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Schooner Days, CCXXXIII (233)
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LADY SKIPPERS

YES, you heard right the first time.

Lady skippers. Not lady-slippers. Real women, not orchids. I have a great admiration for the moccasin flower or pink lady-slipper, which grows in rich wet woods under the murmuring pines and the hemlocks, and I would like to present a huge bouquet of them to the ladies of the lakes.

These include in thousands the wives and mothers and sisters and sweethearts who used to keep a light burning in a top-storey window every night their men were away, whether their voyages took them to the head of the lakes or the far salt sea. These good women always felt that "some poor seaman, tempest-tossed, striving now to make the harbor" might be helped even by the gleam of a coal oil lamp or that their own men might be guided in by it. They chose to burn candles in attics rather than in churches.

And (as we Presbyterians are accustomed to hear quarterly), I do, in an especial manner, intend my bouquet for those other good women in the wind-wagons of the old days on the lakes who, no matter how hard it blew, served three piping hot meals and a midnight lunch to a gang bone-weary with dragging on the sheets and halliards, grinding on the bucking wheel, or bending their backs two hundred times to the hour over the clanging pump-brakes.

William Malcolm, present master of the *Chippewa*, was telling me the other night of Kate, the cook of the schooner *George W. Davis* – drowned in that vessel later – who helped him wrestle a gale all the way from Rondeau to Buffalo, when the schooner had been cleaned out by the preliminary squall. Malcolm was at the wheel eighteen hours, for he was the best hand at steering her, and the others were at the pumps. Kate kept them all fed, and found time to sprinkle ashes under the helmsman's feet as he slithered across the deck in his wrestles with the wheel. The schooner was shipping great seas over the taffrail, and her yawlboat had been washed away. Every few minutes Kate's last contribution of ashes would be swept from under the steersman's feet, or glazed over with the ice of Lake Erie. But Kate would reappear with her galley dustpan. When all the ashes of the cabin cook stove had been used she fell back on lumps of coal, and scattered these around the wheelstand. Capt. Malcolm said he was so stiff and cramped with bracing his sea-booted legs against the roll of the vessel and the heave of the wheel that when he got ashore in Buffalo the whole of the sidewalk was too narrow for him, and he went up the street like a dredge walking on her spuds.

Sometimes the schooner cook was the wife, daughter or sister of the captain or mate or one of the crew. This heroine Kate was the captain's child. Sometimes the cook was just a lonely girl who knew how to take care of herself. Often she was a widow, sometimes black and sometimes green, with a brood of little children to keep ashore. Whoever and whatever she was,

she fed me so well and washed my shirt so often that my hat is off in memory of her and her sisters, though it is thirty years since the last of them ministered to me. And that was Maggie, in the *Stuart H. Dunn*. Where is she now?

The only woman I ever heard of holding a master's ticket on the lakes was Capt. Maud Buckley, a Canadian lady, who died in Port Huron this month. I call Capt. Buckley a lady, not from politeness, but out of respect for her performance.

She was of Scottish blood, born in Wellington County, near Clifford, eighty years ago. She was a Hepburn, too, and Sophie Maud Hepburn was her maiden name. Sophia Maud Hepburn married Captain Thomas Gillies of Kincardine, in 1881. Four years later he left her a widow, with two little boys to look after. Capt. Gillies was lost while in command of the schooner *Annie Watt*, which he sailed for Owen Sound owners. He was swept off the top of the cabin by the mainboom, when they were bringing the vessel about in a hard breeze. His sons, George Gillies, of Washington, D.C., and Archie Gillies of Wisconsin, are still living.

Mrs. Gillies courageously shipped as cook in lake vessels, as many another sailor's widow has done, and eventually she married one of her skippers, Capt. James Buckley, a fellow Canadian, sailing out of Detroit. Her new husband obtained command of the big three-masted [missing in original, *Fanny Campbell*?] continued to sail with him.

The *Fanny Campbell*, in tribute to her square upper and lower topsails on the foremast, was known on the lakes as a "barque." She was one of the best of the "old-canallers," and, like so many others, had been built by Louis Shickluna in his yard at St. Catharines. She was launched in 1868, and measured 139 feet on deck, 26 feet 2 inches beam and 11 feet 5 inches depth of hold; 346 tons register; one of the largest vessels yet to squeeze through the Welland Canal. She is said to have made one or more voyages across the Atlantic in the 1870's.

The late Capt. Angus Macdonald, of the steamer *Hudson*, in which he was lost with all hands, got his initiation into the lake marine as horseboy aboard the *Fanny Campbell*. The late Frederick Campbell Parry, customs officer at Fort William, was another graduate of the barque's stable, under the staysail boom up forward. She was a timber-drogher, and carried her own horses, to tow her through the canals and heave the big sticks of square timber in to the stern-ports with the quill-falls.

