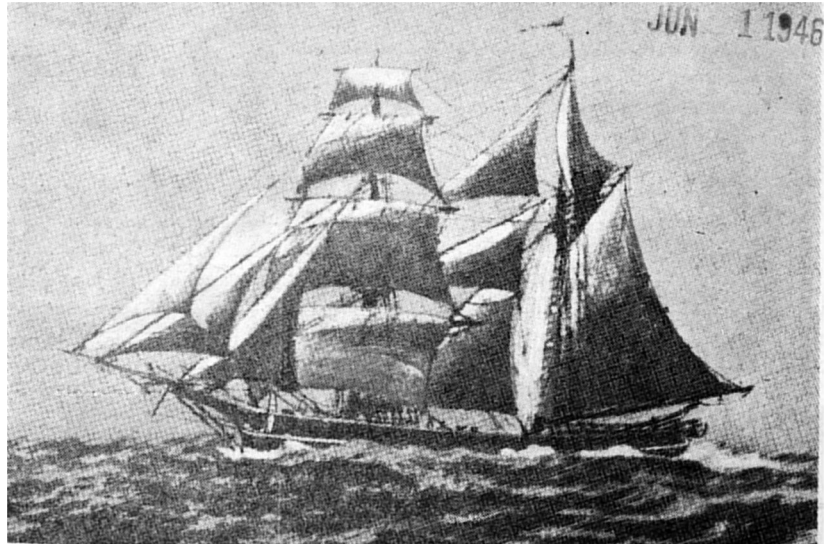


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Schooner Days, DCCXLVI (746)
By C.H.J. Snider

SAILORS' STRIKE IN THE SEVENTIES

ON fine bright early December day, around 1875, just after dinner, when a sailor's belt is at the stretch, and he feels that independence which fills him with power beyond anything during the twenty-four hours, I was one of the crew of the brigantine *Fleur-de-Marie*, a French vessel then engaged in the lake trade.



“The *Fleur-de-Marie* was not built in France, but at Lanoraie, on the St. Lawrence, in 1853. She was an old-time brigantine, with black topsides and scarlet petticoat; hemp-rigged, with thick shrouds and stays of tarred rope instead of

The FLEUR DE MARIE, of Whitby, hundred-foot brigantine built in Quebec, 1853, worked her crew seven days a week, 12 hours a day, on Lake Ontario and called on them whenever required in the other 12 hours without thought of overtime. For this she paid \$1 a day and upwards. After the crew upwarded it to \$4 for a hazardous December trip in 1875 she was sold because she had not earned enough to keep going. She became a wreck and her ex-sailors became work hunters.

steel wire, and four yards crossing her fore-mast, her forward sail-plan culminating in a royal. She had the old style single topsail, which hoisted up on its yard to the top-gallant cross trees, and had to be reefed to be reduced in area. She only measured 156 tons register, and was less than 100 feet long on deck, but with her square rig was quite a handful for a crew of four men forward and captain, two mates and cook aft. Capt. Robert Kent, of Port Whitby, my home port, bought her when she was new, and traded out of Whitby harbor in hex for twenty years.

PAID IN GOLD

“We were lying at the old Hamilton wharf in Toronto, near the foot of Church street, and had just finished loading a cargo of wheat for Ogdensburg down the St. Lawrence at a freight rate of 12 1/2 cents gold.”

“American money was then at a discount of 16 per cent, and shippers had to pay in gold or its equivalent. It was no uncommon thing for captains who sailed their own vessels to come home with baking powder tins from the cook's galley filled with gold half-eagles, eagles and doubles.

“As we had ten thousand bushels under the hatches, this cash freight rate of \$1,250

looked good compared with our own \$2.50 a day, which is what we were getting as ‘big money’ for the fall of the year. In the summer able-bodied seamen worked for \$1 a day or \$25 a month and often for less. Even in the timber trade and the stave-carrying, two of the hardest rackets lake sailors ever had to stand, wages of \$14 to \$16 a month was common pay seventy years ago.

“After due consideration, I, being the youngest pup of the lot and still in my teens, was deputed to meet the captain, my fellow townsman, and demand an increase of pay to \$4 a day!

MATES ORDER TURNED TRICK

“Suddenly my mind was made up for me. The first mate, a typical one of his order, rough and tough, came out on deck and bawled to me to let go the springline, which led from amidships diagonally across the wharf, and was, like everything else, thickly crusted with snow.

“It flashed on me that it was now or never. If I let go that snow-clad line the next order would be to strike the fly for the tug and lay aloft and cast off the gaskets of the fore topsail; and we would be bound away on a voyage at \$2.50 a day, from which there would be no chance of change.

“I’ve got to see the Old Man before I do another hand’s turn,’ said I, as gruffly as I could in my boy’s bass. ‘We may be quitting this hooker.’

“Mr. Mate let go expletives and other kinds of things about d – sailors and the general weaknesses and wickednesses of their kind. But being imbued with the importance of my mission, I proceeded to the seat of the mighty in the smoke-filled cabin and presented – well as I could – our modest demand.

“On my way aft to where the Old Man smoked in state in the cabin, I got out on the snow-covered wharf and walked up and down, rehearsing my speech, hoping to get my courage up, and backing and filling all the time.

“The Old Man glared at me and with the power that was his, as master of the vessel, proceeded to explain to me just what he thought of his as a miserable crew that did not know when we were well off, and added that we were now getting more than we were worth, which was very likely the fact.

“I insisted that all before-the-mast had decided to quit unless we were granted the advance. The fact that it was late in the season, a good freight was in his hold, and the brigantine was ready to sail and, being old, had difficulty in shipping hands for late voyages, had more to do, I am sure, than my feeble arguments. He finally sent me forward, agreeing to pay us \$4 per day, accompanied by language more flowery than the ship’s name, with particular application to myself, my forebears and descendants to many generations. All of which appeared to do him good.

