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Schooner Days, DXXI (521)
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AT THE FOOT OF THE HIGHLANDS

EAST of Toronto, well east, the land heaves up in the Highlands of Scarboro. They are not glens and mountains as in Scotland, but a series of clay folds, increasing to the great Hog's Back, three hundred feet high under the cross of St. Augustine, and subsiding in widening ripples as they spread eastwards. Mounting them, inland, the clear keen air proclaims elevation, but the impression of simply rolling plains may persist until you come to their very south-most verge. Then, parting the sumach bushes, you are faced with the soft blue scarf of Lake Ontario, spread for thirty miles to a horizon vanishing in a bluer sky. The lacelike fringes a hundred yards under your feet are breakers creaming silently because so far below.

Seen from the water or the shingly shore the Highlands are utterly different. The friendly earth ends with savage abruptness in a ragged wall, perpendicular here, there overhanging and cut by spouting springs, elsewhere bastioned by pinnacles and isolated promontories accessible only to wings, yet capped with a few square yards of turf or a starved apple tree. It may have grown from a seed dropped by a bird, or be the survivor of a pioneer orchard which has slipped into the lake with a century of erosion. In another place battalions of birches, aspens, sumachs and evergreens may storm the heights, with auxiliary troops of castaway hollyhocks and iris from the gardens above, mingling with parachute corps of the great willowherb in uniforms of bright mauve. In another the scars of the cliff may be sealed with tons of scrap metals – stove pipes, car bodies, bath tubs, wrecked safes. In still another the clay has been hewn into the shapes of gabled or hip-roofed barns. Like cast clouts of giants waiting to wade out, the wastage of the cliffs lies in layers at their feet and spreads in slow folds over the bed of the lake. Sometimes it forms a beach, sometimes a shoal.

Buried in one of these folds ten miles east of the city high above present high water and seeming to disappear into the face of the two hundred foot cliff behind it, lies the skeleton of a wooden ship. A large ship for her time, although a pigmy compared with the 10,000-ton steel bulk freighters whose smoke stains the horizon fifteen miles out, as they pass in midlake. The wooden ship may have been built a hundred years ago; may, indeed, have been a wreck for that long. The timbers and planking, much decayed, and the iron spikes and fastenings, heavily corroded, have been large enough for a schooner of 150 tons. This was quite a large vessel for Lake Ontario in 1840.

This wreck is towards the eastern end of the Highlands, where they fade in the valleys of the Highland Creek, the Rouge, and the Petticoat. Sailors used to fix the east limit of the Highlands at Centre Point, a decaying headland a quarter of a mile west of the mouth of Highland Creek. What it is or was the centre of, who knows? It is midway between Toronto and Whitby, by water. The wreck is a few furlongs west of Centre Point; half a mile west of the

creek mouth. There is another wreck, or part of the same one, a mile or more farther west. Centreboard skiffs sailing along the shore have noticed its weed-grown timbers, under water. The wreckage, high at the cliff-foot could be a side torn from this submerged wreck and washed along like a raft by strong southwest gales.

The wreckage is either the side or the bottom of a craft around 100 feet long. Seven or eight of the old ribs can be traced in the sand and gravel. They have apparently been centered twelve inches apart. Although they are so much decayed as to be almost shapeless, from the fragments which are still sound the ribs appear to have measured six inches by eight and in some instances eight by ten. The spaces between are irregular, indicating that some have been torn away by the waves or burned in bonfires. Others have rotted away completely. The sand, darkened by the decayed wood, is full of loose spikes and bolts. All the timber of this wreck uncovered is oak – white oak. Some of it, sound enough to stand the axe, is stained blue as indigo with the acid of the iron fastenings, a characteristic of white oak. And after all the years, no one knows how many, the white oak preserves its sharp sour smell when again cut.

Spadework below the timbers as they lie uncovers planking, which the ribs cross at right angles. The planks are rotting like the ribs, but, having been covered with sand, their shape has been preserved, and they measure from eight to nine inches in width and two inches in thickness. Allowing for attrition and decay, they have probably been two-and-a-half-inch strakes.

Side planking of such thickness, spiked, to six-by-eight frames doubled, is consistent with the supposition that this was a vessel of 150 tons burden. The fact that the ribs are not close spaced and the planks are not wide, rather indicates that the wreckage is part of the ship's side. Were it the bottom one would find "floors" between the frames or ribs, making the transverse construction almost continuous or contiguous; the planks would be wider and there would be some trace of a keel and keelson.

A day's work with pick and shovel would reveal much more than meets the eye, but the wreckage has been so mutilated by picnic bonfires and summer campers and the tooth of time that no amount of excavation would recover enough of the vessel to enable one to do more than guess at her original shape and tonnage.

She lies on this highest shelf of beach at an angle of forty-five degrees to the line of the cliffs, as though she had run blindly into the bank on an inshore tack, poking her bowsprit fifty feet into the clay. That, of course, is not probable, even in the blackest night or the thickest snowstorm. One doesn't run into the Highlands of Scarborough like bumping into someone coming around the corner. If the Highlands are completely invisible the roar of the surf at their feet gives warning. Moreover the water is too shoal for any vessel of burden to pit right up to them; she would ground in the breakers, some hundreds of yards out.

There is evidence that the water was higher at the foot of the Highlands long ago, but this wreckage is so high above the present lake level and so far in from the present shore line, that it seems more probable that the ship was wrecked farther out, possibly some considerable distance

away, and broke up.

Many vessels have been lost in the vicinity of the Highlands; in this century the schooners *Zebra*, *Defiance*, and *Rapid City*, the barges *Erie Belle* and *P. B. Locke* and the steamer *Alexandria*, and the steam barge *City of New York* and the scow-built steam barge *Arctic*.

Earlier than that were the *William Cawthrie*, and the *William Wallace*, which left Darlington one morning in October, 1857, and was never heard of afterwards. It blew hard from the east that night, and next morning some of the *Wallace's* cabin furniture was washed on the beach near the lighthouse on Gibraltar Point, Toronto. She was a Toronto vessel and Wm. McCabe was her captain. Fishermen thought they found her hull in deep water, a mile off the Point, but could not identify it. She had cordwood in the hold and stone on deck, a dangerous combination, brought about by some misarrangement which will never be explained. Some thought she rolled over and sank off the Highlands, where the sea was high and hollow.

None of these ran ashore or foundered on Centre Point, although their wreckage could conceivably be carried there were the water high enough. If no one comes forward in the meantime with a better suggestion the possibility of this being one or other of two nineteenth century casualties of the Highlands will be discussed anon.

Caption : WHOSE WRECK? This is what the spade uncovered, and this is where it lies, a little west of Highland Creek.