Sailing so much with her husband, Mrs. Buckley got to know the *Fanny Campbell* and the waters she had to ply as well as he did. When he fell sick Mrs. Buckley took charge and brought the vessel into port. He suffered from a lingering malady, and never sailed again. His gallant wife wrote her examinations and took out captain's papers, so as to be able to operate the vessel, which was their means of livelihood. She shipped another woman as cook and bossed a crew of six men and one or two mates as efficiently as any skipper with side-whiskers. She was quick as a cat, and would lay aloft with the watch on the topsail yards if necessary. He was a good man who could beat her to the weather earing of the upper topsail when sail had to be shortened or made. But she was mild mannered and refined, and never wore trousers unless the

particular job called for oilskins or overalls. Nor did she smoke, drink or swear – like most sailors she thought cigarettes for women silly.

Mrs. Buckley sailed the *Fanny Campbell* for some years, and it wasn't her fault that she lost her. The big schooner was caught in a northeast gale in the fall of 1890, and driven ashore near Harbor Beach, on the west side of Lake Huron. Probably her sails blew out, and she could not be kept off the land. The *Fanny Campbell* went in the breakers on the sandy shore two miles south of the harbor, and her crew took to the rigging.

The U. S. lifeboat fought her way down the shore and got alongside. "Jump, ma'am, jump, the next time she rises!" roared the coxswain, Wm. J. Small, to the sturdy skirted figure standing on the rail and clinging to the lanyards of the mizzen rigging. The boat sank in the trough and soared up on the next crest, and the astonished coxswain heard a high alto voice singing above the gale: "I'm captain of this vessel, and I'll be the last to leave. Come down from aloft, boys, and jump as you see your chance!"

Every man obeyed the skipperess, and when the last one was safe in the lifeboat, and not before, she swung out on the fall of the mizzen boom topping-lift and dropped into the lifeboat as though stepping into a ferry.

Mrs. Buckley did not seek another command, for her husband died. She was essentially domestic in her tastes and knew that the world needed good cooks more than women needed men's jobs, so she became chief cook in the steamer *Edmonton*, running out of Sarnia for Port Arthur. She was in this steamer for twelve years. Coxswain Small, of the lifeboat, was a dredging contractor, and Mrs. Buckley also cooked for his crews. She was generous to a fault, and most of her savings went to the help of sailors in distress during the long hard winters; but she was death on waste.

Once in Bay City when she was cooking for Captain Small one of the dredge crew, a notorious pie-eater, edged up to the galley between meals and coaxed for a "piece." Mrs. Buckley buttered him some biscuits. He hadn't the nerve to insist on pie, and slipped away and dropped the biscuits overside. Mrs. Buckley saw them floating past from her galley window. She rushed out and grabbed the culprit by the collar of his shirt.

"Young fellow," said she, "for two pins I'd toss you overside after those biscuits. Never come near my galley again between meals, if you want one whole bone in your body."

Mrs. Buckley died in a hospital in Port Huron after a month's illness. She had every attention from her many friends and her nieces and nephews living in Detroit. She was a Presbyterian, and her minister, the Rev. N. S. Sichterman, of the First Presbyterian Church, was a frequent visitor. She was a grand old lady and never looked her eighty years.

Mrs. Buckley may have been the only certificated lake skipper with master's papers, but she was not the only petticoated commander in the lake fleets. Magistrate J. J. O'Connor of Port Arthur, who sailed out of Whitby as a boy, once shipped in a Port Burwell brigantine operated on these curious lines: The vessel was owned by a family consisting of mother, father and son. The

father was nominal master, the son mate, and the mother managing owner. She would hire the crew, four men and a woman cook, pay the wages and collect the freights. If, as and when the old man became illuminated (which was often) mother would throw him ashore and tell the son: "Single up your lines, Mister (the mate's usual title on salt water) and get sail on her!"

"What course, Maw?" son would ask, as the dock receded. The old lady would snap: "We're bound for Conneaut," or Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago, as the case might be, "lay out the course for yourself. You're old enough."

"Yes, Maw," the son would say. and then roar to the man at the wheel "Sou'-sou'-west and no higher," or whatever the course was. He was an experienced navigator and just a polite and dutiful son.

The old lady would crowd sail and keep the brig humping, and usually at the first port or in the river the old man would come aboard from some rowboat, with his tail between his legs, take his bawling out, and meekly inquire which watch the son had. He would take the other one, and, with the suds out of his system, sail the vessel well. But if either father or son got her aground or in irons or incurred any of the mishaps incidental to voyaging, the old lady would rate them like a cast-iron owner, and take the cost of the damage out of their "cut" on the proceeds of the charter.

(Caption) THE "FANNY CAMPBELL," MRS. BUCKLEY'S COMMAND, from an oil painting made of her on an ocean voyage.

(Caption) Schooner LAKE FOREST of Milwaukee, a contemporary of the Fanny Campbell in her later years.