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## Pt McNicoll sailor recalls days aboard Athabasca

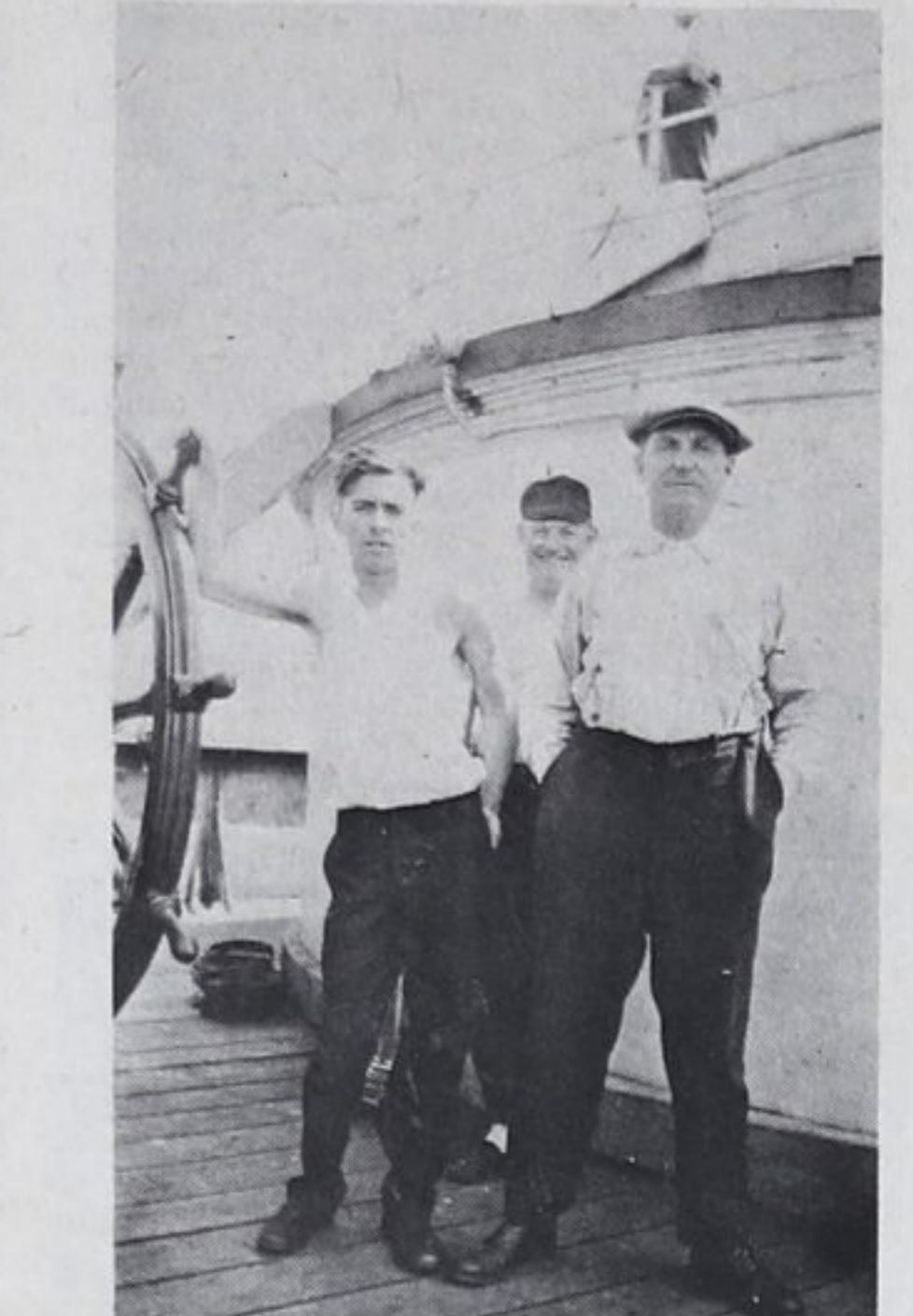
by Shirley Whittington  
In 1927 when you were laid off from a ship's crew, that was it. You found your own way home, and that was how Penetanguishene's John Wedge found himself aboard the Athabasca - one of the ships featured in the Inland Vessels series of Canada's 10 cent postage stamps.  
"I was up in Fort William," says Wedge, "stranded and broke and I met a friend who was sailing on the Athabasca. He offered to stuff me into the coal bunker so's I could get home to Port McNicoll. As it happened, one of the firemen didn't show up that night, and I was hired on and I sailed on her until 1929."  
The green postage stamp shows the Scottish built ship under sail and steam. The sails were

gone when Wedge sailed on her. "I believe they were taken off about 1910," he says, "but the mast was still there. I know, I painted it."  
Athabasca was built in Scotland along with her sister ships the Alberta and Algoma. They steamed to Montreal in 1883 and then were sliced in half to fit the lock system. Reassembled at Buffalo, they arrived in Owen Sound in 1884, ready for the Lakehead run. They were the first lakers to be equipped with electric lights.  
By the time Wedge joined the crew, first as fireman and later as oiler, the Athabasca no longer carried passengers, but she was still a sturdy craft. "A good ship," is how Wedge

characterizes her, "but she had a bit of a flat bottom and that made her a bit rough at times."  
Like all Great Lakes sailors, Wedge has heavy respect for the furies of Georgian Bay storms. "I was thrown right out of my bunk one night," he remembers. "Somebody told me the next day that the Athabasca was on her side for 13 seconds, but the old girl righted herself."  
One storm was so violent it tore the door off the side of the ship where the ashes from the boilers were emptied. "Every time she rolled, ice-cold water poured in and pretty soon, the engine room was awash. We had a load of wheat on, and there was a law against breaking the seal on the

