

*Their Greatness
Touched the
Land*

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Their Greatness Touched the Land

BY FRED LONDON

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Set down in the very heart of the Great Lakes the peninsula of Western Ontario almost meets the definition of an island. Nowhere else, perhaps, has geography been more important. Southwestern Ontario is farther south than most of New England, than “upstate” New York, Minnesota, North Dakota and the State of Washington, most of Michigan, Wisconsin and Oregon. It is nearer the population centre of the United States than 35 states of the Union. London is south of St. Paul and Minneapolis, Seattle and Washington.

The peninsula has long been a highway for people on the move. A good example is the extensive movement of population from the East to the New West in the years immediately after the War of 1812. Families who had lived for generations in New England joined in the breaking up of old ties and moving westward. Directly in the path of many was British Upper Canada, the capture of which had been one of the aims of the “War Hawks,” that militant group of young Western congressmen who had helped bring on hostilities in the war. They had not realized their aim, but the Upper Canada lands, fertile, well-watered and close at hand, seemed as desirable as ever.

From the earliest days, Western Ontario has been profoundly influenced by the people living in the neighboring republic. From New England, New York State and Pennsylvania they came in great numbers, bringing with them their religious institutions, their social customs, agricultural techniques, mechanical skills and business enterprise.

A large immigration from Great Britain later lessened the alien influence but not the pressure that continues to this day and makes Western Ontario probably the most distinctly American section of all Canada. Set down with border lines of great lakes and navigable rivers, Western Ontario was destined to be marine-minded. Inlanders still travel to see the spectacle of boats on the Detroit and St. Clair rivers.

Great ore carriers from Lake Superior or lower St. Lawrence ports package freighters, oil tankers, vessels of every size and type (all but

passenger boats) cross route with “salties” bearing at their mastheads flags of half the nations of the world and increasing in number every year. The complete disappearance of passenger boats (except for some trans-lake ferries) is a striking social change that came with the spread of automobiles after the First World War. It is questionable if they will ever return.

Navigation of the Lakes began with the primitive but seaworthy Indian canoe, the chief bequest of the native race to posterity. It was in an Indian canoe, paddled by Indians, that Samuel de Champlain set out from Montreal in the early Summer of 1615 to make contact with the Indian tribes in the far West who brought furs to the French traders at Quebec. His course was up the Ottawa River, difficult of navigation and with many portages, but Champlain is laconic in his narrative of the difficulties. The high point of the trip came on a day in late July when his canoe emerged on an expanse of open water that reached to the western horizon. He had come out on what today is known as Georgian Bay, that great arm of Lake Huron, almost qualifying as a Great Lake by itself.

The first ship to navigate the Great Lakes was the *Griffin* built by Robert Cavalier de LaSalle on the Niagara River in 1679. It is believed to have been of a Dutch galliot type and was wrecked on Lake Huron on her return voyage southward.

With the conquest of Quebec in 1760 and its cession to England by the Treaty of Paris (1763), British traders continued the fur trade with canoe, but small sailing vessels soon appeared.

The first steamboat on the Great Lakes was built at Ernestown, 18 miles west of Kingston, at the eastern end of Lake Ontario. This was the *Frontenac*, constructed under the supervision of a Connecticut Yankee, Henry Gildersleeve, who had arrived in Ernestown July 1, 1816.

She was launched Sept. 7, 1816, and left on the first trip to York and the head of the Lake June 5, 1817, receiving a tumultuous reception on arrival at the provincial capital. The *Frontenac* was destroyed in 1827 by fire, set by miscreants at her dock on the Niagara River.

Henry Gildersleeve went on to build other boats and drum up trade for them. But his fame rests in his building the first steamboat on the Great Lakes. After his death at 75 in 1851, the family tradition of shipbuilding was carried on by two sons, Overton and Charles Fuller Gildersleeve and by a grandson, Henry Herchmer Gildersleeve. Lake transportation was enjoying prosperity and the family interests grew more extensive during the regime of

the two sons. C. F. Gildersleeve became the first president of the Dominion Marine Association at its organization.

