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Schooner Days DCCXXXI (731)
by C.H.J. Snider

Defiance Herself

Boss Harris, Port Credit shipwright whose first name was Jim was a wit. When, at the end of an open winter 100 years ago Etobicoke Township farmers threatened to have the law on him for cutting timber and building a little black schooner in the mouth of the Etobicoke Creek, he poled the new launched craft over the bar and off for the Credit with one word blazing in bold letters under the great semi-circle painted across her wide transom:

DEFIANCE

She was a typical lake packet of the first half of the 19th century, built to carry grain or flour or apples or lumber and shingles across the lake and bring back salt and sugar and drygoods and furniture. They carried passengers too. Later they fell into coarse freight only, cord wood and stone. With the end of stonehooking the last of them vanished, in 1920's. When first seen, early in 1890's the *Defiance* was what the most conservative hookermen called "ripe." She was nearing the half century mark and looked it. Her deep transom, almost square cornered, had sagged till it threatened to drag in the water even when she was not loaded. Her apple bows, round in the style of the 18th century pinkies seemed to puff with age. Her high bulwarks had rotted and been broken out until there was not much left but the rail and stanchions. Her rig confirmed the evidence that she was an old-timer – masts sharply raked, that is, slanted backward, with short topmasts supported by shrouds set up on deadeyes in the narrow crosstrees instead of leading to the deck and chainplates – and there were indications on the fore topmast that it had once spread a square topsail, a schooner rig long vanished.

Between her chubby cheeks a great thick stem projected like a beak, relic of the time when timber was plentiful and easier to use in its original state than to work down to necessary size. This member of her hull looked like the butt of a tree adzed into one wide plank. Capt. John Miller, at this time establishing a shipyard at the Credit, was discussing the possibilities of rebuilding the *Defiance*.

"Well" he conceded, "she has a good stem." And that was as far as he would go.

Someone else tackled the rebuilding job probably Bose" of the McCraney boys in Oakville. He was a good ship's carpenter. Whoever it was made a job of it that added twenty years to her long life. Her drooping transom was lifted and the corners rounded, her missing bulwarks replaced. The bows were so round that they had to use diagonal staving to take the curve there. Her old keel was sound, as well as that stem, and some of her frames were as good as when they were first hewn. Originally black, she had degenerated to a dismal mouse color before rebuilding, but she came out smart in white paint with red bottom and trim.

When hope was strong and life was young, in the 1890's were gay, we sailed in the *Defiance*. We piled aboard her with our bicycles after lectures and were welcomed by Fod McCraney and his brother Bose. These were the phonetic pet names of a pair of old Oakville sailors who seemed very happy in her. Bose was fore-castle shortening for boatswain, though he was christened William. Fod can only be guessed at: maybe the preterite of fid. Captain McCraney's first name was really Charles. Bose was the mate. There was no crew. Bose seemed the younger, but was singularly protective towards Charles. Both boys had lots of silver in their hair.

We stowed our wheels in the hold leaning them against the centreboard box, which was on one side of the keel. Probably improvement added after she was built. Centreboards of some sort are traceable back as 1813 on Lake Ontario, but they were not in general use until after 1850. She seemed to have been born a standing-keeler. Although she was not more than 60 feet long from end to end she was so deep in the hold it was hard to see out on deck. In mooring the bikes we scraped away the stone chips that covered her keelson – left overs from her last cargo of building stone – saw the empty mortices where her masts had once been stepped. Each spar had been moved forward twelve inches to a new position.

The *Defiance* was so chubby bow'd and deep and her sails were so ragged that we had no expectation of a fast trip, but the wind came out of the northwest so that we could lay out past the Old Queens Wharf in one stretch and then we could give her a little more sheet and she snored along, a growing crumple of foam under her bows and a clean wake streaming back astern.

Every squall that came whipping across the water Brother Fod would murmur to his ancient mainsail, "Mind yourself. The sheenies are after you again." Brother Bose would heave the big wooden tiller, curved and creaking, more a-weather, that the swelling sail might be kept full of wind and not shake, and so escape being sold for rags.

The sun came out as we crossed Humber Bay and we gave her more sheet before still more breeze and ramped up the shore and into the Sixteen Mile Creek at Oakville in something less than three hours after coming on board at the foot of West Market street. Good time even for a yacht. Then legs over saddles and back to Toronto over the old sand-hilly Lake Shore road, cinder-pathed here and there on the side but rather tough going for bicycles except when rain had laid the dust and the sun had dried the puddles. We were home in time for a supper of which fresh brown bread and big plump raspberries are the only remaining memory. Good days those, but better left where they are.

Fod McCraney loved his old *Defiance* and the only faults he would admit she possessed was that she was "Kinda hard to work, being so deep in the hold, and hard to wing out."

The *Defiance* never would wing out properly because her chainplates were too far abaft the masts to let the sails swing out far enough when she was running wing and wing, one sail on one side and one on the other. It was like a bird flying with wings half spread.

There was an error in placing her masts in the first place. They were both too far aft. To correct this her square topsails helped, for it gave her more area forward and it could be backed or filled as required. She had a long bowsprit, too, and a long jibboom, to give her sail area where it was needed, but still she sulked and hung “in irons” when she tacked. So they cut mortices in her keelson, twelve inches forward of the mast steps, and moved the masts forward. But they couldn’t move the chainplates, to which the rigging was attached, for these were through-bolted to her planking and ribs so her shrouds remained set up like permanent backstays.

Shoal scow-built hookers were able to carry a full load of stone on their broad decks, easier work than lifting the stone from the water to the deck from the deck to the hold, from the hold to the deck again and from the deck to the dock. The *Defiance*, being narrow and deep and not a scow, had to have most of her cargo placed low, to retain her stability. But she had not been built for the stone trade, which was only the last resort of the surviving hookers, though she worked long at it.