hold, but the captain knew the only way to save the ship was to break into the hold. He lowered some big bags filled with wheat and jammed them up against the door. That wheat swelled up so hard it kept us dry. Later, when I went down to clear the door, the wheat was jammed in so tight from swelling we had to chisel it out with a pick axe."  
Wireless telegraph was the only communication aboard the lakers at the time.  
There was one bad storm, and a ship went down just half a mile from us. She was carrying cattle and they broke loose. She listed, and over she went. And we never even saw her."  
On board, the work was hard and hot, the food bad and the pay low. "I got \$90 a month as an oiler," says Wedge, "but we had some good times on board too."  
He remembers a night when a new deckhand came aboard. "It was pouring rain outside, just coming down in buckets. Jack Lindsay looked at the new deckhand, and he looked at me and he said, 'Whose turn is it for spark watch?'"  
"I knew by the look on his face that he was up to something. I said it was the job of the new hands on board, and so we sent this fellow out into the rain with a pail and a mop to extinguish any sparks from the stack so as not to set fire to the ship."  
"Well, he stayed out there in the rain for about half an hour and then he comes in, dripping wet and he says 'How the hell can a ship catch fire in this kind of weather? We laughed a lot over that!'"  
Tied in with his

memories of the ship, are memories of Port McNicoll when it was a booming shipping centre. "I've seen as many as 15 ships tied up in there," he says. There were two big boarding houses, and the CPR hotel (now the Inn) and there'd be a couple of hundred people staying there - all connected with the ships.  
"We used to take freight up the lakes - barbed wire, pianos, wine, farm machinery - whatever was needed out west, and we'd bring back flour, or feed. I'll never forget the time we dropped a brand new piano into the hold!"  
Port McNicoll was dry in those days, and some of the locals made their own whiskey. "We'd be unloading corn, and these fellows would come to work with high rubber boots right up to their hips. Now, they didn't wear them, except when it was close to quitting time. Then they'd put them on and fill them right up with corn and they'd walk on home, corn and all. It's a wonder their feet weren't blistered off. And they'd use the corn to make moonshine."  
Breakfast aboard was invariably porridge and it was porridge that prompted Wedge to say goodbye to the Athabasca. "Jack Lindsay one of my mates, got his porridge one morning and it was so lumpy he couldn't eat it. He took it back to the cook, and the cook told him, (not very politely) to eat it anyway. Well, Jack let him have it in the face with the hot porridge, and out came all the the cooks, out of the kitchen waving their meat cleavers. Jack tore



On board Athabasca

Jack Wedge stands by the wheel of the Athabasca. Beside him is Jack Lindsay, the shipmate whose aversion to lumpy porridge almost precipitated a mutiny.

around the deck, with the cooks hollering and chasing after him. He only stopped once - to grab a fire axe out of its housing. He turned around and faced the cooks as they came around the corner, with the axe raised over his head. Well, it was a helluva commotion, and as a result, Jack was fired, and we all resigned with him."

Wedge left sailing, and eventually went into a career with the International Union of Operating Engineers - a job which has taken him to major construction sites across Canada, including Churchill Falls and the St. Lawrence Seaway.  
Retired now, he still feels nostalgic stirrings every time he sees his old ship on the ten cent green. "I wish I could get in touch with some of the guys that used to sail on her in the 20's," he says. "Or some of their relatives. I really would like to hear from them."

Anyone reading this who has a connection with the Athabasca can write to Mr. Jack Wedge, 19 Lucy Street, Penetanguishene.  
And if you want to do Jack a favour, stamp your letter with the ten cent green that bears an image of his old ship.



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There will be an **OPEN PUBLIC MEETING** for the **EAST END NEIGHBOURHOOD IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM AREA** on **Thursday, December 9th, 1976 at the hour of 7:30 p.m. in the Gymnasium at Burkevale School, on Burke Street, Penetanguishene**

**Steve Fournier, NIP Coordinator**



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**New NSSCIA executive**

by Robt. A. Humphries  
Associate Agricultural Representative  
North Simcoe

Despite the poor driving conditions on December 2nd, fifty-six members of the Soil and Crop Improvement Association attended the Annual Meeting at Midhurst.

The morning session featured a report on the 1976 field projects undertaken in the county by C.H. Kingsbury.

Two delegates were appointed to attend the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association Annual Meeting being held in Barrie on February 2nd and 3rd, 1977. They are Gordon Wright, R.R. No. 1, Midhurst, and Donald G. Bell, R.R. No. 2, Coldwater.

Three new directors were appointed for the 1977 term. They are Paul Maurice, R.R. No. 3, Penetang; Karl Miller, R.R. No. 1, Hillsdale, and Gerald Churchill, R.R. No. 2, Coldwater.

Doug Wilcox, our Director to the O.S.C.I.A., declared that he was stepping down and that a new director would have to be found to represent Simcoe-Dufferin. A committee was appointed to recommend a North Simcoe Candidate. The Committee members are Ron Coutts, Russell Maw and Allan Brown.

All directors and members were asked to suggest topic areas for a resolution to the Annual Meeting. A draft of the resolution is to be presented at the Directors' Meeting on January 12, 1977.

President Ron Coutts reminded all members to pre-register for North Simcoe's Forage Conference being held on February 1st, 1977, at the Holiday Inn, Barrie.