



JUNE 22nd, 1959 WAS A BLACK DAY IN COLLINGWOOD

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A small portion of this story (edited to fit the available space) originally appeared in the former Enterprise-Bulletin newspaper on July 24, 2015 under the title Tragedy Struck With The Sinking Of The Shipyard Tug. This is a much-expanded and updated version of that original story for the 60th anniversary of that disaster, including the eventual fate of the three vessels involved. This story is dedicated to the memory of Ken McInnis, Edwin McCoy and Captain Percy Butters who drowned on June 22, 1959.

Sixty years ago on Monday morning, June 22nd, 1959 hundreds of Collingwood men returned to their jobs at the Collingwood Shipyard after an early summer weekend. Many of them had cut their lawns and tended their vegetable gardens on Saturday, attended church on Sunday morning, maybe went for a drive in the afternoon, and watched the Ed Sullivan show on

television in the evening—activities typical of weekend life in a small town of around 8000 people when stores and the town's two movie theatres were closed on Sundays. Four days later the St. Lawrence Seaway, already in operation for two months, would have its official opening with Queen Elizabeth II attending during the 1959 Royal Tour. Collingwood's major employer had a bright future with at least twenty years of work ahead to rebuild the Great Lakes fleet to take advantage of this new marine highway extending over 2300 miles from the Atlantic Ocean to Duluth on Lake Superior. The future for the Shipyard and the Town of Collingwood looked bright. The Shipyard workers went back to work as they always did at the start of the work week with no hint of the disaster that was about to happen. Likewise, hundreds of school children returned to their classrooms on that Monday morning, excited about this being their last week of school before the summer holidays. Several of them would lose their father that day.

For three of the men who punched their time cards at the Shipyard gates that morning it would be the last day they would ever do so, for tragedy was about to strike and they would not return home to their families after the 5:00 p.m. whistle blew. Gordon Braniff, the Shipyard's Personnel Manager, would have the unhappy task of going to the homes of Ken McInnis (my neighbour), Edwin McCoy and Captain Percy Butters to break the news to their families. Ken McInnis and Edwin McCoy were

Shipyard employees from the Maintenance and Rigging Departments, respectively, and Captain Butters was a Great Lakes Captain who had retired in 1957 after a sailing career of about 46 years. They were part of a six man crew who went out on the tug *Bayport* that afternoon to assist two freighters—one of them disabled—to navigate the channel into Collingwood harbour. The peace of a small marine-dependent town was about to be shattered.

The *Bayport* was a 78 ft. long coal-fired, steam-powered tug built in 1914 at Cleveland, Ohio for the Great Lakes Towing Company and originally named *Fairport*. She had been sold in 1941 to Burke Towing & Salvage of Midland and was then resold the following year to Canada Steamship Lines, serving as a harbour tug and icebreaker at Collingwood, Midland, Tiffin and Port McNicol, all of which Georgian Bay harbours had grain elevators, Collingwood and Midland also having substantial shipyards. The busy harbour at Owen Sound had its own tugs belonging to the Hindman fleet. During the winter months, as the grain in the elevators was transferred to rail cars for shipment to Montreal for export, fully loaded ships wintering in these frozen ports had to be freed from the ice and repositioned to unload their cargoes and this required the service of icebreaking to reposition the ships.

When the *Bayport* was in Collingwood she was usually “parked” adjacent to the Shipyard Paint Shop. In January of 1959 the *Bayport* had participated in the launch of the largest ship Collingwood had ever built up to that time, the 715 ft. long *Menihek Lake*—Collingwood’s first St. Lawrence Seaway size ship—launched on January 12th. The harbour and launch basin were thickly frozen requiring icebreaking and extra tug capacity was needed to handle the manoeuvring of this huge ship after the launch. The *Bayport* was not adequate to this task and so, Hindman’s large tug *Sulphite* at 142 feet long, nearly twice the length of the *Bayport*, and a smaller one, the *Paul Evans*, came down from Owen Sound to assist since there was a vast amount of ice to be broken in the launch basin, inner harbour, and turning circle out by the grain elevator for launch day. In those days, heavy boilers and engines were not in the ship at the time of launching because the cranes alongside the building berth did not have the capacity for such heavy lifts. After the big splash, the new hull would be towed out to the grain elevator to be turned around and then backed in alongside the massive Sheer Leg Crane for the heavy lifting job before being backed into the launch basin for several months of finishing.

On June 22nd, 1959 a freighter named *Mohawk Deer* was dead in the water with a broken propeller shaft. The *Deer* was being towed toward Collingwood by another freighter, the *Capt. C. D. Secord* (no relation to Laura). The *Mohawk Deer* had been

constructed in 1896 at West Bay City, Michigan by F. W. Wheeler & Co. as the *L. C. Waldo*; it was just a few inches over 405 ft. long. The ship was lengthened in 1905 at Superior (Wisconsin) Ship Building Co. to just over 470 ft. During the Great Storm of November 1913, while on Lake Superior, the *Waldo* was one of many ships that were blown ashore and wrecked but not sunk. Not only was she blown ashore, but she also broke in two; nevertheless the crew of 24 were all rescued. Abandoned to the insurance underwriters, the wreck was salvaged in the spring of 1914 and reconstructed at Lorain, Ohio by the American Ship Building Co. and sold to the Matthews Steamship Co. of Toronto in 1915 and renamed *Riverton*. The ship went to another new owner in 1934. In 1943 she was stranded on a shoal and brought to the Collingwood Shipyard for repairs. In 1944 she was sold again, this time to Mohawk Navigation and renamed *Mohawk Deer*. When the repaired ship left the Collingwood Shipyard in 1944, little did anyone realize that she would return fifteen years later under tragic circumstances that would affect the entire town of Collingwood.

