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Schooner Days, IV (4)
by C.H.J. Snider

Knights of Malta

That was a great yarn the Caithness Association heard last week from Capt. Jas. McCannel, of Port McNicol, master of the C.P.R. steamer Assiniboia, about the suspended sentence that still hangs fire over half the crew of the Malta, although she left her bones on the Devil's Nose fifty years ago.

It was a favorite story with the late Magistrate J.J. O'Connor, of Port Arthur, who was also an early lake sailor, and appreciated both from the judicial and the nautical point of view.

Bespeaking allowance for inaccuracies due to lapse of time and other perils and hazards of navigation, the story of the Malta and her men is here passed on:

ERE the last school shovel scraped the last half-bushel of wheat from the bilges of the *Malta*, at the old elevator in Collingwood, Capt. Carridice was prancing to get away. It was late in the fall. The wind was blowing fair for Chicago. Another trip cols be squeezed in. At the high rates then paid on grain, it might mean \$3,000 in hard cash ere the week was out. The *Malta* made one run from Chicago to Collingwood in fifty hours in July, 1855. True, she had taken twenty-six days in November of that same year for the same voyage, and blown out every sail she had in process. But – here was a fair wind, and she might do the 560 miles at the seemingly impossible average of eleven knots again.

"Get her out, mister," said Captain Carridice to his first officer. Black-bearded Dave Hunter, of Port Colborne, King of the Welland canal, where the *Malta* was built was the *Malta's* first mate. She carried two mates; and eight men in the forecabin, in those old days of hand-power and "armstrong gear."

Davey bellowed down the fore scuttle: "Show a leg, all of you, and when you come, come a -running!" But only four worthies tumbled out.

"Where's the 'gang?'" demanded Davey.

"Hot time up town last night, and half the boys was pinched!" explained the second mate.

"We'll be frozen in for the winter in this Hen-and-Chickens hole, where you can't get sailors for love or money!" groaned Capt. Carridice. "And a fair wind too! Oh, why –"

"I'll be back with 'em in a bit," quoth David, sliding a mooring line.

Up town he sped. It was a market morning, and the place was crowded. Particularly around the courthouse, where farmers, townsmen and a crowd of lumberjacks on their way north for the winter cut, were debating what was going to happen to "them sailors" who had raised such a particular cain the night before. The police court was in session.

David Hunter barged up the aisle like the *Malta* herself making her fifty hour passage.

The magistrate had cleared his throat and begun to speak. "The sentence will be," said he – David's eye fell on the stray lambs of his flock, huddled hopelessly in the police court dock.

"Never mind, your lordship, I'll give 'em what's good for 'em," bellowed the bearded shepherd respectfully. Then, with concentrated rebuke for his victims vibrating in every shard of his black whiskers. "Don't you's know the company of lawyers and judges is no fit place for the likes of sailors? Out of this, now!"

With that he grabbed the nearest of the Maltese kittens much as would an angry mother cat, only he used the slack of the trousers as well as the neckband as convenient "holts," and propelled him from the dock and through the courthouse window with neatness and despatch.

The window still was low, not more more than knee-height. Before the crash of the landing reverberated from the courthouse square David had emptied the dock and started for the door.

With roads of "Order!" Collingwood constabulary had fallen upon David as one man – as indeed the whole force was. Police attention commenced as soon as David began to wag his black and bushy beard, but having more serious business in hand he had ignored it until now. Not for nothing was he named King of the Welland Canal. There was no man or mule on the "big ditch" between Port Dalhousie and Gravelly Bay who was his match at action or argument.

"If you must do something," said David to the assembled lambs of the law, "see that those swabs get aboard the *Malta* without stopping to liquor up." Whereat he hove the chief through the window after his crew.

David emerged from the courthouse door to partake in a Donnybrook between the townsfolk led by the battered chief, and his released sailors. Charging the mass, he did great execution until some thoughtful citizen rang the firebell and the volunteer fire brigade responded – both of them. Or was it three?

The reinforcements almost overpowered King David and his troops who, who like the Adullamite garrison were somewhat the words for wear to begin with. But the lumberjacks sympathizing with those who go down to the sea in ships and do business in great and strong waters, rallied to the Maltese cross.

