

Annual Mariners Memorial Service: Memorial for those lost at sea

Advocate, Nova Scotia

Presentation made by Captain Conrad Byers

August 17, 2008

I am pleased and honoured to have been asked to join you on this special day of remembrance for the many men...and women from this region who were lost at sea.

You obviously believe, as I do, that it is important for a community to gather in the present to collectively remember and honour the sacrifices made by our forebears in the past. Tragedy and grief touch all of us at some point in our lives but these are best absorbed and relieved under the shared umbrella of support from our families and our community. Fortunately, this has always been the case in Advocate and in neighbouring coastal communities. It is this unity of caring that brings us here today and has kept this community alive and active into the 21st Century.

As far as I know, no one knows exactly how many lives the sea has taken from us over the years or how many families received a 'letter in black' with the message "Lost at Sea". But a newspaper article dated 1935, author unknown, does shed some light on the subject by listing a number of families from this shore that were directly involved in seafaring...and I'm sure that most on that list, at one time or other, received that dreaded letter telling of the loss of a loved one at sea.

It reads in part.... And I quote

"This shores' vessels having sailed to all parts of the world, suffered severe losses by shipwreck, fire, storms, collisions and so forth. In some cases whole families were wiped out in one shipwreck and nearly every family on the shore has suffered the loss of someone. This is particularly true of Advocate Harbour, one of the prettiest, places in Nova Scotia, of which it has been said that the principal product was ship captains. There have been so many captains out of this port that at one time it was pretty safe to call anyone on the street "captain". I may have missed a few old timers, but here are the majority of the family names along the shore that produced captains and crews that have made marine history.

The Morris', Spicers, Dewis, Knowltons, Hatfields, Pettis, Merriams, Kerrs, Howards, Lambs, McLeods, Deans, Pritchards, Kearneys, Ogilvies, Georges,

Durants, Wassons, Desmonds, Willigars, Smiths, Haws, Bullerwells, Cranes, Salters, Copps, Corbetts, Phinneys, Bowdens, Lyons, Taylors, Randalls, Digous, Morriseys, Winters, Rowes, Antles, McCullys, Rectors, Mills, Tupper, McIssacs, Hills, Newcombs, Mannings, Woods, Llewelyns, Kings, Blakes, Huntleys, McLeans, Dodsworths, Trefrys, McDades, Mahoneys, Atkins, Towers, Trerices, Cards, Collins, Loomers, Moores, Elliotts, Roberts, Dexters, Morrisons, Benjamins, McLaughlins, McNamaras, Grahams, Browns, Cannings, McGraths, Hillgroves, McCabes, Tates, Neeves, McQuarters, Parsons, Dyas, Millers, and others all have to their credit fast trips and good service to the Empire.”

Wreck of the Vamoose

Now to take but one example from all those families...I would like to include just one graphic example of a local loss, reported in a newspaper account that arrived in Advocate in December 1898...110 years ago. Titled “Wreck of the Vamoose”. The Vamoose left Sydney, Nova Scotia on November 21st. for Saint John, New Brunswick with a cargo of coal. The weather was thick and rough and the vessel was carried far-out of her course. On Nov.27th, the wind began to freshen and on the 28th., the Vamoose found herself facing the memorial hurricane, which will go down in history as the worst in 40 years. The vessel was then in latitude 42 north. The seas increased in violence until they resembled small mountains. Captain Knowlton quickly ordered the storm sails to be set and prepared for the worst. Meanwhile snow had commenced to fall, and soon the crew were called upon to contend with a terrible blizzard. The thermometer fell rapidly and snow clung to everything. Ice formed about the decks and ropes, making the vessel even harder to handle. The gale tore the railing from the after part of the ship, and everything portable was quickly floated off into the boiling sea.

But a danger even more serious threatened the ship. The canvas began to give way. Gradually the terrific squalls weakened the sails and before long, all the storm canvas had been carried away. This left the crew helpless to control the schooner, but fortunately the wind soon commenced to abate and the men were relieved from their exertions.

The captain took his bearing and found that the nearest port was Bermuda. With the canvas he had left, Captain Knowlton decided to head his ship to that point. But again heavy winds were encountered and soon the Vamoose had worked to the Latitude of New York City. To make matters worse, the provisions were giving out and the men were placed on allowance. Captain Knowlton found that he was 150 miles from New York City and decided to make for that port. The vessel's progress

was necessarily slow but on Dec.6th, they made the south shoal of Nantucket Beach. They then made Gay Head light off Martha's Vineyard and the south light on Black Island. Beating up Long Island Sound the north light on Black Island was mistaken for Point Jude Light, and this led to the disaster.

The Vamoose was running along in a gradually freshening breeze, when at 10pm. she struck one of the worst parts of the coast. She was well up in the breakers and was pounding badly on the rocks. The seas at once started to break over her and the first wave carried off Captain Knowlton, who was standing on the main deck giving orders. The same sea also struck Taylor, whose leg was almost broken by coming in contact with the poop deck. The Captain was seen for a moment as he struggled bravely for his life, but his body was dashed to pieces among the rocks. The men then started for the rigging. First Mate Brooks, who had been ill for some time, was the first to go up and it was there that he died from exposure, his body falling into the sea. After remaining on board for some time, the men found that unless assistance reached them they would, in all probability, meet the same fate as Brooks. Samuel Webb and H. Christensen volunteered to go ashore for assistance but as the boat had been carried away, the men were forced to construct a raft. The craft was frail enough when completed but nothing daunted the two heroes who quickly launched it and prepared for a struggle for their lives. With the heavy waves prevailing they were unable to control the course of the raft and this meant it was almost impossible for them to reach shore but they did. Fainting from exhaustion they started for a house over a mile away. How they did it neither man could explain. Most of the distance they crawled on their hands and knees and fell fainting at the threshold. The good people of the house cared for them, and after getting sufficient details, a messenger was dispatched on horseback to the life saving station some three miles away.

