

**Toronto Telegram, December 17, 1949**  
**Schooner Days CMXXX, (930)**  
**By C.H.J. Snider**

## **Live and Let Live**

In Oswego, just below the first bridge, John S. Parsons' office used to be hung with hundreds of portraits of lake vessels, from the Civil War onwards. The dust hadn't been disturbed from some since Lee surrendered. They were in crayon, oil, watercolor, lithograph, and the faded yellow of silver-plate photography. Of course there were many "movers." Some even of this century.

In crayon there was a particularly good picture of the "brig" *E. Cohen*, which in 1863 lighted all Lake Erie with the bonfire she made with an early coal oil cargo for Europe. There was a litho of the *Mary E. Perew*, built in 1861, with a headlight on her bowsprit-end like a locomotive's – before the red-and-green sidelights became standard equipment. There were early photos of horse-teams towing the passenger canal packets on the Oswego Canal.

The Parsons' ship chandlery was an Oswego "institution." Is yet for John Donovan continues it as a smart modern hardware business. But the old pictures, and John S. Parsons, himself, brisk, dapper, even in old age, are no longer there.

The business was founded by his father, an Englishman who came to Oswego when it was the greatest schooner-port on the lakes. The *Ark* used to get supplies there (we refer to Alexander Muir's barge which used to tow behind the *Enterprise*, in the 1870's). The Parsons' firm supplied all the canal boats on the Oswego canal, all the schooners that could get through the Welland, and all the lower lakes steamers. Groceries, cables, tarpaulins, cordage, paint, cutlery, sidelights (when they came in) - literally, from a needle to an anchor. They had a schooner of their own, the last being called the *John S. Parsons*, a handy little three-'n'-after that could beat up against the St. Lawrence current.

## **Mystery Message**

The *George Suffel* was the oldest of that schooner family and the smallest, 75 tons register. Built at Port Burwell on Lake Erie before Canada was born, after ups and downs she eventually hailed from Belleville on the Bay of Quinte. Judgments from forgotten actions stuck to her like burrs, in spite of changes of ownership. It's hard to pay for what happened long ago when you are greyheaded and can't earn much. But the law's that way sometimes. The *George Suffel* was the oldest of that schooner family.

She was lying loaded in Oswego, ready to go out, with the clearance in the cabin, and her yawl boat on the davits. The new captain, however, had said right after breakfast: "Gotta go up town," and taken his departure.

Alex Taylor, who was mate in her went on with the morning work of washing down. It kept him and two hands busy.

Looking up he saw a man on the dock beckoning.

"You the mate" asked the stranger.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, get out as fast as you can. I'll throw off your lines for you."

"Mister," said Alex., "there's only one man who can tell me to do that, and he's the captain of this vessel. He's up town.."

"I know," said the stranger quietly, "but John S. Parsons says you gotta."

"That's different," said Alex. "What's the rest of it?"

"The marshal's got a warrant for the vessel," said the man, "and the chief's got a suppeeny or a capias, or a writ for the captain. It's some dang-nabbed judgment as old as the hills that's been passed on to them. Whether they want or not they gotta do what they're told. The chief won't be able to find the captain and the marshal won't be able to find the schooner if you get her out past the three-mile limit. We'll send the captain out in a launch to pick you up. Don't strike your fly for the tug, 'cause Charley Ferris has orders to call the chief if you do. But he says he hasn't any other orders – yet - and he won't try to stop you."

"Throw off the lines, stranger," said Alex. "Boys, put the head-sails on her. We're going home."

Without delay the staysail wriggled up the forestay, hank by hank, the flying jib followed, the jib-topsail climbed from the jib boom end, toward the foretopmast head, and the schooner silently floated out into the lake, burned by the Oswego river current and the growing southerly breeze.

All three men next "made" the mainsail. Then the foresail. She was handy enough and steered herself in the smooth water, with only one way go to, and that offshore. The mate took the wheel and stood three miles to the forward from the breakwater light, and then hove her to.

### **In a Hurry**

When he saw a white launch poke out past the pier heads he filled away again, so as to be sure to be more than three miles out. The launch came alongside with the vessel's hull between her and eyesight of the shore. She slowed, but never stopped. The captain hopped over the rail, white under his sunburn, and the launch went on, going back in a wide circle.

"We was near losing her," the captain said. "Get the gaff top'sls on her and rig the sail covers under the booms for watersails. We ain't clear yet."

"Course, sir?" said Alex.

"Kingston, that's were we cleared for," said the captain, unrolling the sail covers on the deck.

With sail covers strung under the booms and a torn jib strung from the mainmast head

and canvas hatch-covers traced to the weather rigging the *Suffel* made good time as the light south wind hardened to a real breeze. None too soon either. A pillar of smoke moving in the Oswego piers showed that the tug *Charley Ferris* was no longer able to hold back and was coming in reluctant pursuit.

"Thought we were safe once we were three miles out?" said Alex Taylor.

"That's where port jurisdiction ends, they say," answered the captain, "but the international boundary runs down the middle of the lake. We're not safe this side of the Ducks. I hope *Charley Ferris* runs out of coal."

But she wasn't. With the False Ducks near but the Main Duck still a blue shadow twelve miles ahead the tug had ranged up on the *Suffel's* weather quarter, close.

*Charley Ferris* pulled his whistle cord, and lake was filled with the most awful screech of escaping steam.

"There's our chance!" shouted the *Suffel's* captain above the din.

The tug, travelling under forced draught for hours, no longer closed the gap. In fact she didn't quite hold her own. She slowly dropped back. She acted as if she couldn't keep up the pace with her whistle wide open. The *Suffel* ran up her Canadian flag, to claim she was in British waters, whether she actually was or not. The tug took the hint and sheared off a couple of points. The Main Duck and Yorkshire islands loomed up big, and there was no longer any doubt about which side of "the line" they were on. The tug turned back.

"Good *Charley*," grinned the captain, cracking a smile for the first the that day. He'd never let a sailor down!"

### **Fiery Finish**

Some time after this the *Suffel* caught fire, and burned to the water's edge in the Bay of Quinte. (Ed., Belleville, April 11, 1888). It was pure accident. They were heating tar to re-pitch her decks, when the barrel caught fire. Fortunately they had been able to keep up the fire insurance on her. So all ended happily, even for the insurance companies. The poor old thing had more than paid for herself in premiums in her 40 years.

No one ever knew that John S. Parsons was one of the creditors at whose suit the *Suffel* had almost been apprehended. His comment on the escape was, "Well, you can't take a man's living away from him and expect to enjoy your own."