So a boiling whirlpool of fists and feet and checked shirts and tossing beards, with a particularly bushy one riding the crest like a black squall rolled to the rusty elevator. There were curses, cries and splashes, and some went over the wharf edge and some were carried on shutters. Davey Hunter helped his men up the *Malta's* side with the copper toe of his red-topped boot, cast off the mooring lines and swung himself aboard by the lanyard of a fender. The *Malta's* fore-topsail bellied out and rose to the top-gallant crosstrees with a mighty hollering of "Weigh-heigh-heigh-YIP!" and other such sobering cries.

She was on her way to Chicago.

The *Malta* was one of Louis Shickluna's early and earnest efforts at completely filling a

Welland Canal lock. She was his first barquentine, and the largest vessel he had he had yet built since he had come to St. Catharines. He called her after the Mediterranean Island where he was born. She was launched in 1853.

Black, with white stripes, plumb-stemmed, blunt in the bow, square in the stern and flat in the bottom, the *Malta* was no beauty. But she was a grand carrier. She was 137 feet 6 inches on deck, 23 feet 6 inches beam and 10 feet 9 inches deep in the hold, a tight fit for the old locks.

Her registered tonnage was 366, and she could walk away with 22,000 bushels of grain, although 18,000 was all that could pass through the canal locks up to 1874. Nine feet of draft was still then the limit. As soon as the Ontario, Simcoe and Huron Railway was completed the golden stream from the western prairies was short-circuited across the Province of Ontario instead of having to all go the long route down Lake Huron and Lake Erie and through the Welland Canal. A roaring trade developed between Chicago and Collingwood and the *Malta*, unhampered here by the dimensions of canal locks, was in up to the neck as early as 1855.

Mr. Shickluna sold his sample of oaken attitude to Mrs. Ellen Rae, of Hamilton. Mrs. Rae also owned the barquentine *Plymouth* of similar size. She must have made money out of her fleet, for as much as \$7,040 was paid in freight on one cargo such as theirs from Chicago to Kingston. Such a passage usually took a month, but it was made in eight days one by the schooner *Twilight*, owned by J.J. Hagarty, of Toronto.

It is curious that some of the bluntest and boxiest lake carriers had records for the best passages under sail. The *Twilight* was no yacht. She was a sister of the *Speedwell*, and the pair of them were hard steering wagons of great carrying capacity. They were two-masted schooners, and smaller than the *Malta*.

They called the *Malta* a barque. She wasn't. She was a barquentine.

Instead of a gas foresail and gaff topsail on the foremast like a schooner, she had square sails there, spread by spars crossing the mast. Her fore-yard measured 63 feet; a record for a vessel of her size, where a long fifty-foot yard was considered long enough. It was half as long as her oak keel. Her topsail yard was 55 feet and hoisted up to the topmast head. Above that, on a topgallant mast, was her topgallant yard, 48 feet long. Over it she may have had a royal and a pair of batwings, climbing in a little pyramid towards the fore-truck.

And she had topmast studding sails. Captain David Reynolds, veteran launch master for the Royal Canadian Yacht Club, used to tell of swarming aloft on her topsail yard to set them. He sailed in the *Malta* as a boy.

Between foremast and mainmast she had main, middle and upper staysails. On mainmast and mizzen she had gaff-and-boom sails and gaff topsails like a schooner.

Her rig disappeared from the lakes about fifty years ago. It became increasingly hard to hire sailors for square-riggers. They required more men, and the men had more work, hauling four or five pairs of braces on a mast, heaving as many sets of lifts and halliards, and climbing to

dizzying perches on the yard arms to furl or reef.

"It got so," Capt. Sol Sylvester said, "that if you hired a man uptown by the time he got to the foot of the street and saw the square yards across the mast he would duck under your elbow and run away. He'd know he could get an easier berth in a fore-and-after."

Lake nomenclature differed from that of salt water. Three masted schooners were not called terns as in Nova Scotia, but "three-and-afters." "Fore-and-after" always meant a two masted schooner. Two masted schooners which had a square rigged topsail and batwings were usually called "brigs." They were not, properly speaking, even brigantines, which are completely square rigged on the foremast.

