

The Toronto Telegram, March 28, 1931.

Schooner Days No. 9 ----- The Boy Mate.

The late Magistrate J. J. O'Connor, of Port Arthur, continuing his lake-going experiences, tells of something that make him very, very angry in the good ship WOOD DUCK.

After we laid the SWEEPSTAKES up, that fall sixty years ago, I went mate in the WOOD DUCK, my first step-up in the noble profession of lake sailing.

And was I proud of it? Proud as a dog with two tails. I was not yet twenty-one. Eighteen, as a matter of fact, and trying desperately hard to grow a moustache. I had still much to learn about barber shops. And still more about conduct and character. "We are all young only once" -- thank heaven!

I had been in the WOOD DUCK earlier, before-the-mast, so I felt at home. Although small, carrying about 200 tons, she was every inch a vessel that could tackle the toughest weather and sea and gave a good account of herself. She was the kind that sailors called a "home" in those days -- and that word meant much more than just a place to hang your hat. In a sailor's mouth it was a high compliment. There was a schooner which Nichols and Sylvester owned in Toronto. ~~She~~ She was built in Jordan harbor, over in the fruit belt and was christened SWEET HOME, as the most attractive name they could find.

The WOOD DUCK was in the grain trade and my test as mate come the very first voyage. We had just discharged a cargo of wheat from Toronto at the old Northwestern elevators on the west side of the harbor at Oswego. We were cleaned out about 3 p.m. and the skipper went ashore to collect his freight and purchase supplies.

Before leaving he directed me, as mate, to get her ready for sailing saying he would be back in an hour. I proceeded about the work, had her hove out to the "Island Dock" in the harbor with everything made ready to let go, and waited.

Supper time came and passed. It was late in November and darkness came early. I sat up for him until after 9 p.m. and then turned in as there was no sign of him. None o'clock seems soon to go to bed, but a sailor steps when he can. Two hours later I heard him clambering aboard, accompanied by the groceries and the delivery boy. He came quietly down into the cabin, stacked the groceries in the galley and tumbled into his bunk.

For all his quietness I had a pretty good idea that he was loaded past the pimsoll mark with these same groceries. Grocery stores were like that in those days. I waited until I heard him snoring and then I slipped out of my berth and went on deck. The fresh air was good after the fumes of the cabin. There was a brisk wind, a little south of east, with a moon wading in what looked like snowstorm clouds.

We were under charter to go to Bath, that old, old U.E. Loyalist port in the

Bay of Quinte, to load a cargo of barley for Oswego. As it was late in the fall the promise of a good run -- even with snow -- decided me to call the crew from the forecstake and get sail on her.

Necessarily we made some noise, what with the thud of rope coils flung on deck, the stamping of feet, creaking of blocks and chanteying as we mastheaded the foresail, throat and peak. But never a sign from the sleeper in the cabin -- except more snores.

Well, he had said to get ready to go, and that we were to get away as soon as he came aboard. So we got away. She slipped out through the piers like a thief in the night, with the lake all full of misty moonlight and murmuring in hollow gurgles of approaching snow.

The breeze went round to the souward and freshened and the promise of snow turned to a probability of rain. We had her under wing-and wing, with no light sails, bowling along before it.

Still nothing but snores from the cabin. The wind increased to a moderate gale, and we hauled out a double reef in the mainsail.

Still nothing but snores. It began to rain heavily, and I went below to get my sea boots. The skipper heard me, and also realized that she was swaying from side to side.

He called to me, and said: "There is a big sea rolling in here, Jimmie, you had better get out a spring line amidships."

I replied: "Aye, aye, sir," and went on deck, feeling confident that the good little "WOOD DUCK" was doing much better than the skipper knew.

At about six a.m. the wind dropped. We shook out the reef in the mainsail and were skimming along in smooth water between Timber Island and Indian Point.

At seven bells--7.30 a.m., and breakfast time on all the lake schooners--I was at the wheel, and the crew at their food when the skipper's head poked up out of the cabin scuttle.

Now, thought I, I'm in for it. I'll either get the grand cross or the grand bounce. I braced myself for a tornado of "What-the-blanks" or "Who-in-blazes," or else what I had read of in story books as a voice husky with suppressed emotion saying "Well done, good and faithful," in the language of the sea.

The Old Man never hesitated a moment. He kept on coming up the companion and said in a most matter-of-fact tone, "Breakfast's ready. I'll take the wheel ... You had better go down."

Choking, I grunted out the compass course for Indian Point following the

ritual of wheel relief and relinquished the spokes.

I don't think I have ever been so angry in my life. That was all he ever said about my bit of drama, then or after. I was too mad to eat, I flung myself down the cabin companion stair and into my berth.

It would not have mattered to me whether he had praised me or blamed me, for I know I had done right. What I wanted was recognition of my action, either for or against. I felt there was something coming, blow high or blow low, and I wanted it to come.

I was only a bumptious boy or eighteen, for all my attempt at a moustache and my name of mate, I was still in the kindergarten class of life, and I was painfully learning the lesson of "sitting tight" and least-said-is-soonest-mended, which our Old Man had mastered years before.

We loaded our barley at Bath, and were soon back in Oswego at the elevator again. This time there was not delay about getting out. It was the Old Man, sober as a judge, who took her out into Lake Ontario, and, a little wiser, I hope, I continued my duties as mate and encouraged my moustache.

We got across and into the Bay of Quinte and up to Rednersville and loaded lumber and lath for the last trip of the season, to Lock 2 in the old Welland Canal.

It was getting late in the fall. Very cold, and December setting in. The Bay of Quinte was glazing over, and by the time we loaded fields of ice had formed. But we had a good hard breeze from the northward, and hoped to break through to clear water. We set all sail, ripped out way through the sheet ice, and took a smash at the pack. She was a sturdy little vessel, and ploughed grinding through it until suddenly ice splinters showed through the deck-load. The ice had cut through her starboard bulwarks from forward clear to aft.

We had to turn her round and head back for Rednersville and lay her up there for the winter.

The WOOD DUCK was a handsome little thing, painted green, as were so many of the schooners in my time, with a half-clipper bow. She was lost five or six years later, going into Oswego in a great gale which wrought havoc in the lake fleet on the 7th of November, 1880. Of sixteen vessels in sight of one another on Lake Ontario at twilight not one escaped uninjured, and most of them never sailed again. That was the night the propeller ZEA-LAND was lost with all hands, and the NORWAY rolled over and drowned her crew, and the BELLE SHERIDAN went ashore in Weller's Bay and all the McSherry family on board were drowned except sixteen-year-old Jim.

The WOOD DUCK, sailed at this time by Capt. Daniel Marks of Frenchman's Bay, was so near to safety that the tug had come out for her and the towline

had been passed; but with two turns around the paul-post it tore out of George Marks' hands, and before it could be passed again the schooner drove in under the fort, piling up so high on the Oswego beach that her crew could drop off dryshod from the jibboom end. She was wedged in so hard on the boulders that there was not chance of getting her off; and she was sold to the junkmen to \$300, new set of sails and all.