

THE ROLLER BOAT

In the December issue, we began our 100th Anniversary story of the appearance on Toronto Bay, in the autumn of 1897, of the ROLLER BOAT, that infamous invention of Prescott lawyer Frederick Augustus Knapp. With the assistance of a number of financial backers, ROLLER BOAT was built by the Polson Iron Works at its yard located on the old (unextended) Toronto waterfront, south of The Esplanade and between Sherbourne and Frederick Streets.

ROLLER BOAT ran a short trial in Polson's slip on October 21, 1897, following which the shipyard insisted that the owners take delivery of the peculiar craft. The ROLLER BOAT ran an actual working trial trip on the Bay later that same day, and another on October 27th.

And there, for want of space, we had to end our first instalment of the ROLLER BOAT story, noting that we would continue the feature in the January issue. We now take up the story again, but we must beg our readers to bear in mind that the later history of ROLLER BOAT is shrouded in uncertainty, and there are many unanswered questions for which contemporary press reports cannot provide solutions.

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We have seen, from sources quoted in the first instalment of our story, that even after ROLLER BOAT proved that she could roll across the water, there were many observers who questioned the practicality of the ship. Most of the detractors were worried about the effects of wind or heavy seas on the boat's ability to roll. Only the prominent lake shipbuilder, Captain John Simpson, dared to raise the question of what useful purpose the ROLLER BOAT could serve, considering that the "hull" of the vessel did not provide any space sufficient for the carriage of either freight or passengers. Perhaps she could roll, but what could her rolling achieve?

Some interesting insight into the thoughts of ROLLER BOAT's inventor, Frederick Knapp, were provided by C. H. J. Snider in his "Schooner Days - No. DLVI", which appeared in "The Evening Telegram", Toronto, on Saturday, September 26th, 1942. Snider's interest was sparked by the death of Knapp only twelve days before the appearance of the article. Snider included much information that had come to him from Capt. W. J. Stitt, late of Toronto, whose father, a resident of Prescott and proprietor of an iron works there, had assisted Knapp with his plans. The elder Stitt also had assisted with the construction of ROLLER BOAT, but (wisely, we would think) left the project part-way through in order to take the position of Lockmaster at old Lock 27 in the Galops Canal, ten miles east of Prescott.

From Capt. Stitt came a quotation from an unidentified Quebec City newspaper published before ROLLER BOAT had run her trials. "Mr. F. A. Knapp, the well-known inventor of the Roller Boat, is at the Chateau Frontenac. He has been here for two days and leaves this evening for England. To those who know nothing about Mr. Knapp's revolutionary ideas of steam carrying boats (sic), his proposition cannot be regarded with any great degree of faith. But to meet the gentleman, converse with him and see his plans and drawings of the new boat, which is to have a trial as soon as he returns from abroad, is to readily believe that his new mode of carrying freight and passengers is quite possible. In fact, to the unprejudiced and ordinary intelligent person the problem seems quite plausible. But outside the main object of Mr. Knapp's new Roller Boat, which will cross the ocean, he has certainly achieved a great success in inventing a boat which will carry grain from the west through the canals cheaper by over 50 per cent. than any other boat now in existence.

"The boat is a floating (grain) elevator as well, and will therefore create a saving of much money. This is one reason for Mr. Knapp's special visit to Quebec to see the Board of Trade and other bodies connected with transporta-