

Tough Sailors Flavored, Shaped Town

Oakville had a decidedly salty flavor in its early days — a flavor caught from the masters, crew and builders of the schooners upon which the village's prosperity depended.

They were a boisterous bunch, especially in the winter, when they had little to do but sit around the taverns waiting for the spring break-up on the ice-bound lake.

One of the greatest battles ever to take place in Oakville was fought one Sunday afternoon near the Victoria House between Protestant sailors and Roman Catholics. The main weapons were axe - handles and many a head was battered and a few arms broken.

Another early account tells of a raid on a Grit political rally by a gang of sailors, who, dependent on their Tory shipowners in the days of the open ballot, were always vocal Tories.

GRIT SWIMS
The candidate and his supporters were assembled in the town hall when the sailors rushed in, swinging their fists and shooting

their pistols at the feet of their opponents. The Grits were driven down the stairs and out of the hall, their candidate managing to escape only by swimming The Sixteen.

It was not until the sailors' numbers began to thin out in the 70's that the Grits managed to gain a foothold in town politics.

But for all their rowdiness on shore, the sailors brought the town its livelihood, and theirs was by far the most dangerous occupation in the colony.

Particularly hazardous was the job of the timber rafters. The cheapest way to get Oakville's timber resources to the market in Montreal was to lash the timber into rafts, joined into trains hundreds of feet long, and tow it down by steamer.

LAKE STORMS
It was hard enough to negotiate the rapids of the St. Lawrence but the lake, notorious for its sudden storms, was worse. And the French - Canadian or Indian raftsmen hired to ride the rafts down to Montreal had little

chance if their raft broke up in a squall.

But despite the danger they made an impressive sight, those huge chains of wood with their colorful streamers, raftsmen's shacks and countless little sails, and many writers of the period tell how they were struck by the sight of a chain of rafts drifting by at night far out in the lake with the cook-fire blazing in the sand-pit of the "Caboose" raft and the raftsmen singing their soft, sad songs.

Neither was it all balmy breezes for the schoonermen. The accounts are many of the ships that went down with all hands in storms on the lake.

In 1857 the schooner "Amelia," built 20 years before by Jacob Randall, was setting out on a voyage when an argument arose between her captain and a seaman, Joseph Mackinder, who claimed she was too deeply laden with wheat and setting down in the head.

NO TRACE
Mackinder finally refused to ship out on her that trip, and the "Amelia" sailed out of The Sixteen, around Merigold's Point a few miles to the east, and was never heard from again.

Mackinder then shipped out aboard the "Tempest" bound for Australia. He was first mate, and several in his crew were also Oakville men. It went down with all hands.

John Potter scorned the sailor's superstition that Friday was unlucky, and on a Friday he laid down a schooner for which the plans had been drawn on a Friday, launched her on a Friday and sailed out for Hamilton on a Friday. The ship disappeared without a trace.

SKIPPER'S SERIOUS
The masters of the lake schooners were sober men who took their business seriously. Many were part - owners of the ships they sailed, and most built their homes in Oakville and had a stake in the prosperity of the town and its port.

Typical of these old skippers was Captain Peter McCorquodale, who was born in Scotland in 1807 and gained considerable experience as a Scottish coast sailor before coming to Canada at age 23.

He first appears in local history as master and part owner of the schooner "Royal Tar," named after the newly - crowned William IV, the "sailor king."

Peter was a man of few words, but a good listener, and when local mariners were talking shop there was little that escaped him. He and old-timers like Capt. Nick Boylan, John Moore, and the brother captains Robert and William Wilson would talk for hours about local weather conditions handling of ships

laden or in ballast in different types of wind and sea, and the pros and cons of various rig.

FALSE HARBORS
One of the hazards discussed at these sessions was the similarity of the skyline at Oakville harbor, Coates' Creek and the Little Sixteen, on the land now occupied by Appleby College. Every one of the captains had found himself running into port before heavy seas when fog or twilight obscured the shoreline and all knew the danger of mistaking one of the shallow creeks for The Sixteen.

So Peter decided to do something to make the skyline at the Sixteen distinctive. In front of his house built on a lakeshore lot he had bought from William Chisholm, he planted a row of fast - growing, tall Lombardy Poplars.

