NEAR-DISASTER AT THE SHIPYARD

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In the 1960's I spent a number of my high school and university summers working as an Office Boy/Messenger in the Collingwood Shipyard where I got to see first-hand the workings of this mainstay of the Collingwood economy. In August 1967, I witnessed a near-disaster in the Shipyard while making my rounds.

That year the Yard built Hull #190, a self-propelled fuel bunkering barge named *Bayshell* for Shell Canada Ltd. This new ship was ordered to replace an older, smaller one of the same name. The new 200 ft. long vessel was launched on May 26, 1967 and was designed for fueling other ships at Montreal. Its motive power consisted of two outboard engines built by Harbormaster Marine, Inc. These were not your typical Evinrude outboard motor on the boat at the summer cottage.

Harbormaster Marine was a United States manufacturer of heavy-duty marine outboard drive propulsion systems. These engines eliminated the need for, and the space taken up by, an engine room, fuel tanks, drive shafts through the hull, etc. They were designed to be mounted at the rear of the main deck or even at the side of a barge, small ferry, landing craft, etc. On the *Bayshell* as in some other vessels, the drive shaft and propeller were enclosed in a notch in the stern of the steel hull.

When the vessel was completed and before it left Collingwood on August 7th to be delivered to its owners, a crew took it out for a spin around the harbour to test its performance and handling. Its cargo tanks may have been filled with water at the time to simulate a full payload to enable them to gauge how it would behave in actual working conditions. This trial run almost became the vessel's first and last trip.

One of my duties at the Yard was to record the water level over the sill of the drydock daily. This was important information because the depth of water affected the ability of ships to enter the drydock. My task involved going downstairs in the Pump House to view the water level in a large glass tube with the depth marked in feet and inches beside it. The normal depth in those days (before water levels on the Great Lakes began to

fluctuate widely) was supposed to be 14 ft. of water over the sill, with the bottom of the harbour and the bottom of the dock being several feet lower than the sill where the drydock gate sat when it was winched into place.

On that particular day in 1967 the drydock gate was in place on the sill and the dock had been pumped dry to "set the blocks" for a ship that would be coming in soon for inspection and/or repairs. When I emerged from the Pump House I saw the *Bayshell* coming too fast into the slip that led from the harbour to the drydock gate. [The drydock gate's position was just barely north of the Pump House at the time; this was the original location before the gate was moved about 50 feet farther north toward the harbour when the drydock was lengthened in the 1970's.] At the same moment that I saw this, Reg Watts, the Foreman of the Rigging Department and a member of the famous Watts wooden boatbuilding family, was walking along the edge of the drydock toward the harbour. He was looking at the ground as he walked, apparently deep in thought. When he looked up and saw the *Bayshell* coming toward the drydock gate too fast he came to life with a fearful intensity and he started running and waving his arms and yelling repeatedly as loud as possible, "BACK HER UP!" The crew onboard the *Bayshell* were not paying attention to their

speed or location but when Reg started to run and yell he certainly got their attention and they reversed the engines and quickly got a line to shore and stopped safely.

Here was a 200 ft. long steel hull that could have rammed the 66 year-old drydock gate which, by this point in its life, was not watertight due to the large amount of wood in its keel. The gate had the pressure of about 17 feet of water in the harbour all on one side of it and an empty drydock on the other side (the ends of the gate were held in notches in the stone abutments). In a worst-case scenario, if the *Bayshell* had not stopped in time it could have destroyed the drydock gate and plunged through into the bottom of the empty drydock with the water of Georgian Bay following it and submerging the vessel, drowning the men onboard and wrecking a brand-new ship. It would also have rendered the drydock unusable until a new gate could be constructed. It could have been a very black day in Collingwood and it is frightening to think of the legal consequences if such a disaster had happened. George Gomme, one of the Stationary Engineers at the Pump House said to me that it must have been the breeze coming from Reg Watts' waving arms that helped the *Bayshell* to slow down and stop in time before striking the drydock gate.

With near-disaster averted by Reg Watts, the *Bayshell* was delivered to Montreal and worked successfully fueling ships for many years at its home port of Montreal before being retired in 1983. The *Bayshell* was replaced by an earlier Collingwood ship, Hull #167, originally built in 1958 as the *Tyee Shell* which was reconstructed at Collingwood in 1969 as Hull #194 and renamed *Arctic Trader*. In 1989 *Bayshell* was sold to other interests and it was towed to Panama, renamed *Petropan I* and there it resumed bunkering duties connected with the Panama Canal. In later years it underwent at least two more name changes and the latest information indicates it was under the flag of Colombia since early 2010. The ship was photographed in Santa Marta, Colombia in 2014. Its successor, *Arctic Trader* underwent four more name changes and it, too, ended up in South America, registered in Georgetown, Guyana—two Collingwood ships far from their birth place and still performing the duties for which they were constructed over half a century ago.

David Vuckson is a great-grandson of pioneer Collingwood merchant R. W. O'Brien. His roots in Collingwood go back to 1875. He and his wife Pamela live in Victoria, B.C.