“CAST OFF, THERE”!

“I came out of the cabin and on deck to meet another explosion from the mate, who still had his mind on that spring line, and again, with many encouraging epithets, ordered me out to

let go the snow-covered rope.

“This I now did with alacrity, and in my best form as a sailor who was being duly compensated for his highly technical efforts.

“My report forward immediately afterwards was so satisfactory that everyone, including the captain and mates, were forthwith in good humor.

“We got away with a tug, towed out through the Western gap, and went spinning down the lake in a spanking nor’wester, spitting snow. We arrived off Kingston in about 16 hours, flying a pilot flag for the river, and with little delay made our destination at Ogdensburg, N.Y. The *Fleur-de-Marie* returned up the river with an easterly slant, loaded coal in Oswego and was over in Kingston within a week, making her earnings about \$1,750 for the round trip.

\$40 WINTER STAKE

“Of course it might have taken a month, or might never have been completed, for she could have been frozen in for the winter or lost in the late gales. But that was how these little vessels made big earnings in the schooner days – high freights and a run of luck.

“We four forward in the *Fleur-de-Marie* drew \$40 each, after stripping her and laying her up for the winter at Kingston. We dispersed on our various ways feeling like millionaires. I returned to my home at what is now Hayden Park at Whitby harbor, to strut about until the sun warmed things the following spring.”

THE narrator was the late J. J. O’Connor of Port Arthur, District magistrate for Thunder Bay, and the time fifteen years ago. He puffed blue rings from a good cigar as he spoke and looked out across the gleaming drifts of new-fallen snow. He went on:

“Home-coming in the fall was for us sailors like summer holidays to the business man. We looked forward to it all season. Men without homes, who had saved up enough money to pay for a winter’s keep deposited the whole shot with the old-time Esplanade hotels, such as the Armories on West Market street, or George Williams or Andy Tymon’s, at the corner of Church street, and the other sailors’ lodgings on the old Toronto harbor front; now high and dry behind the viaduct – very dry, indeed, and far inland.

“Here they took it easy, sure of three square meals, an odd drink and a pipeful until spring struck into the snowdrifts and they were drawn to the outfitting schooners, of which Toronto had a good quota. I always spent my winters at home, and early spring would find me along the well-filled wharves of Whitby, on the same quest as those who haunted the Toronto Esplanade – a ‘site.’

“The old-time sailor’s spring still looks good, and I would like to be in it all again. Its charm and glamor I have never found in any other calling. Then the future had to take of itself, but the fond hope beckoned that I would some day tread my own quarterdeck, as the proud possessor of a lake schooner.

“That, to my mind – and I haven’t changed it – was the height of achievement and

enjoyment of life. I never got there – but I have had the vision. I went off on another slant, into drugs and insurance and vessel agencies, and have wound up on the bench, peddling justice, something that is needed, and lots of it.

“But I would like to have been master of a schooner!

“I have known the *Antelope* to make a seven thousand-dollar freight out of a fortnight run from Chicago to Kingston with grain. The little *Homeward Bound* made nine trips in three weeks between Whitby and Oswego with barley, and her freight on it was \$2,430. The schooner herself was only rated at \$4,000 insurable value. She was old, built in 1854 as the *R. O. Lake*, and rebuilt ten years later. She was -a pretty little thing – white, with green covering board and wale strake – not much over 90 feet long, with a clipper bow and figurehead.

“On the other hand, it might take three weeks to get one way, and one trip in the fall might blow out a thousand-dollar outfit of sails. It was always a gamble, both for schooners and crews. The boys in the *Undine*, a smart black schooner out of Hamilton, were offered \$25 for the run to Oswego and back, or \$2.50 a day. It was in the fall of the year, and three of them figured headwinds either way would spin the trip out to ten days or longer, so they signed on at two and a half. One took the \$25. She left Hamilton that night, was in Oswego next day in time to load, towed out again that night, caught the first of a hard easterly blow, and boomed through the piers of Burlington Bay the next night. Three men left her at the coal trestle cursing at the \$5 bill each had. The fourth stood the drinks at the nearest bar and had \$20 and some change.”

By the time next March’s sun shone on the south side of the street before setting the boys began to stroll around the *Fleur de Marie* to note signs of fitting out. Any “site” at any wages looked good when the grubstake was low. The *Fleur de Marie* lay black and gaunt and bare as the day they had stripped her in December. Old Capt. Kent had been talking all year before of giving her a thorough overhaul that winter, perhaps a rebuild, if he did well enough with her in the season. They had been “kinda” expecting a polite request to make at least beer money through the winter, rough-hacking at this repair job, but pride forbade that they should offer.

Not a thing had been done to her. But here was Capt. Kent himself walking down the wharf, hands in pockets, and, for him, looking mighty affable.

“Hya, Cap,” ventured Panface Harry, “fittin’ out soon, I s’pose?”

“Hell, no,” said Capt. Kent, using a bad word for the first time with cheerfulness. “You fellows stuck me so deep that last trip it didn’t leave enough for the overhaul that was coming to her. So when I got a good offer for her I took it. Some Frenchmen’ll be up for her when the ice gets out of the canals. And they’ll be bringing their own gang with them to take her away.”

That’s what became of the *Fleur de Marie*. She struck the east pier at Oswego and went to pieces.

And that’s what became of the sail sailor’s trade. It struck in competition with coal and oil and freight trains and went to pieces. Mr. O’Connor went drug clerking, and, being an alert

intelligent worker, advanced to the district magistracy of Thunder Bay. Some of his old shipmates appeared before him and were dealt with faithfully. Others may have got into Parliament, but were never known to come out.