

Toronto Telegram, August 7, 1943
Schooner Days DCII (602)
By C.H.J. Snider

THE SAILOR WHO SWALLOWED THE ANCHOR

SOMETHING more cheerful than the fate of Dariny Boy in the *Persian* (of which something was said last week) comes from Oswego in a ballad of that sailortown, submitted to the Palladium-Times with modest interpretations by Charles D. Kehoe, whose ancestry must have been Irish, too. It is attributed to the works of "Shandy McGuire." Incidentally, Schooner Days' good friend, T. W. Rose, of South Bay, confirms the suggestion that the lost schooner was the *Persian*, of Oswego, not one of several *Persias* extant at the same time. The ballad sent in was entitled "The Schooner *Persia's* Crew," and it was often so sung, but Mr. Rose, who was sailing sixty years ago, copied the verses from some Toronto paper in 1887, and the neat copy, giving the lines in improved style, calls the vessel, the *Persian* throughout.

"Shifting a sheet" marks this Oswego ditty as genuine schooner stuff. It is not copied from square-rigger lingo, or broadcaster's bunk, or chambermaid's conversation.

The job in a lake schooner calling for most skill and experience was shifting the fore gafftopsail sheet, and this had to be done every time the vessel tacked under full sail. Square riggers had no such troubles.

The successful shifting and resetting of a sail of heavy canvas, as stiff and large as a moderate church carpet, depended on one man working a hundred feet up in the air on a swaying perch. With the exception of the man at the wheel, the whole watch on deck would run forward, and cast off the topsail sheet (a rope or a chain, but never a piece of canvas) and clew in the sail to the masthead. The sheet was what drew the clew out to the end of the gaff. Then they would raise the tack, one the inner corner, the clew being the outer. Next, the nimblest would run up the rigging to the crosstree and up the Jacob's ladder to the head of the lower mast, where the sail was gathered in. He would, at the right moment, capsize the toggle or wooden pin which attached the topsail sheet to the clew cringle, and dip the end of the sheet over or under what was called the triatic stay, a stout piece of wire connecting the two mastheads. Its presence prevented the topsail swinging over with the lower sail as the vessel filled on the new tack, unless the sheet was shifted.

There was another piece of gear which had to be handled by the man aloft. This was the tack, a long rope hauling the inner corner of the topsail down. When he called "Trice up!" the crew below would haul on a tripline, which would raise the tack of the topsail to the level of the triatic stay. The hand aloft would then haul up the freed tack line, coiling it as it came, and with a hail of "Tack on deck!" would toss the coil over the triatic stay and let the long rope drop down to the waiting ones below on the other side of the mast. They would run the fall or loose end through a thimble, or lizard, to get a purchase, and haul the tack" down and belay on the weather side of the bitts or fiferail.

When the sheet had been shifted the masthead man would hail, "Sheet home!" The sheet led down from the clew through blocks or sheaves on the gaff to the deck. After casting off the clewline the crew below would take their end of the sheet to the capstan, and walk her around, heaving the clew of the topsail out to the gaff end. Then the lad who had gone aloft to shift the sheet, disdaining the ladderlike ratlines by which he had ascended, would slide down a halliard or a topmast shroud and resume his place at the wheel or on lookout. It was, a complicated job at best, and not' made any better by freezing rain snarling tack, trip-line, clewline and topsail sheet in a hopeless tangle on a dirty night, with a mate below setting the darkness on fire with threats of what he was going to do if he had to come up with breakfast for the blank-dashed-excoriated mariner of canine ancestry who had gone to roost up there among the dickybirds. On such occasions one's descent to the deck demanded skill and judgment and great knowledge of the military science of planned withdrawal to a prepared position, other than that reserved for the devil and his angels.

MICHAEL JOYCE was a First Ward sailor out of Oswego, and became watchman later at the old Academy of Music in that town. Capt. John Parsons and his son, John S., of the same name were shipowners and ship chandlers in Oswego known to every tar on Lake Ontario in the last century, and the collection of schooner portraits which decorated the latter's office up to the time of his death a couple of years ago was grand.

