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**By C.H.J Snider**

## **"SHE SHALL HAVE MUSIC WHEREVER SHE GOES"**

*Magistrate J. J. O'Connor's account of how the old lakers were decorated moves another graduate of the school of schooner sailors to describe a Lake Erie debutante and others.*

LAST I saw of the *Erie Belle* she was an unrecognizable hulk in Frenchman's Bay, a gravel barge in John E. Russell's plant, spars all gone, cut down to a third her original size, turned end for end, and all gory with red lead.

That was in 1917, and she had been travelling in hard luck for twenty years before that; seized for debt, rescued and run down the Niagara River, laid up for years at Chippawa and burned to the bilges.

Before that she had had her adventures, too. She had been dismasted twice, once in a squall off Bronte, and once in Lake Erie, with five men on the topsail yards. It was her square-rigged foremast that went, each time. She had done great carrying in the Chicago-Collingwood trade in the '70's and '80's, bringing in eighteen thousand and twenty thousand bushels of wheat a trip. After that her port quarter began to droop, until at last one corner of it got to be two feet lower than the starboard side. She became a shabby figure in rusty black, with her name in faded yellow on the quarter bulwarks, limping in with small cargoes of coal for the Waterworks; and after that she spent her time looking for cargoes. Now she lies at the bottom of Lake Ontario not far out from Toronto. She filled and sank ten years ago while being towed down to Oshawa to be used as part of a dry dock.

I shall never forget the first glimpse of her.

Lake Erie was as smooth as a frozen pond. The wind had petered out during the middle watch. Now, with sunrise coming on, there was a faint breathing aloft which just stiffened the limp funnel of the scarlet fly swaying at the mizzen truck and gave us steerage way. But the trick at the wheel was a tedious one, with a dozen revolutions necessary before the lubber's-mark changed its station on the rim of the compass card, and I was longing for the breakfast bell because I was fed up with the silent monotony and empty with the keen lake air.

The lake was full of the thin mist which often settles after a quiet night. Not a fog, but a softening of the air as the coming sun warms the water. Close at hand everything was in clear detail in the morning twilight, but the jibtopsail on the jibboom end, a hundred and fifty feet away, was very vague, and the water beyond was the same luminous grey as the air, with no division between them.

Thinking of breakfast and the cook's bell I distinctly heard a musical tinkle. Then another. Not a steady ringing, but a broken chime, like the bells of the sunken cities you can hear if you listen intently to the breaking bubbles of the wake. In fact, I thought it was the water

tinkling about our rudder pintles, but the sound seemed to come from afar, and from high up.

Then I saw her.

Three towers of sails; the first square topped in several storeys; the second spiring high above it; the third also steeple-tipped, but small. She was what we called a "barque," though we meant topsail schooner or barquentine. And she had what I have never seen in any other vessel, five triangles of jibs on her long, low horn.

She was all in white. In the sheen of the morning mist she looked like an Easter lily in a lighted chancel. Her sails were all new, of blue-white Scotch linen. Her gaffs and booms and yards, her mast heads, and the lower part of the stout foremast, were all painted white. She had even white anchor stocks. One narrow band of blue went around her at the coveringboard, like a girl's sash.

As she floated by the level beams of the climbing sun lighted up three great golden bells, painted on her stern in a billowy scrollwork of broad blue ribbons, above the name

*ERIE BELLE* of PORT BURWELL.

She curtsied towards us as a little freshening of the dawn wind shook her sails, and again came a shower of tinkling bell-taps from on high. Above the truck or button at each white topmast-head, in a little iron frame, hung a real bell of brightly polished metal, flashing back the sun rays as though these were physical strokes, making the music.

The fellow at her wheel spun the spokes as she began to gather steerage way.

"Morning," called I, "a new one?" "Yes," he called back, "Launched this month at Ryerse."

"Where ye bound?"

"Kincardine, for John McLeod's orders. He owns her."

The old saying is that calms bring ships together and winds separate them. We drew apart rapidly as the air stirred. The newest pride of Lake Erie floated away again into the mists of the morning. But even after I lost sight of her I could hear, now and then, the tinkle of her masthead bells.

What Magistrate O'Connor said the other day about decoration in the old lake schooners was all true.

"I've kept myself shabby that she should go fine," Hungry Mac once told me, and he was not talking of a sweetheart, but of a schooner; a homely little scow you would not cross the wharf to look at. But to him she was mother, wife and child.

Of course some of the old lakers were awful traps, even when new, built by the mile and sawed off by the rod, as we used to say. Rigged after the cheapest fashion and painted one color, such as barn red (which antedated battleship grey and was about as beautiful) where they were

painted at all.

Such vessels often as not were company ships, owned by a line out for nothing but dividends. But against them should be set the individual craft, whose masters had a chance to show their regard.

Figureheads flourished in my time, though they were going out. The plumb stems of the carriers built to fill canal locks discouraged them. But the less utilitarian vessels would have stems ending in fiddle or billet scrolls – which vary according to the way the curl runs. From these trailboards would sweep back to the catheads. The small topsail schooner *Atlantic* of Cobourg had her trailboards painted like horns of plenty, with fruits and flowers flowing out.

An eagle was a favorite figurehead with the Americans, or sometimes an Indian.

Some vessels had horses' heads carved; they made a splendid finish to the knee of the stem. Running horses were popular, too. The *Highland Beauty* had a little gilt horse in full gallop on her jibboom end. Horses cut in brass and highly polished decorated the pilot house, of the Oswego tug, *Charley Ferris*.

Cannon barrels were also used as figureheads, being rather decorative with their wheels and trunnions. The *Garibaldi* of Port Hope had one. And of course, many figures of women were used. There is your classic example of the *Nancy*, with a lady in full eighteenth century costume, including hat and feather.

Stern paintings, as Mr. O'Connor mentioned, flourished as a sister art with figurehead carving. Beginning at the bottom, general practise was to paint the planks above the "hood-ends of the tuck" a rich deep blue. Above this would come the name-board, with the name and port of hail either black on white or white on black.

The wide space between the name-board and taffrail would be painted any color so long as it contrasted with the paint of the vessel's side and bottom.

It might be plain, but it was more likely to be decorated with scrolls, or a broad band like a flattened rainbow. The corners or spandrils over this might be one color, and the space below another; and in it might be centred the three gold links of the Oddfellows, or the square-and-compass of the Masons, according to the skipper's lodge.

Or it might have a flaming maple leaf and the patch-work quilt escutcheon that once stood for the arms of Canada, as in the *W.J. Suffel*, of Port Burwell. Or it might be an eagle, grasping the thunderbolts and the cash in the case of an American vessel.

The *Bert Barnes* of Kingston, one of the last to go – she was lost in 1926 – was an American bottom, but she had a fine big Union Jack painted across her stern.

Masthead decoration was also a point with many skippers. Many schooners had a small ball on a spindle above the flat button on the tip of the topmast.

Often these balls were painted white. Sometimes they were gilded.

The *White Oak* of Oakville had golden acorns at her trucks, in place of these balls. I am told it was the *Three Bells* of Oakville which set the fashion for the *Erie Belle*'s musical finials. She was a little old lake "barque", built by Simpson for Archibald Taylor, of Toronto, in 1854, and had a bell for each masthead.

Others had gilded weathercocks, like the *W.T. Greenwood*. The *Stuart H. Dunn* had a wooden gull, permanently perched on top of the truck of the foretopmast above the batwings which the topsail yardarms spread.