

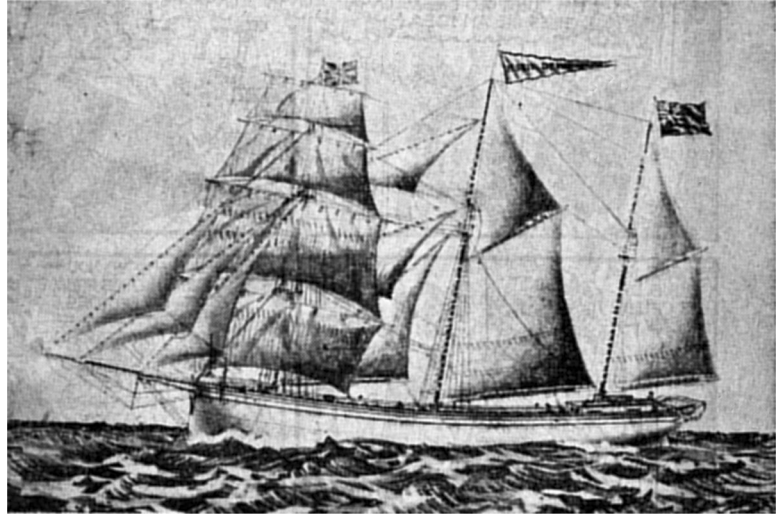
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Schooner Days CMLXXII (972)
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LOST LIFE BREAKING COAL FAMINE OF 1902

November, 1902, was mean for the Lake Ontario coal trade.

This was the year of the coal strike which drove Toronto to import coal from Wales. When American coal began trickling to the south shore ports and the schooners and steam barges couldn't get up the lake with it because of the weather.

Three vessels lay at the foot of the lake, in Little Sodus or Oswego, loaded with the last coal for the season for Cobourg. This was five years before the "great car-ferry system" began to supply Cobourg and the Grand Trunk with coal from Charlotte. The schooners waited day after day for a slant while northwest winds wore the month out and Cobourg hungered for its coal.



When she crossed the Atlantic in 1865. The JESSIE DRUMMOND, then "Barque-Rigged," crossed the ocean from Montreal to Hamburg, Germany, for a cargo of iron rails.

Capt. "Little Dan" Rooney, still living, had the two-master *Annie Falconer*; Capt. Johnny Williams the larger 3-master, *Sir C. T. Van Straubenzee*, and Capt. James Quinn, of Oakville, the ocean-crossing *Jessie Drummond*, whose adventures we have been following. They were all loaded for the same port, where Capt. Rooney had a coal business with his partners, the Plunketts. He had a double interest in this bad weather – its effect upon his own vessel and voyage, and its effect upon the town's winter fuel supply.

"Little Dan" walked the coal trestle day and night, listening to the surf and smelling the wind.

The die is cast

"Johnny," he said suddenly to Capt. Williams after supper one evening when the darkness settled, "the sea's going down outside, and I wouldn't be surprised if we got a slant from the eastward. I'm going out at midnight. I don't say you boys ought to, but if the wind does strike down the lake again I can go into Presquile, for we're only drawing 8 feet. Maybe you couldn't, loaded two or three feet deeper, and maybe Jimmy couldn't, and you'd have to run all the way to Kingston if you got caught, but I'll call you at midnight if you like."

Fortunes of three

At midnight the *Annie Falconer* sailed out on a light air and dying sea. The *Straubenzee* followed. The *Drummond* waited.

The *Falconer* made Cobourg before dark, though the wind had whipped round to the westward by then. The *Straubenzee* tore her mizzen and dropped into Presquile before it got too dark to see the channel buoys. This was only 28 miles from Cobourg. She put her nose in the mud on the Middle Ground going in, and lay snug all night. In the morning, getting three anchors overboard for kedging off lightened her enough, with the rise in the water, so that she floated easily.

The rising water forecast southeast wind, thick weather, and likely snow after dark. Capt. Williams took the chance, and steered for Cobourg.

