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TWILIGHT and SPEEDWELL

WHOSE design the *Speedwell* was is lost in the mists of speculation, but her building, and that of a similar schooner, the *Twilight*, was credited to Jack Tait, who built more Prince Edward County schooners than any one man. The pair were erroneously called twins, but while they looked alike and were of similar dimensions they were built a couple of years apart and several miles apart, and were not identical. The *Twilight* was built at Picton for John Walters, W. Ostrander and Capt. Cummings, in 1873, by Jack Tait, but it was George Dixon who built the *Speedwell*, and she was built at Cooper's Wharf in South Bay, in 1875, for Messrs. Palmateer and Collier. Her first master was Capt. R. Coutts.

The *Twilight* and the *Speedwell* were both owned by Hagarty and Grasett in Toronto, before Capt. Ewart bought the latter. He sold her to Capt. Williams.

Both vessels were alike in their fiery end, the *Speedwell* being burned in Toronto Bay in 1896, years after the *Twilight* had perished by fire elsewhere.

These two schooners were in the Great Gale of 1880 which capsized, wrecked or stranded a dozen vessels on Lake Ontario. The *Twilight* split her foremast head down to the bolsters with the strain of the peak halliard blocks and lost her foresail. She fetched up at Ogdensburg, whither she and the *Speedwell* were bound at the time, with grain from Toronto.

Bobby Dale of Brighton, now 82, was a lad of 18 in the *Speedwell*, and perhaps we may repeat his story of the night:

"The *Twilight*, sailed by Capt. Alex Ewart, our captain's brother, lost every stitch of her foresail and had as close a call as we had on Long Point.

"I told our mate, an American from Ogdensburg, we were going to catch it, but he paid no attention, so I stuck my head in the companionway and called to the Ole Man to come up. It was his watch below. This woke the cook, and she woke Capt. Jim Ewart, who had turned in, but before he was out on deck the first of the squall struck us from the southwest.

"It was a snorter, and with everything on her the *Speedwell* was unmanageable. We had to get in both the gafftopsail and clew down the jib topsail of course and squat the mainsail and foresail. While we were at it she jibed the mainsail all standing. It is a wonder it didn't take the mainmast out of her, but all that went was four or five masthoops. They burst with the strain. We settled the mainsail down more and jibed it back, for to carry it on the starboard side would have fetched us on the north shore. After jibing it back we stowed it altogether and settled the foresail to the first reef. Then with the staysail and standing jib set we went boiling down the lake.

"Capt. Ewart kept sail on her to run her ahead of the seas. The sea came right in with the

wind, and it seemed to take no time to make up. We were in water up to our ears. It came spilling aboard over the taffrail and washed the mainsheet off the wheel grating. That was an ungodly mess to straighten out, working up to your knees in water all the time and sometimes over your head. One sea caught our Ogdensburg mate. I had one glimpse of him, straddle of a fender, riding that sea like a Hawaiian surf-boarder. I thought it took him clear over the bows, but the fender jammed between the pawlpost and the knight-heads, and he hooked his toes under the windlass, and there he hung for dear life.

The Old Man – Jim Ewart, was young then, but every master is “old” – was on the cabin top, hanging on with his arms around one of the peak halliard blocks of the main gaff. He was the only dry man aboard, for she would fill up to the rail and the water would spill back overboard when she rolled, like a woman employing a dishpan.

“She’s going straight under and never coming back!” he called to me when he saw the water boiling in at both ends.

“Don’t tell those fellows forward that,” I yelled, “or they’ll let go their hold and drown before their time.

“I was at that wheel from twenty minutes past nine that night till three o’clock the next afternoon, with the exception of a short while, while Walter Maitland relieved me, and I was helping rig a burton to see if we couldn’t heave up our centreboard.

“One enormous sea had washed the provision box off the deck, where it was bolted forward of the cabin, and hurled it against the iron centreboard winch and smashed that. The box weighed a ton, for one-half of it held our meats and groceries, and the other held our big lines.