They served their purpose well for years, marking a landfall for many a master who otherwise would have groped his way along the shore and maybe broken up his ship on the rocks of some deceptive creek mouth. They are gone now, but may be seen in old photographs of the lakeshore.

SAILOR SONS
Among the masters to be guided by old Peter's trees were his sons Duncan and Robert, who later commanded sailing ships, and his youngest son James, who foresook the family tradition and went "into steam."

But despite the pride of the lake sailors in their tall ships the coming of steam was inevitable. Canada's first steamship was the "Accommodation," built by John Molson in Montreal in 1809, just three years after "Ful-

ton's Folly" did the impossible on the Hudson River. Two years later the "Walk-in-the-Water" was launched on Lake Erie.

But it was not until 1835 that a steamer began to make regular runs from York to Hamilton and around to the New York ports on the south side. It was the "Constitution" built in Oakville by Col. Chisholm's shipyard under contract to a joint stock company.

Its master was Capt. Edward Zealand, who had once been the master of an ocean - going ship, and who had captained the "Rebecca and Eliza" and other ships owned by Chisholm.

NOTABLE VOYAGE
The schooners were on the way out. The Oakville schooner "Sea Gull," owned and skippered by Oakville citizen Captain Francis Jackman, made quite a

stir when it sailed to Africa and back in one season, at the same time inaugurating trade between Africa and Canada; but more than 30 years earlier, in 1833, the "Royal William", manned by Canadians, had made the first Atlantic crossing by steam in only 19 days.

But it wasn't steam that ended Oakville's days as a haven for sailors. Oakville's sailors could sail a steamship as well as a schooner, and many did.

It was the death of the harbor itself, caused by the railroad's diversion of Halton County's produce to Toronto and Hamilton instead of out through the port of Oakville, coupled with the dwindling supply of trees and the death of the timber trade.

Some of the sailors moved to more lucrative shipping lanes, but others stayed on with their

families and took up new occupations in Oakville. Many of Oakville's oldest families are the children and grandchildren of the tough schoonerman who kept the town alive in the early days.

PIONEER PRICES
A bargain \$6 per thousand was the price of barrel staves manufactured in Proudfoot's Mill in Old Sixteen Village (just west of King Paving in the creek valley) back in 1857.

STRAWBERRY COUNTRY
John Cross, a Yorkshireman, cultivated strawberries in the Oakville area as early as 1851. Mr. Cross sold runners of the fruit to other farmers for \$4 per thousand.

SHAKY WEALTH

Rise And Fall Of Lake Trade Affected Port

The history of Oakville is bound to the rise and decline of its port at the mouth of The Sixteen. For many years the town's fortunes rose and fell with the ups and downs of Lake Ontario commerce and the final death of the port as a commercial centre brought a long period of stagnation for Oakville.

It was the possibilities for a port on The Sixteen to tap the inland commerce of the area that first prompted Col. William Chisholm to found the village of Oakville and to undertake the dredging of the harbor and construction of a pier at his own expense.

In a letter to the lieutenant governor in 1824 Chisholm said of The Sixteen: "From here is shipped a considerable portion of the staves made in the adjacent county and no doubt this in time will become a place from which much of the surplus produce in the rear will be supplied."

There was already a small community growing up in The Sixteen Hollow to the north, and many of the farmers in the area earned extra money by cutting barrel staves and floating them down the creek to the lake.

CASH CROPS
It was primarily wood products, particularly barrel staves, that Chisholm was interested in as a merchant, but he seems also to have foreseen that the farmers of Halton County would eventually take to producing cash crops for which they would need an outlet to markets down the lake.

And Chisholm, as the owner of a private port, could collect a percentage of all goods shipped through Oakville and his purse would expand as trade in the area increased.

But things did not work out that way, unfortunately for Chisholm. The expense of keeping up a harbor proved to be too much for one man's resources. He died bankrupt, but the harbor he had built continued to bring prosperity to the town he founded.

The harbor passed into the hands of Chisholm's sons, who formed a stock company to try to spread the expenses of its upkeep. The harbor never brought a profit to private ownership, and so it eventually passed into the hands of the town corporation.