The crew from the station responded promptly, and were soon on the scene. Meanwhile those on the wreck had suffered terribly, and the mate had dropped overboard, his body being subsequently recovered. The life boat, however, was found to be useless, owing to the rocks on every side, and the breeches buoy was sent off. With the aid of this the men were landed and treated by a physician. Ten minutes later and before the half dead sailors were removed for shelter, the Vamoose went to pieces with a crash.

The crew were well cared for, and after communicating with the British Consul, were provided with tickets for this port. They were anxious to reach Saint John where they would be paid off. All of the men lost everything but the clothes they stood in. Watches, money and clothes were at the bottom of the sea. Young Webb,

one of the heroes, who risked his life to save those of his fellow crewmates, was minus \$15, a watch and two suits of clothes. He intended to visit his home at Lescombe after the voyage, and would continue onto there, but under entirely different circumstances from what he anticipated.

Often deep feelings and emotions can be best communicated through poetry or music. Thus, I would like to close my remarks by sharing with you two poems that are really lyrics to songs. However, because these short pieces will be new to your ears, I must take a minute or two to explain their creation and their relevance to our heritage and to what we are honouring here today.

Over a year ago now, a young man, David Stone, a folklorist and songwriter, was directed to me for stories and history of the Shore. I quite often get such requests but I seldom know the degree of sincerity or talent these people may have. However, I told him some of the basic history and a few stories of the area...but to secretly test his dedication of mission, I advised that he travel down the shore to Advocate and view the area for himself...I hinted that it was not only a beautiful area but that it was the only area I knew where the past and the present seem to meld together in harmony. Several days later I received via-e-mail, a half dozen song lyrics...although I have never heard these put to music they seem to my ear to read as true poetry. I am sharing two of these pieces because they were not only written in Advocate but to my mind capture much of the essence of what we are honouring here today.

Age of Sail

Gone but not forgotten are words we often hear
No truer have they uttered for the ghosts of those down here
The men who cut the timber down and brought it to the shore
To the men who built the sailing ships that sailed the whole world o'er

They carved their place in history from the rugged Minas ring
And built the finest many say – the greatest ships there's ever been
From the local yards grew masts and spars – crewed by the finest lads
Taking timber from the Cumberland – timber in such great demand

From Portapique to Advocate – where the tidal rivers run
Port Greville to Parrsboro – for two hundred years they'd come
Maitland on the Noel Shore to the Avon's churning mouth
Ships were built by stubborn - skill – and sold and sailed down south

They coined the phrase – Age of Sail – a time the whole world o’er
When the smartest and the strongest men – to go to sea were born
Creating such an industry – that married – minds and might
No finer representatives were the crowd on Fundy sites

The schooners and great brigantines – tacked to the open sea
Between the Capes of D’Or and Split – that towered mightily

The land carved by God’s caring hand – the last glimpse of their home
Before the Fundy pulled them south – to the unforgiving foam

From their decks - crew could check the smoke clouds from the mills
The hissing steam whose plumes would stream below the red-faced hills
They’d see the ribs - the new lain keels of the next great brig or barque
The slipways leading t’ward the bay – where young shipwrights make their mark

But the Age of Sail slipped gradually – into the mists of time
When steam and iron ships took o’er – wood and canvas bid goodbye
For another hundred years - the yards - fell one by one away
And but a ghostly trace – is still in place – all up and down the bay
And but a ghostly trace – is all that remains – of the golden Age of Sail

The Advocate Boys

The tide’s on the rise - over mud flats of grey
The lobstermen’s boats – are set for the day
Soon they’ll be off through the gap in the bar
For the Fundy – with traps – their day they will start

In Advocate Harbour for hundreds of years
They’ve loaded their boats with bait and with gear
And families are fed with the bounty they haul
As they roll in and out - each day to the wall

The ships they have changed over time in these parts
The tall masts and sails – the schooners and barques
Have come and they’ve gone as the trade has evolved
It’s not timber they load – its lobsters they haul

Since the days of Champlain and Prince Henry Sinclair
Between forest and sea they've profited here
They've reaped their reward for the sweat and the toil
And the dangers they've faced - these Advocate boys

The day it is clear and the water - she's calm
December is deep - the season's - she's gone
A week or two max - then its wait til next year
And then it's back to the woods and the timber to clear

It's a balance of struggle and good times at best
Like the shifting of tides they roll and they rest
Families are raised from the bounty they haul
Through the break in the bar by the Advocate wall.

I may have greatly underestimated Mr. Stones' ability to capture in a few words the essence of our history...and our continued reliance on forest and sea.

We are here today to continue to express our remembrance and prayers for those lost lives of the past and for those that still go down to the sea in ships.

Thank you