

THISTLE and SHAMROCK

Back in the days when Canada was an integral part of what then was known as the British Empire, and before anything resembling due recognition ever was accorded our native peoples and Canadians of other than British origins, one of Canada's most popular patriotic songs was one entitled "The Maple Leaf Forever". It was written before the turn of the century by Alexander Muir, who reportedly took his inspiration from a huge old maple tree which still stands in the City of Toronto. The tree today is endangered by local development which eventually may force its removal despite efforts to preserve it, while the song, although possessed of a pleasant melody, is no longer considered appropriate, and very seldom is heard.

Indeed, many Canadians may not be familiar with the words, and so, not because we have any fondness for them, but simply because of their relevance to our Ships of the Month, here are the words of the first verse and chorus:

In days of yore, from Britain's shore, Wolfe the dauntless hero came,
And planted firm Britannia's flag on Canada's fair domain;
Here may it wave, our boast and pride, and join in love together,
The Thistle, Shamrock, Rose entwine the Maple Leaf forever.

The Maple Leaf, our emblem dear, the Maple Leaf forever,
God save our Queen (King) and Heaven bless the Maple Leaf forever.

And so it went on through a total of four verses. It is easy to see why it no longer is considered to be acceptable today. Back in the political climate which prevailed when it was written, however, praise of Canada's relations with Great Britain was all the rage in the English-speaking parts of the Dominion, and particularly in Toronto, which was a great bastion of The Empire.

The references to the thistle, the shamrock and the rose, of course, come from the floral emblems of Scotland, Ireland and England, respectively. It is not surprising, therefore, that when the Toronto Ferry Company Limited began to name its new or newly-rebuilt ferry steamers for familiar flowers, two of those chosen to be so "honoured" were Scotland's thistle and Ireland's shamrock.

Both THISTLE and SHAMROCK have been gone from the waters of Toronto Bay for almost ninety years now, and so they may be even less familiar to our readers than the words of "The Maple Leaf Forever"! It has been quite some time since we last featured the history of a Toronto ferry in these pages, and so it seems only fitting that we should now present the stories of THISTLE and SHAMROCK (I) for our readers' enjoyment.

Our inspiration for doing so comes not from Alexander Muir's song, but rather from the recent discovery of an excellent photograph of THISTLE, the first photo ever positively identified as a true image of this elusive vessel. In fact, she now is known to appear in the distance of several other photographs, but although we long had suspected that it was THISTLE we were seeing in those views, we never could prove it conclusively until this "new" photo was discovered amongst the detritus extracted from an old Toronto attic and offered for sale by an antique dealer who was disposing of items from the estate of the former (and unidentified, at least to us) owner.

THISTLE was an oak-hulled, two-decked, double-ended, sidewheel ferry steamer which was built in 1882 by George Cleak at the foot of Berkeley Street on the old Toronto waterfront. She was constructed for John A. Clendenning and the Toronto & Humber Navigation Company. She was launched into the waters of Toronto Bay on the "cold and disagreeable" afternoon of Thursday, April 6th, 1882. Her christening with a bottle of wine was performed by "little Georgie Westman", grandson of George Williams, the Esplanade constable, who gave her the name CANADIAN. Enrolled at Toronto under official number 83383, CANADIAN entered service on Saturday, July 29, 1882, the day after she had successfully run her trials.