PORT PROSPERS
But the port of Oakville was another matter. Chisholm's prediction that the town would become a shipping terminal for its entire inland surroundings proved true, and the commerce of the port increased as the frontier was pushed farther and farther north.

Timber still stood thick on the land in the early days, and Halton County farmers were producing more wheat per acre than those of any other county, and so the little port of Oakville contributed a good share of the timber staves, wheat and flour being shipped from the St. Lawrence to Britain.

When Britain repealed the Corn Laws in 1846, ending the favorable position Canadian wheat had held on the British market, the colony's commerce suffered a serious setback.

But Oakville, although it was in the middle of a wheat belt and depended on wheat commerce for its prosperity, did not appear to suffer as much as the rest of the county from the repeal of the Corn Laws.

This testifies to the fact that most of the grain shipped from Oakville went to the United States through the Erie Canal. Significant also is the increase in the export of whiskey from Oakville after 1846, which shows that the farmers in the area were also using the Oakville Brewing and Distilling Company as an outlet for their grain.

The port continued to prosper for 15 years after the repeal of the Corn Laws. In 1857, with a population of over 2,000, Oakville was incorporated as a town.

But the price of wheat took a

nosedive in 1858, and never recovered. Farmers had over-extended themselves in the boom years, when crop failures in other countries had raised the price of Canadian wheat to \$2.50 per bushel, and many lost the land they had bought on credit.

Most tightened their belts and began to depend on diversified crops rather than just wheat. Also, they began to look to the new markets being created by the rise of cities close at hand, rather than marketing their goods through the port of Oakville.

SOILS RUINED
Other factors contributing to the decline of Oakville as a wheat port were attacks of insect pests in the latter years of the fifties, and, in the older areas of the county, the depletion of soils.

The figures in the Tables of Trade and Navigation in the province show clearly the dramatic decline in the port's commerce. More than 232,000 bushels of wheat were shipped to the United States in 1856, but by 1862, just six years later, this had dropped to 86,000 bushels, and the expenses of collecting tolls on exports, \$1,426, was three times the revenue.

In 1863 the number of bushels shipped dropped to 44,000, and after 1865 Oakville does not even appear on the Tables, probably because the figures were so small that the town was grouped among "Other Ports". During the eighties, the amount shipped was rarely more than two schooner loads per season.

The port's gross revenue, which had been more than a half - million dollars in 1856, had dropped to under \$1,000 in 1875, and after 1880 never again reached \$500. As a commercial port, Oakville was dead.

BACKWATER
This falling commerce, coupled with an economic depression that hit the entire country, transformed Oakville almost overnight into an economic backwater.

Even the American Civil War, with the huge demand it created for foodstuffs, did not profit Oakville as it did the rest of the country, because the railroad had provided area farmers with outlets to the east and west for their crops.

Oakville's population, which had been more than 2,000 in 1857, had dropped more than 25 per cent to 1,450 by 1861, and ten years later it had dropped to just over 1,000.

Businesses went broke or moved away, whole families fled to greener pastures, the bottom dropped out of property values and the town's shippers and sailors saw the writing on the wall. The boom was over.

BUILD ESTATE
Oakville's dog days continued uninterrupted until near the turn of the century, when the area became famous as a fruit-growing district, especially for its strawberries. The town was also becoming recognized as a pleasant resort, and many city dwellers came for the summer or built permanent estates.

The exodus from the city brought in enough revenue to make municipal ends meet, to pave the odd street, install a few sewers and street lights.

But the town would have to wait until after the Second World War, until large industries began to see the advantages of settling in an area with cheap land and ready access to highway and railroad traffic, before it could again look forward with the economic optimism that characterized Col. Chisholm's early ambitions for Oakville.

And just as life in the harbor once brought prosperity to Oakville, now it is Oakville's prosperity that has brought life to the harbor once more, with pleasure craft sporting more sails than ever graced the port in the days of the schoonermen.



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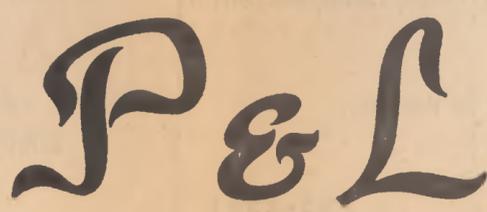
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