True brigs and barques were rare on the lakes after the time of the War of 1812. The first three-masted schooner was built as early as 1822 at Moy House, in the present limits of Walkerville, by that stout old merchant prince and fur trader Angus McIntosh. This rig became very popular on the lakes. Governor Simcoe had contemplated it for a "schooner frigate," the *St. Mark*, for which he had plans drawn before the close of the eighteenth century. The spar dimensions he set down indicate a vessel with fore-and-aft lower sails on each of three masts and square topsails on them. The *St. Mark*, however, was not built.

The last true brig on the lakes is said to have been the *Robert Burns*, lost in 1869 near the Straits of Mackinaw. She was built in 1848 by Pangbourn at Port Huron, and was owned by Hohn Owen of Detroit, after being rebuilt in 1861. She measured 307 tons register.

As for barques, the only one the writer ever saw among the two hundred and four freshwater sailing craft of his acquaintance – exclusive of yachts – was the U.S.S. *Essex* at Toledo in 1910. She had then a full barque rig, since removed; but was a government patrol vessel and training ship, not a carrier. Several real barques were built on the lakes for export to salt water. The *Garden Island* and the *Cataraqui*, both by the Calvins, opposite Kingston, were two, and the *Reindeer*, built at Coldwater, is the third.

One lake barque which appears to have been of the true variety was the *E.B. Morgan* of 310 register, built in Grand Haven in 1847, and owned by J. Stafford and Co. of Chicago, in 1864.

Grand Haven, on Lake Michigan, was the originator of the "Grand Haven rig" which was the nearest approach the Great Lakes ever got to the ancient ketch of salt water. Some Grand Haven skipper with a three masted schooner lost his rotten mainmast in a breeze, and was surprised to find that with only two masts remaining, his vessel worked practically as well as before. Others imitated him and new schooners were built and rigged with foremast at one end and mizzen at the other, and the long space abaft the foresail filled in with a mizzen staysail.

The *E.B. Morgan*, however, was not of this Grand Haven rig, which came into vogue after her day. Robert Thomas recorded her as a barque, the only vessel of the rig in his register in 1864, although 45 Canadian vessels and 112 Americans, elsewhere described as "barques," are registered by him as barquentines. Some of these were actually barquentines and some were

three-masted topsail schooners. Thomas registered the *Robert Burns* as the only brig on the lakes in 1864, and enrolled 16 Canadian and 63 American two-masted vessels as brigantines.

The American vessel *Cortland*, built at Sheboygan on Lake Michigan in 1867 by Albert G. Huntley, is documented as of barque rig by her registry at the port of Milwaukee. This gives her length as 173 feet 6 in., beam 34 ft., 4 in., depth of hold 13 ft, 7 in., and tonnage 676 register. This was a very large vessel for the lakes at the time, and at any time in the wooden era, for her carrying capacity would be close on 1,500 tons. Documentation proves little as to the rig, although the size makes it not improbable that the *Cortland* was a real barque. Dozens of topsail schooners, as already related, were so documented.

Anything with square canvas of any description laid claim as a "barque" or "brig." Perhaps the best examples are a pair of little scows in the stone trade, neither of them much more than 50 feet in length. They were two-masted schooners. One bore on her stern the proud legend "BARQUE SWALLOW of PORT CREDIT," and the name-board of the other proclaimed "BRIG ROVER of OAKVILLE." Each was so registered. The reason was that an old salty named Jack Sponton, had adorned the *Barque Swallow* with a square topsail on her meagre fore topmast when he rigged her up from the sand scow that she was originally, and so registered her, while the Brig Rover had daringly imitated the "barque" in her headgear when she first came out. The little squares of canvas disappeared from the tophammer of both the scows after a few seasons, but they wore the prefixes "barque" and "brig" on their name-boards up to their dying day, which happened soon after the Cobourg harbor work ended twenty years ago.

The *Malta*, finished in 1878 or thereabouts on the Devil's Nose, that stormy promontory that projects into Lake Ontario on the south shore, twenty miles or so to the west of Rochester. She pounded to pieces. Magistrate John A. Proctor of Brighton, Ont., was her last owner.