“When the winch broke the centreboard dropped. We couldn’t heave it up with the winch gone, but we knew that the board dangling around under her bottom would break off. We tried with a burton from the mainmast head, but we couldn’t budge it. And with the *Speedwell* rolling and writhing, and sashaying around in the sea the board buckled under her and did break off. She was always a brute to steer, but you can imagine what she was with twenty or thirty feet of splintered board wagging around under her. She would turn around and try to poke her jibboom through the lazy-jacks of the mainsail.

“By this time we were down off the Scotch Bonnet, and it was daylight, between 7 and 8 in the morning. It was just by God’s mercy that we cleared Long Point in the end, for the schooner was almost out of hand. The wind hauled to the west and to the northwest, and that just let us go clear. But I’ve never seen that point so close aboard as I did through the lather of breakers that Sunday afternoon. Long Point or Point Petre as the chart calls it, is the farthest south the Prince Edward Peninsula sticks out. If you clear that you can keep on going.

“Last I saw of the big *Thomas C. Street* she was blowing across our stern, with every sail she had streaming in rags and patches from her yards and gaffs. Fine No. 1 storm canvas blew out of her like so much brown paper, and she was quite unmanageable. She had a high topgallant rail all round her, for her ocean voyaging, and she was full to the top of that rail, for

she had no sail to keep her running off from the seas. Her crew were busting the bulwarks out of her with sledges and windlass brakes and capstan bars, to free her decks of water. Sometimes she had a hundred tons of Lake Ontario above her hatches. Yet she came up each time, and would have pulled through if she had only had any sail left to save her. She drove in, on the beach above Wellington, a total wreck. Her crew got off alive, sliding down a lifeline that they sent ashore by swinging the heaving line from the yardarm of the foreyard, braced up sharp next to the shore.

“Sixteen vessels had been in sight just before dark Saturday; night, and by Sunday evening every one of them had been damaged and some would never sail again, and 30 good Ontario sailormen had sand in their shirts.

“By daylight that wild morning we could see nothing of the propeller *Zealand*'s smoke. She had left Toronto after we did. We, of course, did not know it, but she had foundered with all on board, 16 men, on the Badgeley Shoals above Proctor's Island,

“And we could see nothing of the *Norway*, for she had rolled over on her beam ends and drowned a crew of eight. She was loaded with square timber, and floated. It was the *Mary Taylor* that sighted her, water-logged, but still floating, the next day. The *Snow Bird* and the *Wood Duck* were ashore, under the guns of Fort Ontario at Oswego, driven right up on the beach.

“The *Baltic* had lost her mainsail, gaff and boom and most of her deck load of lumber. She was loaded for Oswego and had to run into Kingston. The *Bermuda* had lost her rudder and gone ashore at Port Granby and been broken into chips.

“We came up on two vessels; one was an American, and seemed to be making good weather of it. The other was yawing all over the place and made the *Speedwell*'s steering streamlined in comparison. We passed her close, and saw she was towing a big stick of timber-astern. She was the *Great Western*, of Port Hope, and she had lost her rudder in the gale. But her Old Man had got this drag out over the stern, with a line to each quarter, with a tackle on it, and by heaving in and easing off he was making her steer some sort of a course; she fetched into Kingston, or at least to safe anchorage.

“We ran on down the river, went into Clayton to get straightened out and cook a meal. It was our first hot food since supper the night before, when we anchored at 3 o'clock Sunday afternoon.

“But I must say our cook, a Kingston woman, was as good as any man aboard. All through the night that cook of ours was up and busy making sandwiches for us.

“From where I was at the wheel I could hear her being banged from one side of the galley to the other, and sometimes clear across the cabin, as the *Speedwell* rolled. There would be a crash of dishes and knives and forks and spoons, out every now and then she would bang on the companion scuttle, and I'd yell, 'Wait a minute!' or 'Now's your chance!' according to whether a sea was coming or not. When I'd say, 'Now's your chance!' we'd pull the slide back quickly, and out would pop her dishpan full of sandwiches and the coffee pot, and we'd grab for it and

close the scuttle before a sea could pour down and drown her in the cabin. She was a grand woman.”

The *Twilight* had the reputation of getting from Chicago to Kingston in eight days, with a load of grain, and of wearing away the arms of every man at the wheel up to the shoulders before the week ended.