John S. Parsons always had a high reputation for honesty and generosity with lake sailors, Canadian and American. He pulled many men out of a hole, and never put anybody into one. The *Algerine* may have been one of their schooners of which I have not heard, or the steamer *Algerian* for which he may have been an agent. Mickey Joyce, who is represented as a man fed up with a shore job, speaks with the freedom of the old-time lake sailor, who was no nerve-shattered foreigner, drugged and dragged from a crimp's crib, but the equal of any man who had two fists.

Working Tom Cox's traverse meant swinging the metaphorical lead, or shirking. Watch-and-watch meant four hours on and four hours off, considered a great boon before eight hour days were invented. The old chislers used to work their men for four hours and- then four hours more, and four hours more I again, cheating them of their watch below.

The ballad bristles with unaffected "nauticisms," to coin a word. One reference to captains bringing crews ashore to find a still more dainty dish reflects a state of affairs accurately. When times were good and men in demand captains would kidnap cooks who had better reputations for culinary skill, in order to keep their crews, or they would send all hands to a hotel if the cook proved unsatisfactory.

"Matlows" is 20th-century navy slang for sailors. French matelot. I never heard it used on the lakes.

"No watch below" means no time; to one's self.

"Full and by" is the order to the helmsman when he is sailing close to the wind, another

synonym for hard times.

“Squaring the yards” has two double meanings, either to get even with someone, or to run away, the yards being squared when a ship runs off before the wind.

Swallowing the anchor means retiring from sailing and living ashore.

“Handing” a sail is an old nautical parlance for doing whatever was required with a sail, particularly taking it in and stowing it. The standard qualification for an able-bodied seaman of yore was that he could “hand, reef and steer.”

The setting is quite true to fact— the old sailor, working ashore during hard times, sniffing the forecandle again, “when freights are up and wages, too,” and hinting to his employer, who was once shipmates with him, that if he is not treated better ashore he will quit the job and go to the lake again. They often threaten, but they seldom do.

It is in line with what happened the other day in a plant operated by a yachtsman who had laid his yacht up for the duration but retained a soft spot in his heart for old sailors. He had made a job for an old lad who found employment precarious even in wartime. The old boy was tickled pink at first, but when he saw the distant sails gleam in the sun from the factory window he shifted his quid, cleared his throat, and rumbled: “Mister So-and-So, do you know I’m losing \$2 a week just because I’m I working for you now?”

MICKEY JOYCE

“Now freights are up,” cries Mickey Joyce,
“And wages, too,' so boss, less lip;
Close reef your shrill, commanding voice,
Or I’ll be off and make a trip.
A life ashore is drudge and drive,
For twelve long hours, to and fro;
It matters: not how hard I strive,
I ne’er can get a watch below
But freights are up and times are J good,
And owners very freely boast
They’ll give their “Matlows” wholesome food,
I Roast beef, plum duff, with quail on toast.
Just like the good old days of yore,
When tables groaned with flesh and fish;
And captains brought their crews ashore,
To find a still more dainty dish!

I yet can shift a sheet and hand
A sail when aequinoctialis howl;
Besides, at sea, not like the land,
The mates don't care how much I growl;
But here it's work the live-long day,
In ev'ry kind of stormy weather,
And scarcely get sufficient pay
To keep my body and soul together.
Yourself and I have shipmates been
Some twelve or thirteen years ago,
With. Parsons, in the *Algerine*,
Who gave ' us watch and watch below;
You then could growl as well as me,
And work Tox Coxs' traverse, too,
And on a first class jamboree
I never got the start of you.
For seven years I've done my best
Against head seas and heavy gales;
'Twas "full and by" no ease nor rest;
With stranded gear and tatter'd sails.
But now the wind is piping fair.
And freights are on the rise once more;
Don't drive me or the yards I'll square,
And on my lee leave jobs ashore."

I simply quote Mike's words to prove
That times are on the mend again;
The freights and ships are on the
move,
To cheer the hearts of sailor men.
Old tars begin to roll their hips,
And talk of all their pleasures past,
With captains, who commanded ships,

And used them well before the mast.

(Caption) THE JOHN S. PARSONS, a schooner commemorating a popular vessel owner and ship chandler of the 19th century.