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**Schooner Days, DCCCXIII (813)**  
**By C.H.J. Snider**

## **Jailing the Banshee**

Banshee – a supernatural being supposed by the Irish and Scotch peasantry to warn a family of the speedy death of one of its members by wailing and singing in a mournful voice under the windows of the house. – Webster.

Tom Mowatt, a Toronto boy who became in turn a tugman, and chief constable of the City of Oswego, N.Y., (he retired last month on a well earned pension after forty years of service), made many strange captures in his long term of office. He is the only police chief on record who ever jailed a banshee.

It happened thus:

Crossing the bridge on his way to this office Tom noticed a pair of top-masts in an unusual position up to the westward in Oswego harbor. Top-masts, which had been the delight of Tommy's eye as a boy at the foot of Bathurst street and along the old Northern docks in Toronto were lamentably scarce in Oswego harbor in 1923 when this happened. The schooners had dwindled from hundreds to half a dozen on the whole lake, and only two now traded to Oswego and that only occasionally.

At a glance the chief, long experienced as a tugman, could tell these topmast belonged neither to the *Lyman Davis* nor the *Julia B. Merrill*, Oswego's last customers in sail. They looked to be a little vessel's which used to bring in YMCA parties in the summertime long before.

Tom reflected with a sigh that if she was still afloat, and this was she, whoever had her had chosen a queer place to bring Sunday school boys – up there in the west harbor near the old box factory wharf, where nobody had gone in a donkey's years. He thought he had better go down and see if some stranger needed help.

Before he got there he met an excited watchman with a coat-tail streaming astern.

### **THE WAR IS ON**

“Hurry up chief!” he hailed. “there's a big gang unloading bottled beer in sacks from that little schooner! They've been raising hell ever since she came in last night, and half of them are pie-eyed. I told them they couldn't land the stuff here and they told me to go and lay an egg!”

“Don't you do any such thing,” said Tom soothingly. “You telephone the district prohibition officer – this looks like his show – and I'll go down and see fair play.”

That's what endeared the Canadian-born chief to all Oswego, from Mayor to merchant. Fair play. Everybody got it from Tom Mowatt.

When he reached the old box factory three trucks were standing with running motors, and

dozens of men were tossing sacks into them, forming an endless chain between trucks and schooners. At the sight of his flat cap the motors roared into gear and the human ants evaporated into wood piles, grass, bushes, fences, and the wide horizon, scattering sacks that clinked and gurgled. The prohibition agent arrived pronto with a truck and picked up half a load of loose bottles of Canadian beer before cautious spectators made the remaining sacks vanish. Men, women and childminders lugging off beer bottles, in overall legs, aprons, sunbonnets and chubby bare arms.

“Arrest 'em” yelled the prohibition officer.

“No warrant,” replied the chief.

“Well arrest the schooner!”

“The coastguard or U.S. Marshal's the one to do that,” said Tom mildly. “I'll put a man aboard her – but she won't run away. Meantime, if you're smart, you'll follow up those trucks. I'll help you.”

## **ON THE TRAIL**

They traced the trucks to a transport barn outside the city. All quiet. Deserted. At last a watchman was found who said there was nothing inside and he didn't know where the boys were anyway.

With the assistance of the coastguard, the customs officers and the sheriff's warrant more beer was found aboard the deserted vessel. Chief Mowatt knew her name very well. He had towed her in a dozen times when he was a tugman. But what was the good of putting in ex-name on her when the only owners he recalled would no more carry a cargo of prohibition beer than he himself would think of loading her with holy water?

The beer found on board and the cargoes in the trucks bulged the walls of the warehouse where the bags of bottles were stored. So much so that boards came off. By night, and noiselessly. And by morning some bad Samaritans had reduced the swelling so perceptibly that there was only a truckload of bottles left to be bonded or bashed. Still, it was a good haul.

After some months the unnamed one was put up for auction by the customs. A Canadian built schooner, yacht-like in lines, with room for a party of a dozen or twenty in her big hold and small cabin. Fully rigged, and equipped with an auxiliary diesel engine – an essential for rum runners. They couldn't afford to be caught becalmed.

The bidding began low. If any rum runners were interested under cover they weren't going to pay too much to get their own property back. But Matthew H. Knapp of Syracuse and Sackett's Harbor, yachtsman and summer resort owner-and president proprietor of Old Storr's Harbor where the biggest sailing battleship ever attempted was begun for the War of 1812 – cracked the combine with a \$400 bid. The opposition raised him by tens. But when he offered \$500 they were sourly silent.

“Sold to the sunburned gentlemen with the fair complexion,” said he auctioneer, and Mr.

Knapp was happy.

## **TRANSFORMATION**

At Colombo, in Ceylon, in UK service in the navy, Mr. Knapp had seen a dashing little brig, one of the now vanished type of square riggers which then perished in the Mediterranean and farther east. Her rig and her lines fascinated him. Her name too appealed particularly to the Irish in him, he having been brought up in the Neo-Celtic city of Syracuse, N.Y. He resolved if he ever had the opportunity he would duplicate this little beauty. He kept this resolve by instalments, as we often have to do.

First there was the name. Across the transom of this ex rum runner now black as night with stripes of green and scarlet, remember he painted a broad bold flourishing scroll like the old time lakers and this Cingalese brig had. And on the scroll in striking white letters, the new name he was entitled to give this new addition to the U.S. registry:

### **B A N S H E E**

“So that,” philosophized Chief Mowatt, “is what I ran in when that prohibition agent told me to arrest the schooner. A banshee! What’ll my Irish friends in Canada like the McGarrys and the Kellys of Toronto think of me now? Next thing they’ll be asking me to lay a leprechaun by the heels or lock up a lenenshee.”

May ye never hear the banshee's keen avick machfree. But will ye be listening now to what happened to this one? Next week.