Port Milford dreams of ninety-nine other springs in South Bay – of the black dog of the mountain that snuffled at the cemetery gate, of the wood-burning steamboats, of the barley-hungry schooners, of the canning factory boom, of the ruck and roar of warplanes and artillery practise in the last war. But most of all, of the man who built the red brick house on the high bank.

Jimmie Cooper came to South Bay from Kingston a hundred years ago, a barefoot boy with a pack on his back and an idea in his head. South Bay was the whole stretch of water now charted as Prince Edward Bay, between the finger of Point Traverse, prolonged by the False Ducks, on the south, and the thumb of The Rock, or Cape Versey alias Vesey, on the north, a high colored promontory with the profile of Napoleon or Queen Victoria according to taste. You find fossilized golfballs of prehistoric coral there, estimated by Dr. Lighthall to be four hundred thousand years old. James, however, was not one to waste his time on golf. He came to the county a hopeful lad without a penny to bless himself with. He departed fifty or sixty years later for a better land (if there can be a better than Prince Edward) a white-bearded stalwart, leaving behind his empty pack and a full purse, many who called him blessed, a mellow red brick mansion still overlooking the bay, shores, warehouses, wharves and schooners, a port, since fallen into decay – Port Milford – and a reputation for industry, honesty, and benevolence which has become a legend.

Jimmie's original pack was filled with cottons and wools and worsteds, pins, needles and crochet hooks, buttons and braid and handkerchiefs for the farm wives of the county. He extended his range of wares and took what he was offered in exchange, the scanty pennies and scantier shillings of pre-Confederation days, butter and eggs and chickens, pork and beef, roots and grains and cordwood and timber, as his trade grew. His brother William came to help him, prospered, married, and built a stone house. They needed transport to and from Kingston and the islands – the Ducks, Waupoos, “the Isle of Tantee in the Bay of Quinte”, and all the South Bay shore. So they hired or bought or built vessels, little scows and open boats at first, then bigger scows like the *JESSIE BROWN* and the *JENNY LIND*.

Either Jack Tait or Capt. Curran built the *JENNY*. The year is uncertain; 1852 is on the register as the building date of a *JENNY LIND* of 70 tons, owned by R. McLean in Toronto, in 1864, which might have been the same vessel. David Tait Sr., or his son, Jack, built the *JESSIE BROWN* for Cooper Bros. in 1860. James Cooper had been considering owning vessels for some time, and in the reciprocity era, 1855 - 65, ship owning paid good dividends. There is extant this letter to him from John Fraser, of Kingston, in 1854, the address of which is reproduced: “As regards Tait building a vessel for Mr. Ferguson and myself, there is no

agreement to that effect. Tait builds on his own responsibility, and as soon as she is in frame we were to get security on her. However. If you wish a vessel I will give you my claim against Tait at a long term, only keep it afloat and pays me the interest. I have no doubt Mr. Ferguson would do the same. My debt against Tait is about £145, Ferguson £175.” The meaning of this appears to be: Tait isn't building a vessel for us, but we have advanced him £320 on one, and hold liens or mortgages. If you want the vessel, take up our claims and settle with Tait when the time comes, paying us our interest meantime. This was a practice in shipbuilding, usual both in Britain and Canada. The builder began the ship as his property and borrowed on her as she grew, giving mortgages. When she was finished he sold her as best he could, either to a third party, subject to existing mortgages, or to the mortgage holders, who might be the intended purchasers from the beginning. As for the vessel under discussion we have no means now of learning which she was. Tait built the *MARY ADELAIDE* on Amherst Island in the year the letter was written.