When the *Bayport* went out to meet the two incoming freighters that afternoon, a tow line was passed to the tug. One of the accounts states that the *Mohawk Deer*, 470 feet long and without power, but still with momentum from being towed by the *Secord*, suddenly veered off at an angle and

nothing could be done in time to prevent the tug from being pulled over by the tow line. Around 3:00 p.m. the *Bayport* sank in seconds in about 20 feet of water. The crew of the *Secord* first threw rafts and life jackets into the water and then launched a lifeboat. Reg Watts, Bruce Gillies and Jack Scott were rescued; Ken McInnis, Capt. Percy Butters and Edwin McCoy drowned. Two skin divers from Barrie were rushed to Collingwood with an Ontario Provincial Police escort; they found the tug but no bodies. A drag line was used to find the body of Ken McInnis late on Tuesday evening. On Wednesday morning a group of divers from Camp Borden were brought to Collingwood to aid in the search and the remaining two bodies were located just before noon. The funerals for Ken McInnis and Percy Butters were held at Fawcett's Funeral Home on Pine St.; the funeral for Edwin McCoy was conducted at the United Missionary Church on Cameron St. My neighbour Ken McInnis left a wife and two young children, his son Paul, 6, and his new daughter Susan just 10 months old. Edwin McCoy also left a wife and daughter. Captain Butters, in his 61st year, being the eldest of the three men left a wife and two grown/married daughters and a son. All three men had extended families in Collingwood including parents, brothers and sisters and, in the case of Capt. Butters, ten grandchildren.

The sunken tug was salvaged that summer by McQueen Marine Ltd., a towing and salvage firm from Amherstburg, Ontario.

They came with three vessels for the job: the wrecking barge *T. F. Newman* and two tugs: *Atomic* and *Buoy Girl*. There is a photo of the *T. F. Newman* in drydock at Collingwood on page 28 of the larger of George Czerny's two books on the Collingwood Shipyard. The *Newman* had a heavy-lift crane on the deck, the boom of which, painted white, can be seen in the photo and, ironically, this vessel was built in 1902 for the same company—Great Lakes Towing—as was the *Bayport*. *Atomic* was legendary on the Great Lakes. Built in Owen Sound by Russell Brothers in 1945, she won two international tugboat races on the Detroit River when she was just a few years old and could break ice 30 inches thick.

My parents and I went to watch the progress of the salvage. At the time, the salvagers were out behind the grain elevator with the *T.F. Newman*, towed by *Atomic*, using its powerful crane to drag the *Bayport* underwater with just the top of its mast showing above the surface. In the shallower water at the Shipyard dock, the tug was raised to the surface and pumped out. She sat there derelict for some time and then spent a winter in drydock being repaired and converted from coal to oil-fired. The following spring she embarked on an ice breaking mission to Midland, nearly running out of fuel before reaching her destination. Several changes of ownership and name followed the sinking at Collingwood. The next owner was F. R. Mireault of Fort William who renamed her first, as *Tug A* and

secondly, as *Fairport*. By 1971 she was owned by A. B. McLean & Sons of Sault Ste. Marie and in 1974 was converted to diesel power. Renamed *Rod McLean* in 1975 she carried this name for the rest of her days. Sometime in the 1990's the diesel engine was removed and placed in another tug. The hull was left on shore at Purvis Marine Ltd. in Sault Ste. Marie and was scrapped in 2008 at age ninety-four.

The two other ships in this story both ended their careers in the 1960's. The *Mohawk Deer* was sold to be scrapped in Italy in 1967 and while under tow, broke loose and ran aground off Portofino, Italy where she broke up and sank and is now a popular dive site. The *Capt. C. D. Secord* built in 1900, but owned by the Mohawk firm since 1936, also called it a day in 1967 and was scrapped in Spain in 1968.

Canada Steamship Lines reactivated the name *Bayport* in 1962 when they purchased a diesel tug built in Kingston in 1945 for service on the east coast. The tug was then brought to the Great Lakes where she performed much the same duties as her predecessor namesake—harbour tug/icebreaker at Midland, Tiffin and Port McNicol. This particular tug was resold twice more in the 1970's and eventually the hull was donated to Pier 4 Park in Hamilton and turned into a play area for children in the park (on dry land).

Tug services at Collingwood for a few more years beyond 1959 were provided by Hindman's tugs from Owen Sound. The *Sulphite*, along with several barges from the Hindman fleet, was scrapped in 1966. However, a study of launch dates at the Collingwood Shipyard from 1959 on, reveals that very few ships were launched in the winter months when the harbour and launch basin would be frozen solid. Eventually, the Shipyard had an air bubbler system which kept the ice in the launch basin soft. Also, with the advent of the St. Lawrence Seaway, fewer and fewer freighters wintered at the Collingwood Terminals, lessening the need for mid-winter icebreaking to reposition ships at the elevator. Some winter seasons, the only ship to winter in Collingwood's harbour was the Coast Guard's *Alexander Henry* which was also an icebreaker. The need for icebreaking notwithstanding, tugs were still needed to turn newly launched ships around even when newer heavy lift cranes on the building berth were able to place engines in the ship before the launch.

Collingwood is a very different town from sixty years ago. The harbour, which for so long saw the construction and repair of ships and considerable shipping activity at the three grain elevators that have stood in the harbour since 1855, now hosts pleasure craft. It can be difficult for newcomers who did not experience life in Collingwood in that era to understand the

impact that ships and shipbuilding had on such a close-knit, small, blue collar town.

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