

TATEY BUG'S LAST RIDE

Although the ports of Georgian Bay do not see much commercial shipping any more, they once were very active and supported a thriving shipping industry. Midland, Ontario, was one of the most active of these ports, being the site of a number of grain elevators, a coal dock and a large shipyard, and it also was home to several shipping companies. Some of these firms were controlled by the famous entrepreneur James Playfair, but Playfair was not the only well-known shipping name to be associated with the town of Midland.

The Burke family also was very influential in the development of Midland as a shipping centre. Irish-born in 1806, Quartermaster Sgt. David Burke later was an equipment officer at Penetanguishene, near Midland. He had three sons David, John and Francis (Frank), all of whom became lake captains. In turn, Capt. David Burke (1843-1893) also had three sons, and all of them also were ship masters. They were Capt. Edward Francis Burke (1873-1958), Capt. David Joseph Burke (1879-1941) and Capt. Frederick John Burke (1888-1940).

The Burkes had a number of shipping interests over the years, but perhaps the one best recalled by those who remember anything at all about the Burke boats was the Burke Towing & Salvage Company Limited, Midland, the last of the Burke companies. This firm was incorporated to acquire the assets of the MIDland Towing & Wrecking Company, and it functioned until its charter was surrendered in 1948. Captains Ed, David and Fred all were associated with this company, and all were officers of the firm at various times.

The Burke Towing & Salvage Company owned a number of vessels, mostly tugs and barges, but its two largest ships were the canallers ARLINGTON and SALVUS. The ARLINGTON was a bulk freight steamer, while SALVUS was a canal-sized barge, reconstructed from the hull of the steamer LAMBTON (28), (a) GLENAFTON (25), which had been built in 1921 and stranded with the loss of two lives on Ile Parisienne, in eastern Lake Superior, on December 8, 1927. While in Burke ownership, SALVUS often was used as a wrecking barge but, for a few years, she regularly was towed by the ARLINGTON.

Capt. Fred Burke was well known in Midland, and for most of his life he was affectionately known as "Tatey Bug" Burke, a nickname that dated back to his childhood days. That he was an important local figure is demonstrated by the fact that he appeared in the centre of an April 10, 1932, photo taken in the town offices, which showed a ceremony involving elected officials and prominent Midland citizens of the day.

Fred Burke sailed many lake ships over the years, among them being a number of the family's tugs. He also sailed the Playfair freighters GLENLIVET, GLENORCHY and GLENIFFER, and later commanded the JAMES B. EADS and RALPH BUDD. He left the BUDD at the end of the 1939 season, and in 1940 fitted out the Burke canaller ARLINGTON, sailing with her on her first trip of the season when she departed Midland in mid-April. Fred Burke also had taken the position of secretary-treasurer of the Burke Towing & Salvage Company.

"Tatey Bug" Burke was described in the press as "a bluff, hearty seadog" and "hard-spoken, gruff... yet beloved by his crews". In 1924, he had been master of Playfair's GLENORCHY, (a) A. E. STEWART (18), when on October 29th, she collided off Harbor Beach, Michigan, in a dense fog, with the Columbia steamer LEONARD B. MILLER (37), (b) CHARLES W. GALLOWAY (58), (c) ROBERT C. NORTON (I)(74), (d) BUCKEYE (II). GLENORCHY foundered quickly in the deep waters of Lake Huron but, before she went, Capt. Burke checked and found that two of his crewmen were missing. He found them trapped in their cabin and, using an axe to clear away the debris, Fred Burke was able to free both men and get them to safety aboard the MILLER.

But on May 1st, 1940, "Tatey Bug" Burke's luck ran out and, as the ARLINGTON sank in 930 feet of water on Lake Superior in heavy weather, Capt. Burke went with her to the bottom. How this came to pass has been the subject of much speculation ever since, as the rest of the steamer's crew were rescued.