The steamboat had reached each of the upper lakes in turn, Lake Erie in 1818, Lakes Huron and Michigan in the 1820s and Lake Superior after the building of the Sault Ste. Marie canal in the 50s. When a railroad was built in 1857, connecting Toronto and Collingwood on Georgian Bay, the upper lake trade became important. New problems faced the grandson, Henry, when he succeeded in the family hierarchy. In 1904 he became manager of the Northern Navigation Company at Collingwood, an amalgamation of individual lines centred at Collingwood and Sarnia (later controlled from Sarnia).

This decade was the heyday of the lake excursion business and in 1908 work was begun at the shipyards in Collingwood on the new passenger steamer *Hamonic*, at that time the finest ship ever built in a Canadian shipyard. The great task facing H. H. Gildersleeve was to save lake passenger trade from the growing challenge of the automobile. No one could have worked harder or been more ingenious in his methods. When the merger of a number of lines brought the Canada Steamship Lines into existence he occupied executive positions with that company until his death in Ottawa in March, 1933.

The first steamboat to navigate any of the Upper Lakes was a small engine-powered vessel, the *Walk-in-the-Water*, built on the Niagara River and planned to provide service to Detroit. Launched May 28, 1818, she began her first trip west August 23.

As her engines were not sufficiently powerful to breast the current of the Niagara River, she was hauled by 20 oxen to the entrance on the Lake, a means commonly referred to at that time as a "horned breeze." Firing of a small cannon from the foredeck preceded docking at any port, as the steam whistle was not yet in existence. The *Walk-in-the-Water* ran for three seasons, in 1819 as far north as Mackinac and at a later date to Green Bay on Lake Michigan.

On the night of October 31, 1821, she ran aground near Buffalo and was lost. Her passengers made their way to land and her engines, when salvaged, went at once into another boat.

Success of the *Walk-in-the-Water* demonstrated that steam had arrived in Great Lakes navigation. But it was not true that the sailing ship had had its day. On all the Lakes they were to remain the chief carriers for almost half a century. Through the years, shipbuilders were free to exercise their own

ideas and many a handsome craft was produced from both American and Canadian shipyards. As late as the American Civil War, 90 per cent of the tonnage on the Lakes was still sail and less than seven per cent steam. One result was the presence of a large fleet of tugs, some of them the most powerful in the world, capable of hauling a string of sailing vessels behind them. A famous lithograph shows the tug *Champion* with six schooners in tow near the entrance to the Detroit River. On the open water, sails provided the motive power and the helmsman's rudder set the course. On the rivers, with their sometimes sharp turns and narrow passages the assistance of steam-powered vessels became necessary.

Schooners of every size and design were constructed on lake shores or rivers about the borders of Western Ontario wherever there was suitable timber and depth of water sufficient for a launching. Indeed, boat building must be set down as one of the local industries of earlier Western Ontario. Schooners disappeared from the Lakes about the turn of the century, well before the First World War, one of the last going up in flames viewed by a nostalgic audience on the lake shore at Toronto.

Between Sarnia at the entrance of the St. Clair River and Windsor on the Detroit River there were a score or more of small Canadian communities which depended on river passenger boats for transportation and needed supplies. Crockett McElroy, of St. Clair, opposite Courtright today, was responsible for placing on the river two of the best-remembered passenger boats, the *Mary* and the *Unique*. In her design, the *Mary* was a departure from previous models, having the lines of a smart yacht and achieving a speed record she was able to maintain over all rivals for 12 years.

It was a delight to see her go along with her white hull freshly painted, overtaking and passing everything in sight. McElroy was so proud of his achievement in design and building that he was determined to build an even faster boat. The resulting product was the *Unique* which appeared first in 1894. The builder had achieved speed for his boat and was able to pass the *Mary*, but the effect was to weaken the construction and after a few years she was sold to a wealthy sportsman who transformed the former river boat into a palatial yacht.

On the Canadian side of the river the two boats which served the local trade longest were the *J. C. Clarke*, built in 1864, and the *Hiawatha*, built at Dresden on the Thames River in 1874. The *Hiawatha* remained in the river trade for 50 years, then went to the north channel of Lake Huron where she was beached and abandoned. The *J. C. Clarke* continued service until 1905 when she burned at her dock at Port Huron.

