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Schooner Days, XXV (25)
By C.H.J. Snider

SIX SHIPS

"Six Ships Vernon" was the nickname of that British Vice-Admiral of the Blue who invented grog; and who boasted, and made good his boast that, given half a dozen vessels he would beat the Spaniards out of Porto Bello.

Peace hath her victories no less renowned than war. Also her heroes. "Six Ships Macdonald" might have been the epithet of this Goderich mariner as well as his epitaph. His six commands in life are mentioned on his tombstone. But he lived and died plain Captain John.

*ALARM
ANNIE AGNES
EXPLORER
FLORENCE
JOHN G. KOLFAGE
AZOV*

These are the six sailers, large and small, of which Capt. John Macdonald, of Goderich, was master.

The list commences with the yacht *Alarm*, unknown to Toronto yachtsmen of this century, but remembered by those of last. She was once owned by Messrs Hagarty and Grasett – who were also shareholders in many Toronto trading schooners in the brave days of old.

The *Alarm* was built at Goderich in 1875 for the late M. P. Hayes, Seaforth lumber merchant and shipowner. John Macdonald, sailor in Hayes lumber carriers, was also sailing master in Mr Hayes' yacht. Goderich still remembers how he fitted her out and took her to Detroit, with a crew of Goderich boys – all old men now, if alive – and cleaned up the American champion. John Macdonald went with the *Alarm* when she migrated to Lake Ontario.

It was Lt.-Col. H J. Grasett, secretary of the Royal Canadian Yacht Club and later Chief Constable of Toronto, who, with Messrs. Anderson and Fiskin, bought the *Alarm*. She had been schooner rigged. They changed her to a yawl. They also lengthened her, and refitted her handsomely throughout. Heeled to a certain angle, in smooth water the *Alarm* would develop sudden bursts which amazed beholders. She created a sensation once by leading the whole fleet in a cruising race to Niagara, when all the betting had been on how much she would be behind the next-last boat in.

The *Alarm* was not long lived. She was sold and broken up in the 80s. But long before that John Macdonald had left her. Saving his money and, watching his chance he returned to Goderich, building the fish boat *Annie Agnes*, one of the old-time mackinaws, and naming her after his wife. A little thing, and sweet – and his own. Second in the granite scroll above his grave in Goderich now.

From the open fish boat he stepped to the quarterdeck of the hundred ton schooner *Explorer*, at the time when she was owned by the late Judge Lewis, of Goderich. She killed two crews one off Tobermory and one on the Greenock Shoals, Stokes Bay. Her story is luridly tangled with suspicions of scuttling, switched cargoes, and drowned men. It is hard to get it

straight, at this distance, fifty years afterwards. One tale is that she was reported lost on Shingle Shoals by her master, but was afterwards found on the Greenock Shoal with spars above water and her crew frozen in the rigging. She was supposed to have a valuable cargo of whiskey; but when Harry Jex, the Port Huron diver, bought the wreck two years later and went to salvage it he was said to have found nothing but railroad iron – and what looked like auger holes in her bottom.

That is one version. Another is that when she capsized off the Tubs of Tobermory and drowned her crew her then owner – who was not, of course, the late Judge Lewis – was suspected of having had her loaded with a false cargo and to have scuttled her for the insurance. But the poor man was found drowned himself – according to one story in her cabin, according to another in the lake – so that should clear him.

All these legends cannot be true, for they are self-contradictory. If anyone can give the “true inwardness” it would be very welcome.

It seems to be established, however, that the *Explorer* drowned two crews, one perishing on board of her. when she rolled over, the other dying of exposure in her rigging when she stranded in an autumn gale.

Capt Macdonald was the *Explorer's* master in between her two tragedies. He had good luck with her. So much so that he was given command of the *Florence*, a full canal-sized “brig” (brigantine) with double topsail and topgallantsail. She had been built in Kingston or Port Burwell, and was owned by M.P. Hayes, who had owned the *Alarm*. He was twelve years in the *Florence* altogether.

John Macdonald sailed the *Florence* in the grain and lumber trade, when the wharves of Goderich would be lined with “for-’n’-afters” “three-’n-afters,” “barques,” and “brigs,” loading square timber or boards, or shingles, tanbark and staves. Lake Huron was a great highway for the lumber hookers, and Goderich was a great port. The “barque” *Maitland* was built there. And the *E. W. Rathbun* was lost there on the breakwater. Her insurance had run out at noon that day. She was lost at night.

There was the *Lilly Dancy*, owned by Dancy and Marlton, built by Henry Marlton, in 1856, who built the *Stanley* and the *Tecumseh* and other Goderich vessels. She was named after a well known ship-owner’s daughter.

Marlton built the *Stanley* two years earlier, and the *Tecumseh* in 1862. The latter was one of his chief works, a schooner of 245 tons register, 111 feet on deck, 29 feet 4 inches beam, and 10 feet deep in the hold. She was too big to pass the Welland Canal in her day; too wide for the locks, although they will now take a vessel of eighty feet beam. Vanevery and Rumball owned her and several other vessels.

And there was the *Absolom Shade*, – what a name! – built in 1857, and the *Sailor’s Bride*, owned by C. C. Crabbe, and the old *Annexation*, afterwards owned by Wright and Wallace of Port Hope, and sailed by Capt. Charles Wakely, Sr.

The *Annexation* was a thorough “old timer,” built in 1849 for C.C. Crabbe, before centreboards came into general use on the Great Lakes. She was one of the last “standing keelers.”

Goderich was a great town for sailors; is yet. Big bold hills for a landfall. A snug port at

their feet. The town square laid out like a compass rose, with the courthouse in the centre, bowered in trees, smart shops on each of the eight surrounding sides, and streets radiating eight ways to the four cardinals and four half cardinals – north, south, east west; north-east, south-west, south-east, north-west. The intersections make triangles, demanding good navigation if homeward bound after closing hours. Goderich runs to the octagon and multiples of eight. Only last week the octogenarians of Goderich had a celebration; and lively lads they were too, those eighty-year young men.

It is a big shipping port yet for grain and salt. It has huge concrete elevators, topped by the high hillsides. The sail trade is all done now, save for few able little fish-boats with auxiliary power. These same fishboats commemorate John Macdonald. They are built and sailed by his sons.

After some years in the *Florence*, with sturdy boys getting to the age where they could pull on a rope, and little daughters becoming useful at home, John Macdonald invested all his savings in a schooner of his own.

She was the *John G. Kolfage*, built in Amherstburg in 1869; small and not new, but fast. She was clipper-bowed and two-masted; 78 feet on deck, 20 feet beam, and 7 feet deep in the hold; registered 84 tons measurement, but could carry over 200; white bulwarks and black below; so quick in stays it was hard to get her headsheets pinned down in time.

With the *Kolfage* he did well, carrying grain and salt and lumber, with his boys to help him – “Red” and “Mac” and “Angy” and “Bertie.” They grew up to be good sailormen; you will not find better fishers between Cove Island and the River than those Macdonald boys working out of Goderich to-day, with their clipper-bowed power boats. The old schooner influence is manifest in broad, round, transom sterns of these boats and figureheads crowning the knee of the stem – a girl's head and a pair of fishes. Heads and sterns are gaily painted, schooner fashion. One boat is the *Margaret Macdonald*. The other is the *Mac's*, of Goderich, named for Malcolm Redfern and Malcolm Macdonald and their brothers are known to every water lover on Lake Huron.

John Macdonald's big chance came when the schooner *Azov*, long a profitable carrier on Lake Ontario, came on the market. There will be more about the *Azov* next week.