The one thing is as credible as the other, so perhaps she did both. The two sisters were notoriously hard to keep straight running before the wind, and the *Twilight* must have had the wind over the taffrail all the way down. If she even got to Port Colborne in eight days she would be doing well, for she would have almost nine hundred miles of water – four lakes, two straits and two rivers – astern of her. However – The *Twilight*'s registered dimensions were, length 106 feet, beam 25 feet 7 inches, depth of hold 9 feet 1 inch, registered tonnage 173. The *Speedwell* may have been a trifle shorter, but was of the same beam and at least a foot deeper in the hold, perhaps two. Her frames had been carried up higher, giving her more freeboard and more capacity, but her registered tonnage was only 180. You could crowd almost 500 tons deadweight into her; certainly 400. Being of 180 tons register it was unnecessary for her to have a certificated mate. This did not affect either the papers or pay of Capt. Alex. Ure, who was at first a partner with Capt. John Williams in the *Speedwell*, for he had a master's certificate and was receiving \$10 a month more than the standard rate of wages for a mate. But Capt. Williams turned his knowledge of the law to good account once when he was in Amherstburg with the *Speedwell*, and asked for a clearance for Toledo, whither he was bound. The fussy old gentleman in the harbor office demanded his papers, and was shown them, all in order.

“Where is your mate's certificate?” he asked.

“This vessel does not require a certified mate,” said Capt. Williams. “You can see by her papers she is of 180 tons register.”

“You must produce your mate's certificate,” said the harbormaster. “Otherwise, no clearance will be granted.”

“I am going aboard to order my crew to make sail,” said Capt. Williams. “Before we cast off I shall telegraph Ottawa that I am bound for Toledo with a properly registered Canadian vessel, properly manned, and that I have been refused a clearance and am therefore sailing without one.”

“I have warned you, Captain,” said the officer.

When Capt. Williams had reached the *Speedwell* when a messenger was awaiting him.

“The harbormaster says it's all right about your clearance,” he said, “he says to just send your mate up to the office for it.”

“I've just come from the harbor office and been refused a clearance,” answered Capt. Williams. “If the harbormaster wishes to change his mind, let him send the clearance down in a hurry, for we'll be under way in five minutes.”

The messenger ran all the way to the harbor office and back.

“Here’s your clearance, captain,” he panted, waving the paper over the *Speedwell*’s rail. “Sorry for the mistake.”

“Thanks,” said Capt. Williams. “Cast off men!”

In Toledo there were some questions about grain cargo. Capt. Williams went right to the mat. He spoke to the inspector of hulls. “They want to class my vessel down,” said he, “and say she’s a couple of soft spots in her centreboard box. We are taking those timbers out and replacing them, and meantime we have her sound and watertight and will keep her so. Will you make a survey for yourself and see just how good she is?”

The inspector ordered the hatches off and the sails hoisted enough for him to see their heads and made a good examination.

“Captain,” said he, “I am giving certificates every day to vessels not as good as yours. Your vessel is as sound as the good grain she carries.”

“Will you give me a line to that effect?” asked Capt. Williams.

“I will, right now.” And he did. That line was worth thousands of dollars of unneeded carpenter work, for it gave the *Speedwell* her share of the seasonal grain trade, which was to the routine freighting of coal and coarse freight what the cream is to the coffee.

The immediate effect was to give her a cargo of 14,000 bushels of corn to Kingston, which, at 2 1/2 cents, made a freight of \$350, good money for a “full canaller” at this time.

At Kingston the Canadian inspector watched every bushel of corn coming out of her. It was all dry as when it left the cob. Capt. Williams got bigger and better cargoes; more than once he got 16,000 bushels of wheat into the *Speedwell*, a dead weight of 480 tons for a 180 tons register.

“The *Speedwell* made money for me while I was sailing her,” he said modestly. “When others sailed her she took it away from me.”

(Caption) ALIKE IN THEIR- FIERY END – Two old sketches of the Speedwell, made after she was burned in Toronto Bay, thirty-four years ago. The Twilight was burned earlier.