Sarnia's steamboat connection with the Upper Lakes began in 1870 with the establishment of the Sarnia and Lake Superior Line by J. H. and Henry Beatty who had previously operated out of Collingwood and Owen Sound to Lake Superior. They began with the steamer *Manitoba* and a leased vessel, the *Acadian*. Later they had built in Chatham shipyards two propellers, the *Ontario* and *Quebec* which, when they went into service, were the largest Canadian boats in the Lake Superior trade. The Beatty boats were later incorporated in the Northwest Transportation Company under Beatty management and a further expansion came when the Windsor and Lake Superior Line was added with its two boats, *Asia* and *Sovereign*. Thus for a time, there were five boats trading out of Sarnia to Lake Superior.

An important step was taken by the Beatty interests in the 1880s when they had built for their company in yards at Sarnia two fine wooden steamers *United Empire* and *Monarch*. The timber for their construction came from Lambton forests. The *Monarch* went on the rocky shore of Isle Royale in 1906 and was a total loss. The *United Empire* was later rebuilt and became the *Saronic*. She, along with the *Huronic* and *Majestic* and the freighter *Ionic* made up the Sarnia fleet prior to the building in 1908 of the palatial steamer *Hamonic*.

The route of the early Sarnia boats northward followed the eastern shore of Lake Huron, touching in at Goderich, Southampton and Kincardine, with occasional calls at St. Joseph's Island, then on to the Soo, Port Arthur and Fort William. On the return trip calls were made at Hudson's Bay Company posts on Lake Superior. Two weeks was the usual length of a trip, often much longer in fall weather. Goderich was the most important call on the up trip and a transcript of the entry book of the port for 1882, kept by L. D. Dancey, harbormaster, shows a tri-weekly service from Sarnia by the steamers *Ontario*, *Quebec* and *Manitoba*.

Inward cargoes reflected the activities of the Goderich district. Much lumber was being brought in from Georgian Bay, probably for farmers' needs. Hoops and staves came from Dresden and Wallaceburg for the salt industry. Fish were received in quantity from the Fishing Islands to the north, particularly in October and November. Wheat was brought from Kincardine and coal from Sandusky. The ill-fated steamer *Asia* was in Goderich twice during 1882, bringing in whiskey both occasions. That autumn she foundered on Georgian Bay with but two survivors out of a passenger and crew total of more than a hundred.

Shipbuilding was also carried on at Goderich by the Marlton family, William and Henry. They built numerous tugs, chiefly for the fisheries along

the east shore of Lake Huron and on Manitoulin Island. In waters so teeming with fish as were Lake Huron's there must have been something beyond the ordinary which would give the name Fishing Islands to the miniature archipelago off the shore of the Saugeen peninsula. As early as 1831, Captain Alexander MacGregor of Goderich, discovered this fishing ground, rich beyond anything he had known. He established a station on one of the many islands but soon his problem was to dispose of the enormous catches that came to his nets. He entered into contract with a Detroit company to supply them with 3,000 barrels annually at \$1 a barrel. They were to clean, cure and pack delivered fish.

Around Georgian Bay were ports such as Collingwood, Owen Sound and Midland with shipping companies, shipyards, elevators and special interest in Lake Superior trade. Georgian Bay boats pioneered in opening up the trade on the Upper Lake and carried men and supplies for the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Fleets of wooden ships were built in the Georgian Bay shipyards and manned by men from that region. When steel supplanted wood, shipyards quickly turned to the new direction and some of the largest carriers on the Lakes today have come from these ports.

Railway development in the fifties brought new and increased business to these ports. The Northern Railway which reached Collingwood in 1855 was a link in the grain trade with New England and early pictures of Collingwood harbor show a forest of masts rising from anchored schooners waiting their turn at the elevator. The steamer *Collingwood* left the port whose name she bore in July, 1857, with the expedition under Henry Youle Hind sent by the government of Canada to explore the resources of the Red River country. She was the first Canadian registered boat to go to Lake Superior. The *Rescue* in her turn was the first to carry Canadian mails to the North country.

During the fifties and sixties the tide of emigration to the western states was running heavy and thousands of homeseekers, many of them Scandinavians, passed through Collingwood on their way to Wisconsin and Minnesota. Railway companies, prompt to seize trade, chartered a fleet of side-wheelers and beginning in the Spring of 1855 a tri-weekly service was maintained with Chicago.

