

CHICAGO BELLE / WIARTON BELLE

by Capt. Gerry Ouderkerk

- with the Editor -

The beginnings and endings of lake vessels often went unrecorded, and such is the case of the wooden steamer CHICAGO BELLE. A thumbnail sketch of her appeared in our Vol. XIII, No. 7, in April, 1981. The time has now come for a more detailed history of the steamer.

Some confusion concerning her origin arose as the Chicago builder's certificate was signed by Capt. F. W. Myers, of Buffalo, N.Y., who in partnership with E. H. Myers owned half the vessel. In the list of Buffalo shipbuilders compiled several years ago by the late T.M.H.S. member, Dr. Richard J. Wright, E. H. Myers was listed, but there was no mention of his building a ship at Buffalo in 1871 in the accompanying list of boats for that year. Although built at Chicago, CHICAGO BELLE was first enrolled at Buffalo in 1872, and she was listed as a new vessel. The reason for this was one of the worst disasters in American history.

Launched sometime in July of 1871 at Chicago, she was a triple-decked, wooden-hulled passenger and freight propeller. She measured 100.7' x 17.2' x 5.8', 87 Gross Tons and 57 Net. She was registered at Buffalo as U.S.125339. Her last enrolment at Buffalo (No. 241) states that the certificate was surrendered in September of 1882, as the vessel was sold foreign. This was the owner's fault, he being extremely slow at turning the information in to the government, for she had been sold Canadian in 1879. Her registry was changed to Owen Sound, Ontario, in 1889, and her name was changed officially that year.

No account of the launch has been found, and little is known of the ship's U.S. career. The "Chicago Free Press" of August 1st, 1871, stated: "In commission, CHICAGO BELLE is the name of the new propeller just completed at Miller Brothers yard. Owned by Chicago parties."

The "Buffalo Advertiser" of October 6, 1875, gave the following synopsis of her career: "Prop CHICAGO BELLE is at present in port lying at the foot of Bates Street. She is on her way to Chicago, which port she left shortly after the conflagration in 1871. Captain Myers, her owner then and now having been burned out at the time, removed his family to Buffalo." This explains why the ship was enrolled at Buffalo and not at Chicago. The Great Chicago Fire, purportedly caused by a cow kicking over a coal oil lantern, began on October 8th and burned without abatement until the business portion of the city was in ruins. Over 100,000 people were left homeless. Several vessels, and \$300,000,000 in property were destroyed. Fortunately, CHICAGO BELLE was spared from the flames.

The "Buffalo Advertiser" continued: "During the season 1872 & '73 he ran the BELLE between ports in the St. Lawrence River also in the vicinity of Ogdensburg, Prescott and between Kingston and the Bay of Quinte. In the fall of 1873 he returned to Buffalo with his vessel and in 1874 and '75 he used her as an excursion boat between ports in the Niagara River and that city (Buffalo). This season several exhibitions of the Boynton Dress have been given in Lake Erie in some of which Mr. Quinn, of this port has taken part. Capt. Myers is now returning to Chicago, his old home."

An advertisement for CHICAGO BELLE appearing in the "Buffalo Commercial Advertiser" of July 7, 1874, announced an "Excursion for the Thousand Islands: Stm. CHICAGO BELLE will make daily trips to Sheenwater at 2:00 P.M. and returning at 7:00 P.M. from the foot of Main St., until the 14th inst. Will leave 15th, Wednesday at 10:00 A.M. for the St. Lawrence River, Via Welland Canal, stopping at all ports on the South Shore of Lake Ontario making the trip in daylight". Sheenwater was a small resort on the west side of Grand Island, N.Y., in the Niagara River. It was a popular picnic spot and steam-