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Schooner Days DCCCLX (860)
By C.H.J. Snider

Last Ferryman of the Long Reach

The Bay of Quinte is a hundred mile Z-shaped scroll of olive green water, gold dusted with pollen. It parts six counties - on one side Northumberland - Durham, Hastings, Lennox and Addington, on the other Prince Edward and outlying islands. With its many sub-bays and indentations Quinte is often quite wide. Its narrowest water is the long Reach between Desoronto and Picton, where the east-west axis of the Bay sheers sharply south-west around Capt. Johns Island. Captain John was the Mohawk Chief Deserontyon, after whom the town was named. Quinte water was the first highway in old Upper Canada. In winter its frozen solid surface gave a level track for the teams of the pioneers for a hundred miles. In summer its reaches, coves and windings offered sheltered passage for canoes, bateaux and rafts.

Naturally the Loyalist settlers of the 18th century chose those parts of the Bay for crossing, where the shores were nearest together. So came into being Coles Ferry, at the narrowest part of Long Reach about 3 miles below Desoronto, where the oaks of the old high shore of Sophiasburg in Prince Edward County could almost trade acorns for cones with the pines, firs and cedars of Fredericksburg North, and on the opposite bank Addington County bank.

The ferry was as essential as the old Carrying Place road itself, whose off-shoots wandered past Fish Lake, in Prince Edward, towards Hay Bay, in Addington. Coles kept it from time immemorial. Perhaps Old King Cole was the first Charon. At one time a cable ferry was tried; but it needed too much rope; nearly two furlongs to Huff's Wharf, on the other side. There was the oared ferry, sculled by one man with a great sweep through a choke in the stern, but big enough to carry a loaded farm wagon and a team of horses - for a shilling. Then the sail ferry, a shapely boat, with its loose fitted lug high enough to clear the heads of men and horses. Then the horse-power ferry, with a farm horse on holiday plodding its treadmill as sturdily as a ploughed field. And then the great innovation, when those new fangled horseless carriages, ringing gongs and blowing horns among the buggies and wagons of the macadam roads brought moustached men in peaked caps and goggles, and ladies in cartwheel hats tied on with veils long enough to reach over to Huff's wharf and back. Whatever the world was coming to it wanted to go somewhere else - and by the Cole Ferry. So Charon went modern, with a neat little pontoon propelled by a gas engine, lashed alongside a decked scow big enough for two cars. It was improved upon, and made more money than all its predecessors combined. But Mitch Hepburns free ferry farther down the reach between Glenora and Adolphustown (and the paved scenic route highways leading to it) ended all this. The private ferries across the hundred miles of Quinte now remaining are the little scow on the Belleville Reach near Telegraph Narrows west of Desoronto and the big motor vessel which plies between Amherst Island and Mill Haven on the Bath Road.

Durward Cole, last ferryman of the Long Reach, does not worry. The ancestral tract was really more than he could easily attend to, with his farm and fishing camp, boat-building shop and his white home set among the hollyhocks, sweet William, bluebells and orange lillies. The sufferers are from Sodom and Gomorrah and Christian street and Jericho who thought it more reasonable to come 2 or 3 miles from Fish Lake to cross over to their kin in Addington than to drive 10 miles to Glenora and find themselves still 10 miles from their destination when the governmental beneficence ferried them to Adulphustown, on the Bath Road to Kingston.

Traffic, however, on or across the Long Reach hasn't been what it was, not for a long time. On the summer cottage bordered water now is the frequent launch and outboard, the occasional yacht, sail or power, and the equally occasional freighter a cement carrier, an oil barge, a package freighter picking up cheese and canned goods. Years ago it was very different. Durwood Cole can recall 20 or 30 schooners being in sight from the ferry hill at one time, threading their way among towing rafts and passenger steamers in the 10 mile Reach.

His first acquaintance with Quinte traffic was in early boyhood and rather startling. The family lived in the lower story of a famous old building right on the water's edge of the ferry wharf, and little Durwoods bedroom was right next to the water. Early one summer morning, with a crash like a cannon, chunks of limestone, lath and plaster fell on the bed where he lay, and the rays of the newly risen sun streamed in where there had never been a window, like the flash of an explosion. A stout hickory jibboom, with flying jib set, speared through the limestone wall near the ceiling like a battering rain. A schooner Captain, relying on his centre-board for a break, had counted on the slope of the bank to check his headway on approaching the wharf, not realizing the 40 foot depth of water outside the store in the Reach. The stout stone wall could not stop 300 tons of motion when that weight was concentrated behind a square foot of hickory - but it did not budge. Two pieces of stone were pushed through by the punch, but the wall did not crack. Nor did the spar break. Good stuff, those hickory jib booms in the old lake schooner. And Quinte limestone walls.

Later young Durwood was heavily engaged on the outboard end of the churn handle, for the family farmed as well as ferried. He was all alone. The butter was slow in coming, perhaps the October air had something to do with it. Just as he could feel the golden snowball commencing to form a steamer whistle began to blow without stop. Looking up the Reach, he saw a dense cloud of smoke beyond the bend of the opposite shore. Boats were hurrying towards it, perhaps the ferry boat among them, for he could not see her at the wharf. His impulse was to drop the plunger handle and rush to the smoke in anything he could find to float him. But if you break off while the butter is forming the whole batch is wasted. It won't come when you start all over again. And he had been told to get that churning done before his folks got back. So he churned on and on and on, and got a wonderful batch of butter. But his folk were late getting back, for they had gone with the others to the assistance of the passenger str. *QUINTE*, which burned with the loss of 5 lives on the Addington shore a mile or so above the ferry. Capt. D. B. Christie had beached her and saved all his passengers and crew but five who could not get out of

the cabins. His own hands were burned in the wheel spokes.

This happened Oct. 23rd, 1889. Durwood Cole had been wondering for 59 years whether he did the right thing. He did not know what he could do if he could get to the fire. He could not have reached it in time to do more than was done. Those who were burned were not burned through lack of rescue boats but because they could not get out of the cabin. Durward had that butter to churn and he churned it. He did his duty. So he can look the world in the eye calmly as he does, through the circle of the old portlight of the *QUINTE* recovered from the sunken hull long afterwards. The stout brass of its hinges and flanges shows in places the corrosion of the fierce flames that reduced her oak plank to ashes and ate up the dross of the metal.