

**Toronto Telegram, November 15, 1947**  
**Schooner Days DCCCXXI (821)**  
**By C.H.J. Snider**

## **STORY BEHIND SOME IRON**

YEAR after year at the Mariners Service at Cherry Valley a sturdy figure which might have been carved from mahogany would stir at the reading of the roll call and without a word extend a large sheaf of spring flowers in memory of the county mariners who had passed beyond the horizon in the twelve-month gone.

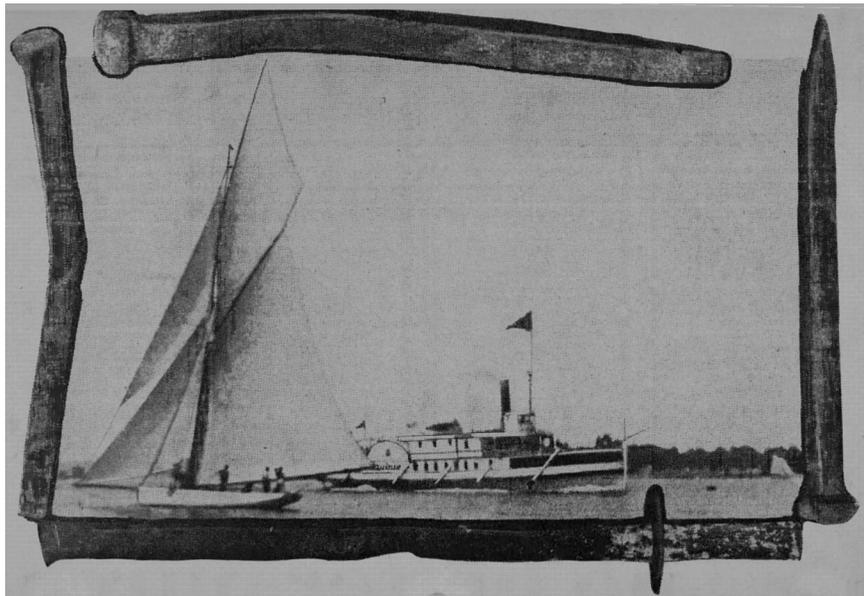
One glance at his marred hands and weather beaten face, impassive as a statue's yet full of kindness, would convince the most captious that this was no automaton's gesture, but one fraught with feeling that could not find a voice.

The whisper might go 'round, "That's D. B. – captain of the *Ella Ross*, *Brockville*, *Aletha*, *Varuna*, – *Glenburnie*, *Glen Allen* and the *Quinte* – don't believe he's smiled since she burned fifty years ago – but don't ask him why."

The whisper was absent at the Mariners' service last spring and the spring before. The flowers were there. But not Capt. Christie. He, too, had passed below the horizon in the calm sunset spread in benediction over his flame scarred memories.

## **THE GREAT HIGHWAY**

Almost sixty years ago – up to 1889 to be exact – the Deseronto Navigation Company's newly rebuilt \$18,000 paddle wheel steamer *Quinte* was the pride of the Bay, plying regularly with excursions, passengers and freight between Trenton and Picton. There were no highways then but gravel roads, no railway but the old Grand Trunk, no rubber tires, no radio, no wireless, and telephones were still novelties. The Bay of Quinte was a great traffic artery of Eastern Ontario, dotted with schooners, sloops, steamers and rafts in summer, and with cutters, sleighs and single or double teams in winter.



*The QUINTE passing the yacht MADGE in the narrow below Belleville, off Massassauga Point, in 1884. Photo per kindness Arthur R. Wallbridge, Belleville. It is framed in some relics of the Quinte recovered this year.*

On October 23rd, 1889, the steamer *Quinte* had made her daily “up” trip to Trenton, and at half past five, in the early dusk, had left Deseronto for the short steam “down” to Picton she had twenty-four persons on board. On the way down the upper reaches of the bay the *Quinte* had picked up the young captain’s mother and his twelve-year-old brother at Northport. She had been nursing a sick daughter there and was coming back to Picton. She felt a mother’s proper pride at seeing her firstborn mount to the pilot house and give the bay steamer the bells for home from Deseronto wharf.

Duncan B. Christie was that young captain. He had succeeded to the *Quinte* after three years in the *Ella Ross*.

His passengers, besides his mother and brother, included a Salvation lass, Capt. Azuba Kellar, Col. Strong, United States Consul in Belleville and several commercial travelers with their sample cases and considerable cash. H. G. Levetus, representing a Montreal optical company, had \$1,300.

### **FIRE DOWN BELOW**

The passengers went down to tea in the dining hall, for the October evening was chilly. A mile or so on the way, off Grassy Point, a deckhand discovered fire in the hold. Thomas Kelmsly, fireman or second engineer, set the pumps to work, but smoke, flame and steam drove him back. He called to the captain in the wheel house, “She’s on fire!” Capt. Christie thought of his light cargo of flour and lumber between decks, and the commercial travelers’ sample trunks. All would burn like paper.