The ruinous rivalry between two lines operating out of Collingwood in the last quarter of the century, the Great Northern Transit Company, popularly known as the White Line, and the North Shore Navigation Company, known as the Black Line, ended by amalgamation in 1899. The former Beatty Line at Sarnia also amalgamated, the three forming the

Northern Navigation Company with headquarters at Sarnia. In 1902 the *Huronic*, built at Collingwood, joined the fleet.

Entry of the Canadian Pacific Railway into lakes shipping was an important development for Georgian Bay. Three ships built in Scotland, the *Algoma*, *Alberta* and *Athabaska*, came to Canadian waters in 1884 and began a tri-weekly service out of Owen Sound.

Midland was a generation younger than Collingwood and Owen Sound, but it had a magnificent harbor, well protected. Its marine history centres about one man, James Playfair, who came to the place in 1883 and five years later purchased an old boat and entered the grain trade. With a partner, D. L. White, he went on to build a fleet, the Great Lakes Navigation Company, made up of boats acquired or built in the Midland yards. Here, in 1926, was built the *Lemoyne*, which until 1942 was the largest bulk freighter on the Great Lakes.

She was 633 feet long, 70 beam and 33 feet in depth. Her cargo records remained unbeaten for years. On her maiden trip in August, 1926, the *Lemoyne* took on at Sandusky 15,415 tons of soft coal; a month later at Fort William she took on the largest cargo of wheat ever loaded to that time on the Great Lakes, 518,000 bushels. At the end of the season of 1943 the big ship was still holding seven cargo records, including soft coal, wheat, corn and mixed grains.

These Georgian Bay ports were particularly marine-minded. They built ships, organized shipping companies, constructed drydocks and elevators. Their big contribution, however, was men—men who became officers and men who were just plain sailors. From the Georgian Bay came many captains of large American vessels and from the Bay came one man with a novel idea of vessel construction.

This was Alexander McDougall who invented the “whaleback,” and built more than forty in American yards between 1888 and 1908.

Until recently, however, there were three whalebacks in Canadian registry, the steamer *John Ericsson* and two barges, the *Alexander Holley* and *No. 137*. For years the *Ericsson* and her two barges were a familiar sight in Goderich harbor where they unloaded grain cargoes at the elevators. The barges went to the steel mills to be scrapped three years ago or more. The *Ericsson's* owners offered her to the City of Hamilton for use as a marine museum. The offer was first accepted and later declined. The one remaining whaleback is the American owned *Meteor*, operated by Cleveland Tankers, Incorporated.

No survey of the Great Lakes in their relation to Western Ontario would be complete without reference to the disastrous storm of November 9, 1913, which brought death to 233 sailors and, on Lake Huron alone, saw eight ships sunk without a single survivor. On this Lake, Western Ontario's great playground, bodies continued to wash up on the beaches for a week or more. Six unidentified bodies now rest in Maitland Cemetery in Goderich.

First report of the storm on Lake Huron reached *The London Free Press* Monday with word that bodies coming up on the beaches were in life preservers of ships known to have been in the area on that Sunday. More than sixty bodies were recovered from Lake Huron. William E. Elliott, then of *The London Free Press* staff, today a resident of Goderich, went at once to Sarnia and boarded the Reid Wrecking Company tug which went to investigate the vessel turned turtle but still floating. Back in Sarnia he found reporters from other papers handing copy to the telegraph operators with dollar bills attached to secure priority. He himself went by train to Port Elgin and there found bodies "stacked like cordwood."

One hundred-and-fifty years have passed since the *Frontenac* made history. Today Canada stands second only to the United States in lake shipping and has attained a remarkable place in this highly competitive field. This is a far cry from the days when wooden steamers were being built at Chatham and Dresden, Sarnia and Owen Sound or along the shores of Lake Erie and Georgian Bay. The development has become Canadian and national in contrast to earlier local activity based on the presence of forests and convenient waters for launching.

Western Ontario still provides both officers and men for the lake fleets just as it did in the past, and its shipyards and machine shops, elevators, docks and storage facilities still employ thousands on land. The relations between Western Ontario and the Lakes have changed greatly through the years but their importance and value, each to the other, continue. The Great Lakes today constitute one of the world's great trade channels and to speculate on the future of this world trade channel might well be futile.

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