

OCEAN

- by Capt. Gerry Ouderkirk -
with the Editor

Ed. Note: We now resume the story of the 1872-built steamer OCEAN, which we left last issue after the vessel had been repaired following her June 7, 1894, collision with the barge KENT on the Upper St. Lawrence River.

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The 1894 accident was bad enough, but OCEAN was back in the headlines in June of 1895 with yet another mishap, and this one reportedly was the worst accident ever to occur in the Cornwall Canal. OCEAN's 1895 season had begun late, but she finally got away to Montreal on May 4th and in her cargo on that trip were 13 rowing and sailing boats, built at H. L. Bastien's Boat Works in Hamilton for a customer in Montreal. On June 19th, OCEAN was on an upbound trip and she arrived at Cornwall at about 8:00 a.m. As she entered Lock 17, her speed was not checked quickly enough and, despite frantic efforts to snub her, she struck the upper gates so hard that they were displaced. The force of the water from the upper pool then tore them from their fastenings and hurled the gates, along with the unfortunate OCEAN, down into the basin below the lock. One of the lower gates also was carried away by the water from the long upper level, which washed down and over the canal banks.

OCEAN was carried backwards 30 or 40 feet below Lock 17, lurching from side to side, and was driven violently against the stone wall on the south side of the basin. It was said that she bent like a whip. A hawser was made fast to the shore and OCEAN thus was prevented from being carried down to Lock 15. The water from above was four feet over the lower lock walls and wrecked the bridge on the bywash, tearing down the banks. Large piles of coal and large stones below the lower dock were carried into the river and the rip-rap on the river bank was displaced. OCEAN's stern was split from top to bottom and, when the steamer lurched, the freight between decks was hurled against the ship's sides and burst outward. A large quantity of wreckage floated out of the hold, including a number of cases of liquor, of which short work reportedly was made by the crowd gathered along the shore.

The tug SARAH DALEY was tied up above Lock 17 and, when the accident happened, she was torn from her moorings and flushed stern-first through the lock. Her crew managed to get a line ashore and she was brought to before reaching the stricken OCEAN.

The passengers and crew were got ashore before OCEAN sank in about 20 feet of water, listing heavily to starboard. When most of the water had run out of the level and the current was less strong, she righted and then lay diagonally across the basin, with the water nearly up to the saloon deck, and her entire cargo of general merchandise under water. It was expected that the accident would cause suspension of vessel traffic for four or five days, as OCEAN's position completely blocked the canal.

The canal superintendent was faced with rather a complex problem. Since the whole reach up to Lock 18 had been drained, he had no immediate way of getting spare gates or his gate-lifter up to the scene of the damage. The problem ultimately was solved by removing one upper gate from Lock 15 and floating it through the basin to Lock 17. It then was hauled up and hung in place of the lower gate carried away by the force of the water from the reach above. The superintendent optimistically stated that the canal would reopen the following Monday, June 23rd. OCEAN was pumped out, her leaks plugged as well as possible, and her bottom covered with canvas. She was refloated on Saturday, the 21st, and she was towed to Montreal for repair on Cantin's drydock. Captain Malcolmson went to Montreal with her. Navigation in the Cornwall Canal resumed on June 22nd.