

## A TALE OF TWO BANSHEES

by Capt. Gerry Ouderkirk with the Editor

Today, any loss of life in a marine accident, especially on the Great Lakes, is considered to be a matter of extreme gravity. There was a time, however, when human life was not valued nearly so highly, and when the occasional (and, unfortunately, frequent) loss of life was considered to be something that went hand-in-hand with the operation of ships.

The 1861 navigation season brought the loss of 116 lives in accidents on the lakes. The worst individual loss occurred during November, when Lake Huron claimed 33 souls, being all of the passengers and crew of the steamer KEYSTONE STATE. More obscure, however, was the loss of a single life, an unfortunate passenger aboard a small steam propellor which was lost off Timber Island, on Lake Ontario. [1]

The ill-starred steamer was aptly named BANSHEE. That is the name which, in Ireland and the Western Highlands of Scotland, is given to a female fairy-elf, or spirit, which by its shrieks and wailings foretells a family of the impending death of one of its members. This seems a strangely unpleasant name to give to a passenger steamer, but in fact there were two vessels bearing this rather odd name, both built at approximately the same time and in the same area. Accordingly, it is not surprising that substantial confusion exists as to which of the vessels was intended whenever the name BANSHEE was mentioned in early marine reports.

The first BANSHEE was a small propellor built in 1852, and it was this ship that was lost in 1861. The second BANSHEE, a sidewheeler operated by the Royal Mail Line, was built in 1854 and lasted until she was dismantled in 1876. This second BANSHEE was a much larger vessel.

According to Canadian Coastal & Inland Steam Vessels 1809-1930, by John M. Mills, the propellor BANSHEE was 119 feet in length and 18 feet in breadth of hull, 166 tons, and was built in 1852 at Portsmouth (Kingston), Ontario. Interestingly, however, we have been unable to discover any accounts or mention of her in any of the available 1852 or 1853 newspapers. Steamboat advertising in the public press was very common at that time, and one would think that her owners would have taken pains to advertise the steamer's route and schedule to attract the patronage of the travelling public.

The first advertisement for BANSHEE that we have found is one that appeared on the front page of "The Globe", Toronto, on Monday, April 9, 1855. The steamers ST. NICHOLAS, Capt. Williams, and BANSHEE, Capt. Malcolmson, were owned by Nixon & Swales, of City Wharf, Hamilton. The two ships operated between Hamilton and Kingston and, by the autumn of 1855, they were joined by the steamer CITY OF HAMILTON, Capt. Everett, in a new line of independent freight boats. [2]

ST. NICHOLAS was built at Quebec in 1847 and was broken up in 1861. CITY OF HAMILTON was constructed at Bath, Ontario, in 1850, and was renamed (b) CITY OF THE BAY in 1856, reverting to her original name in 1862 and holding that name until she was abandoned in 1875. In 1854, Capt. John Trowell, of Kingston, was master of the schooner EMBLEM, of Hamilton, but he transferred to command the propellor BANSHEE later that season. (EMBLEM had been built in 1851 by Melancthon Simpson at Bronte, Ontario. On her second trip from Toronto in 1855, she was rammed by the Great Western steamboat AMERICA off Long Point on Lake Erie, and five of her crew drowned. [3] She later was rebuilt and ended her career as the Picton schooner OLIVIA.)

The "List of Canadian Vessels" published by the Toronto "Globe" on Monday, August 4, 1856, shows BANSHEE, commanded by Capt. Malcolmson, as 150 tons, built at Bath and owned by Nixon & Swales. She was valued at \$14,000. The same statistics were published the following year, but there was an ownership change, the ship now listed as owned by M. V. Browne, a prominent Hamilton wharfinger and shipowner. [4] J. B. Mansfield, in his History of