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Schooner Days XCIV (94)
By C.H.J. Snider

How The Picton Passed out

There were two Pictons on Lake Ontario, the old iron steamer so re-named (wasn't she the Magnet originally [ed: Corsican]) and the schooner. Both were well known in Toronto up to thirty years ago. The steamer carried thousands of passengers on the old Richelieu and Ontario Co.'s route, and the schooner brought in cargoes of coal and loaded cargoes of grain at Adamson's elevator up to the year she was lost. This tells how she went.

I HEARD Capt. Sidley bought an interest in the schooner *Picton* of Port Hope, after he lost *The Blake*, and he was lost himself in her with all hands on Lake Ontario," said "Red" Macdonald, Goderich fisherman, in a recent letter.

That is so—on Dominion Day, 1899 or 1900, probably the latter year. A bitter cold day it was on Lake Ontario, too, for all it was the first of July. How the *Picton* went is best told in the words of Capt. Byron Bongard, of Cherry Valley, as he related it before the Mariners Service there only this year.

"I was in the *Acacia* then, lying in Charlotte, loaded for Kingston. The *Annie Minnes* was lying inside of us, loaded for Belleville, and the *Picton* lay outside of us, loaded for the same place, or somewhere in the Bay of Quinte." Captain Sidley had his eleven-year-old son, Sylvester, on board with him for that trip.

"It had been blowing hard from the westward," Captain Bongard says, "too hard to pull out, and I had gone up to Rochester. When I got back the *Picton* was gone, and Capt. Jim Savage, of the *Annie Minnes*, was getting as fierce as his name at my delay.

"'Come on,' said he, 'the *Picton's* gone, and we're lying here wasting a fair wind. I can't get out with you lying outside of me.' Sidley says, 'When we're ready we go and wait for nobody.'

"'That may do up above, where he's been sailing until lately,' I said, 'but he ought to remember that that *Picton* of his is no spring chicken, and nowhere near the size of the *Edward Blake* or big vessels he has sailed.'

"'Well, I walked down the pier with him, and the sea has run down a lot,' said Savage. 'Why, look at him now, on the horizon! He's got his gafftops'ls set!'

"'All right,' said I, not convinced we should go, though the *Acacia* was a stronger vessel than either the *Minnes* or the *Picton*. 'Strike the fly for the tug!' We towed out together, making sail as we went. The *Picton* was ten miles ahead of me when we squared away to run down the lake, and the *Minnes* got a start on me too, because after we got out I stopped to reef my mainsail. There was still some sea left, and the wind showed signs of biting in again.

"I was glad of the tuck, for soon it come down hot and heavy, and I could just see the *Picton*, a long way ahead, taking in her gafftopsails. After that we were coming up on her fast. And all getting a heavy dusting. Then her lower sails came down, till nothing but the peaks of them showed, and we knew she was in trouble. She was by this time only four miles away, and the *Minnes* was half way between her and us."

"She staggered like a drunken man trying to walk, and then all at once there was nothing of her in sight. Ten minutes later the *Minnes* sailed over where she had been, and saw nothing, not even a barrel or a hatch. I kept the *Acacia* off and passed over the spot 15 minutes afterwards, but there was neither hat nor handkerchief floating." Poor Sidley had gone down with all hands, his young son, Sylvester, his mate, Frank Smith, two sailors, Walter Dunn and William Bly, and the cook, Barney Ayres.

"We both had it hot and heavy--though the wind was bitter cold--before we picked up the lee of Point Traverse on the north shore. Walter Savage, who was mate with his father in the *Annie Minnes*, told me that the old man collapsed on his knees on the deck when the *Picton* went down before his very eyes.

"She was a nice little vessel, 30 years old at the time, very straight in the sheer, painted black with red beading under the chin rail, and lead color bottom. She was built at Picton in 1867, and was owned at one time by Hugh Gaw. She was 98 feet, 4 inches long and 22 feet, 5 inches beam. Her depth was 9 feet, 4 inches and her registered tonnage, 180. She had been a good vessel once, but was in no shape to stand the hammering bound to come to her if her master stuck to the motto, 'When we're ready to go we wait for nobody'."

Capt. Bongard sailed the *Acacia* for 17 years and never cost his owners or insurance companies a dollar. He is best known to Torontonians as the master of the steamer *Turbinia*, a later command which he took to the West Indies.