He got up off the place in the early twilight. He had made up his mind to run all the way to Gibraltar Point rather than tackle the little cramped harbor of Cobourg in the dark. (This was years before the present improvements.) The lights came up strong, however, and he lined the piers up well outside, and went in on a compass course, with rising wind and sea behind him, his mizzen stowed, his big mainsail and foresail folding up like circus tents as he passed the lighthouse.

Fortune favored him. His good friend Little Dan was on the pier with a lantern. He ran along to the hazard of the projecting "T", showed it, and hailed to John to let her go on the soft sand in the northwest corner of the harbor, and she'd work herself off by the time he'd get a line run to the east wall.

Miracle feat

It is hard enough yet, stopping a yacht under sail in the right spot in Cobourg harbor with all its improvements, but to berth a 3-masted schooner in the old inner harbor without the aid of a tug seems miraculous.

But all went well. John and Little Dan exchanged their news of the last forty-eight hours and wondered when Jimmy would be along. There had been no sign of the *Drummond* when darkness shut off the short horizon.

Night settled down. Little Dan went home. His cosy brick house is east of the park where Cobourg now conducts a model motor camp. It has a good view of the lake.

"There's a light, captain!" said someone as he opened the door, "would that be the *Drummond*?"

The *Drummond*

Little Dan looked long into the blackness.

"It's a vessel's port light," he said, "but not bound here. No vessel can come into Cobourg from the southward with her red light showing from this angle. That's something bound farther down the lake."

The red light grew stronger. It was nearing the waterworks pumping station on the shore, half a mile south of Capt. Rooney's house.

"He's fetching that intake pipe pretty close," commented Little Dan. "He ought to haul off."

As though listening on the yet-to-come radio, the red light suddenly vanished. It was replaced by a green one, which leapt up and down in the breakers and then vanished also. The dim yellow of a binnacle lamp succeeded it. A sailor could see that the vessel had changed her course completely, and brought her unlighted stern towards the land. Her red and green sidelights could only be seen from ahead or to within 2 points abaft her beam.

Above the roar of the surf on the sand could be heard the roar of anchor chain running out fast, the shouts of men, the thunder and slatting of sails shaking in the wind and booms banging back and forth.

"If that's Jimmy he's in trouble," said Capt. Rooney, and ran to the pier end again, half a mile away. His Uncle Hugh was harbormaster and captain of the lifeboat crew along with his other uncle, Capt. Dan.

Fighting for life

Against the ragged night sky could be seen the three masts of the schooner, waving like spears brandished in battle. She was leaping and diving at the bitter-ends of her anchor chains, close in on the east pier. He could hear Capt. Quinn calling to bend a messenger onto the bight of her towline and get the hawser onto the pier head.

"Slip your anchors and let her come in on the beach," called Little Dan. "The wind's going round nor'west again and the pier will break the seas and shelter her and she'll lie quiet!"

"We can heave her in with the donkey engine if we can get lines on the pier!" was the reply.

But they couldn't.

The anchor flukes ploughed through the sand and shingle, and the poor *Drummond* neared the beach like a bucking horse going backwards with halters trailing. She was hitting the bottom now every time the breakers tossed her, as it were in a blanket. You could hear the crack of oak plank and scream of iron fastenings giving, as 600 tons deadweight of coal (she had only a winter load) pounded the sand with her tortured keel. Her tall masts began to wave at different angles.

Man the lifeboat

"If we don't get those boys off now," said Captain Hugh, "some of them or some of us will be killed by those spars. Come on, get the boat out!"

The lifeboat was run out from its house on the "T". Captain Hugh and half a dozen Cobourg men shipped the white ash oars and pulled lustily. Out she went, came up under the lee of the groaning *Drummond*, and Captain Hugh leapt aboard.

“We’ve come for ye, Jimmy,” he said. “We’ll take ye off while we can. Get the cook into the boat first and the rest of you quick after, before those masts kill us all!”

“I’ll stick with her and save her!” shouted Capt. Quinn above the uproar. “This *Drummond*’s all I have!” “You’ll save her best by getting ashore,” quoth Hugh, and hustled the woman cook and the seven men into the bobbing lifeboat.

Before they were landed at the “T” the coal from the *Drummond* was washing up on the beach. Her masts swayed and fell. She was done.