James Cooper may have had "a piece," as it is called, in many schooners, for Coopers Dock was a favorite building place on South Bay. Here Jack Tait built the two-masted schooners *S. & J. COLLIER MARYSBURG, ONTARIO* (a rebuild), and *SEA BIRD, COLIN GEARING*, and probably, the *DAVID ANDREWS*, although the latter is said by some to have been built on Timber Island. These were all three or four times as large as the *JESSIE BROWN* or *JENNIE LIND*. They traded into South Bay for cargoes of lumber, cordwood, apples, fish and grain, especially barley – and brought back manufactured goods and coal from the United States. They were not limited to South Bay trading, but carried fruit, hay, coal and stone to Toronto, and some went to the head of the Great Lakes for grain, squared timber, or iron ore. These long haul bulk cargoes were profitable only for large vessels. An unforgettable sight about 1870 was sixty-four schooners tossing at anchor between Point Traverse and Timber Island, at the mouth of South Bay, riding out a prolonged westerly gale. By day their tapering spars made a leafless forest, by night their red and green side lights and yellow anchor lights, binnacle lamps and cabin lights looked like Picton on Christmas Eve. At Coopers's Dock also was built the first three-master in Prince Edward County, the *HURON* of 18, 000 bushel capacity, by the McMurchy brothers. Old timers looked askance at her for they knew she would take twice the load of the earlier vessels in which they had shares. But the clock won't run backwards, and in 1877 George Dixon, who had built the *SPEEDWELL* here two years before, launched the *W. R. TAYLOR* the county's second three-master, capable of carrying over 20,000 bushels. She was valued at \$22,000. She was wrecked in Lake Michigan, recovered, and rebuilt and enlarged at Port Robinson, and rechristened *STUART H DUNN*, after a Quebec timber trader. She was engaged in the timber trade to Garden Island for many years, and then carried coal for the Conger Coal Co., of Toronto. After her rebuild she could carry over 30,000 bushels, a far cry from the 2,000 or 3,000 bushel scows which bore the Cooper brothers first ventures in grain from South Bay.

The Cooper store had a basement flush with the Bay at the back, where heavy wares like farm implements, anchors and pianos could be stored. It's upper storey was flush with the bank-top at the front, where the customers drove up for the weekly mail. It served the east half of Prince Edward County. You can still see its ruins. They built wharfage along the Bay, where the

cordwood they bought and sold fuelled the newfangled walking-beam steamboats and the later Bay propellers like the *IONA RESOLUTE*, *RELIANCE*, *WATER LILY*. The lantern on a pole to guide the steamers in was the only light Port Milford ever had. Milford village, some miles inland up the Black River (properly spelled Mill Ford a century ago) was older than Port Millford, and has survived it. Several vessels hailed from Milford, or Mill Ford; among them the schooner *MARY* and steamer *SILVER SPRAY*. And a motor launch, *SILVER SPRAY* was built there just before the last war. Skeletons of sunken schooners now line the sunken wharves of the port James Cooper brought into being. The last to lay her bones there being the *FLEET WING*, which entered into rest after a stormy passage from Toronto in 1908. James Coopers' greatest achievement was not his fortune, or the various Cooper enterprises but the home he provided for half a dozen motherless and fatherless little girls who came, one by one, pigtailed and hollow-eyed to his red brick mansion on the brow of the bank, and graduated from it years later, trained in sewing, cooking, and home making by "Jimmie's" motherly housekeeper, to become the happy brides of prospering farmers or vessel owners in the county.

*(Caption) Remains of old South Bay wharves and warehouses and James Cooper's waterfront store at present Milford, first known as Cooper's Dock, where a dozen schooners were built and the old steamers stopped in their crawl from woodpile to woodpile. The old place flamed into activity again thirty years ago as a canning factory town, and faded.*

*(Caption) Postage from Kingston to South Bay, thirty miles distant, was six cents or three pence in 1854, and you folded the letter so as to make its own envelope. This is one of James Cooper's letters, through the kindness of the late Mrs. Earl Collier, of Port Milford.*

*(Caption) "An old-fashion farm house with verandah overlooking the bay" this was James Coopers's mansion, now occupied by Mr. Earl Collier.*