“Put her on the bank!” he shouted to his first mate, who was steering. I’ll get the boats down!”

She had three good lifeboats, and they might all be needed, for this fire could not be fought on board.

### **LOVE AND DUTY**

Before he could stir the first boat from its chocks, a burst of flame swept the upper deck and shriveled the davit tackles in his hands. Those working with him fled. His finger ends were charred, his clothes afire. He heard screams from below. His mother’s agonized cry of “Duncan! Duncan!”

“Get the women and children over the side in lifebelts!” he shouted to his smoke dazed crew.

He plunged down the stairway into the red hell of the decks, fighting his way towards the ladies’ cabin; where he had left his mother. Saw two forms in the smoke, a woman’s, a boy’s, slipped lifebelts on them and dragged them to the rail. Only then did he realize the woman was Mrs. Robertson, the ship’s lady’s maid, the child her little son.

A passenger had lowered himself over the side, kicked in the cabin window, seen the scared faces of the maid and her child and tried to get them out, but failed. Capt. Christie

plunged back toward two more huddled bodies in the dining room, the cook's helper and her 5-year-old boy. They were dead. He again tried the ladies' cabin. It was now like the inside of a red hot stove. Not even a salamander could be alive in it. The burst of flame shore the hair from his head.

### **LIKE JIM BLUDSOE**

First mate Collier, bearded lake mariner, had rolled his wheel a-port almost automatically at the captain's call. The Long Reach, which the *Quinte* was traversing, is not more than half a mile wide anywhere, and less than that off Grassy Point. Within five minutes the *Quinte's* sharp nose was smelling the cedars on the bank. Collier clung to his wheel until the churning paddles themselves bit into the mud of the bottom and he knew she was fast aground.

But the flames had mounted to the upper deck and surrounded the wheel house. He dared not open the door, but smashed a lee window and crawled out, his coat burning, his face in flames from his burning beard.

The *Quinte* was now a torch lighting the bay for miles around. While the bow was within a few yards of the land, her sides and stern were in deep water. The steam yacht *Ripple*, lying in Deseronto, panted to the scene, followed by rowboats. A Bay trading sloop, anchored in the Reach, sent her little yawlboat. The rescuers found people clinging to the paddle wheels, the American consul among them. He had slipped down a chain from the bow, swum back to the paddle box and helped others reach that refuge. The sloop's yawlboat took off some clinging there and picked up others when they jumped. Kingsley, the fireman, stuck to his pumps until his hair caught fire. In jumping he suffered a compound fracture of the right leg, probably hitting the gunwale of the boat. Thomas Shorts, the engineer, had his eyebrows and whiskers burned off and left behind his trunk with \$280 in bills to feed the flame.

There were three hundred life jackets and four hundred floats in between decks but the men passengers, all of whom saved their own lives, were not able to get two women and two children who were below decks with them, to the safety they themselves found.

### **PRAYING IN FLAMES**

The young Salvation Army captain – whose Bible name, Azuba, means “of the comely anklets” – stood praying on the upper deck for all until; with her clothes aflame, she leapt overboard. She was dragged from the water, so badly burned about the hands and face and body that the flesh peeled from her arms. She was taken to hospital, and her condition was described in the Belleville Intelligencer next day as “as good as could be expected,” which would indicate that she was dying. It is not known whether she, or a commercial traveller supposed drowned, made the fifth fatality reported. The traveller was said to have been seen afterwards in one of the Ontario towns.

Capt. Christie had plucked nineteen of his ship's company from death by fire and water. But among those he could not save were these women and children. And one of the women was his own mother. And one of the children was his own little brother. He lived with that memory

fifty-six years. Lived with it and conquered, as only a good man could. But laughter was not more for his lips, nor feeling for his fingers. That was why his hands moved so stiffly and his lips moved not at all at each Mariners' Service.

We first saw Capt. Christie when he was in the *White Star*, a long time ago, running excursions on the Toronto, Lorne Park, Hamilton and Jordan route. He was fifty years master in steam when he retired in 1932, but after that, and up to the time of his death, he was a valued pilot for the Imperial Oil freighters to Kingston and Belleville.

The *Quinte's* charred timbers are now a weedgrown wreck in five to twelve feet of water on the eastern shore of Long Reach, half a mile above San Souci camp and two miles below the mouth of the Napanee river; a good place for bass and lunge, as Dr. Gordon E. Campbell of Toronto has proved in his holidays. May it never entangle his lines. Attempts have been made to regain the \$2,000 or so that went up or down with the *Quinte's* smoke or her ashes. We have not heard of any being found. But we treasure the spikes and bolts recovered from the wreck by Dr. Campbell, and the memory of that much enduring mariner Capt. Duncan B. Christie.

A weaker man would have fled the scene of his tragedy and never returned, but he went on piloting other steamers past the very spot for sixty useful if painful years.