

Saved From the Jaws of Death On Georgian Bay

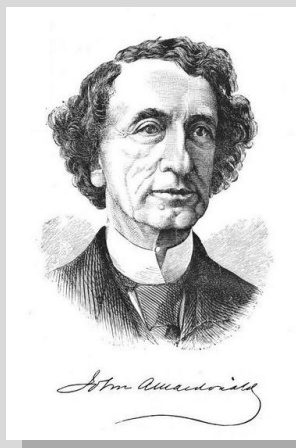


The paddlewheel steamer Ploughboy runs into trouble with
John A. Macdonald on board

1859

STEAMBOAT STORIES

A collection of stories featuring vessels and events on
the Upper Great Lakes in the 19th and early 20th
centuries



Sir John A. Macdonald

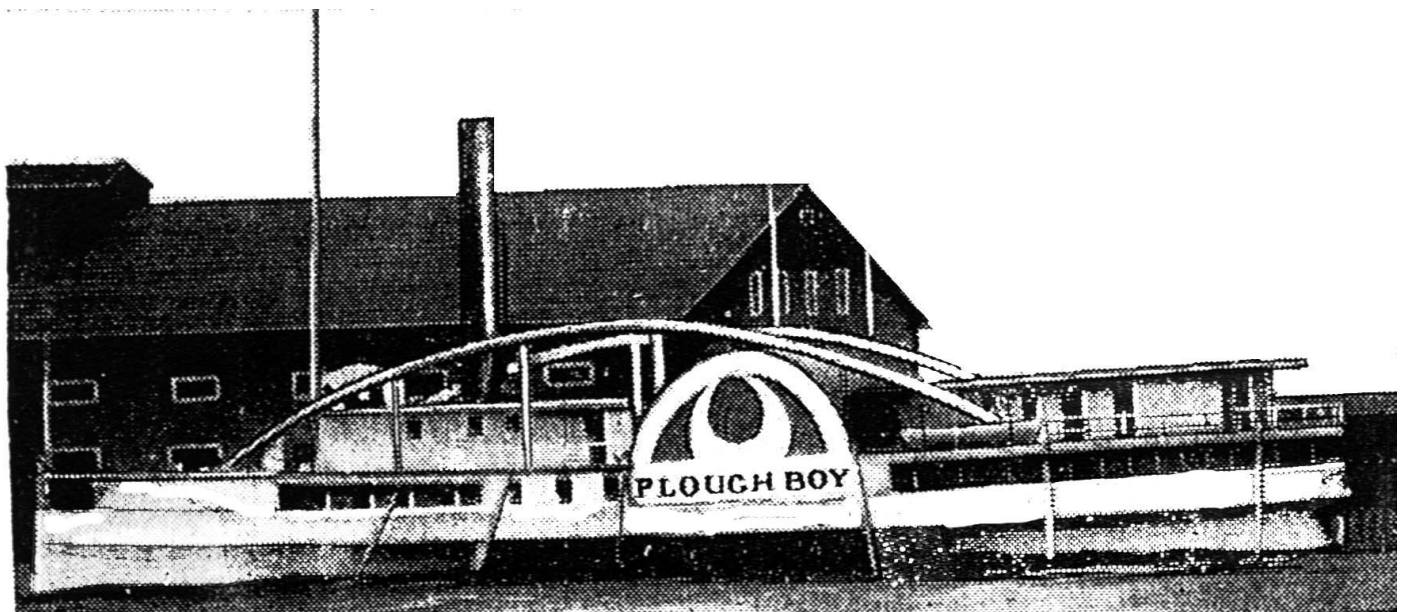
Saved from the Jaws of death

The scenery along the Georgian Bay coast from Byng Inlet to Killarney and then to Little Current and finally along the St. Mary's River to Sault Ste. Marie is spectacular. Low lying islands with "blasted pines" swept to the east by powerful west winds have been the subjects of poets and painters for almost two centuries. In the middle of the 19th century, a steamer excursion



Settlement of Killarney - Painting by William Armstrong circa 1859

from Collingwood to the Sault was considered one of the best tourist attractions in Canada West (Ontario). Several sidewheel steamers in the 1850's carried freight, mail, businessmen, settlers, and excursionists through the meandering channels, (called the "Turkey Trail" because of its erratic track) from early summer until mid fall. Usually the weather was pleasant. But not always. Present day sailors can attest to the changeable weather conditions on the bay. Storms can arise on the best summer days.



The Ploughboy at the dock in Collingwood

The *Ploughboy* was one of the early sidewheel steamers in the Lower Great Lakes. When launched on June 24, 1851, the 170 foot wooden paddle wheel steamer was owned by two brothers, William and Walter Eberts of Chatham, Canada West. The two brothers where successful businessmen and steamboat owners. They initially owned a steamer, called the *Brothers* , launched in 1839.

Brothers originally was listed as a “tow boat” but toward the end of the 1840’s she was rebuilt and listed as a passenger and package vessel working the lower Thames River between Chatham and Detroit. It was the success of the *Brothers* that prompted the Eberts brothers to build the much larger *Ploughboy*.

This new vessel had two 24 foot paddle wheels installed on the sides of the ship. A “walking beam” converted the power from the vertical piston in the engine into horizontal motion to drive the large wooden paddle wheels. (See diagram p 11) A metal arch (hogging arch) fixed at points, forward and aft much like the architecture in a bridge, strengthened the vessel allowing her to carry heavy loads without stressing the ship itself.

The *Ploughboy* was sold to a shipping and freight forwarding company, Park & Co. in 1854. As passenger business increased Park & Co. took advantage of the growing commerce on the St. Clair River and Lake Erie. Upper cabins were added and excursions were chartered

No. 7.

Register No. _____
 Year, _____
 Port, _____

REPORT OUTWARDS.

Port of *Port Stanley*
 CONTENTS in the *St. Ploughboy* Master for *Buffalo* Tons, *20* Men. *S. S. Kelly and U*
 Built of *Cornhusker*

MARKS AND NUMBERS.	SHIPPERS.	QUANTITY AND DESCRIPTION OF GOODS.	VALUE.			CONSIGNEES.
			£	s.	d.	
	<i>J. Rainey</i>	<i>80 Bbls Flour</i>				<i>W. H. Hubbard Buff</i>
	<i>Park & Co.</i>	<i>3 Kegs Butter 6 Sacks Wool 14 Bbls Pelts 3 Bales Hides</i>				<i>J. Peterson Buff</i>

I, *S. S. Kelly* Master of the Vessel above named, do declare that the CONTENT above written, now tendered and subscribed by me, is a just and true Account of all the Goods laden on board my Vessel for this present Voyage, and of the names of the respective Shippers and Consignees of the said Goods, and of the marks and numbers of the Packages containing the same.

Signed and Declared before me, at the Custom House, PORT of *Stanley* the *5* day of *Nov* 185*8* *S. S. Kelly* Collector.
 [Under a Penalty of £100.] *P. Bennett*

Typical Outbound control Report showing cargo carried on the *Ploughboy* in 1855.

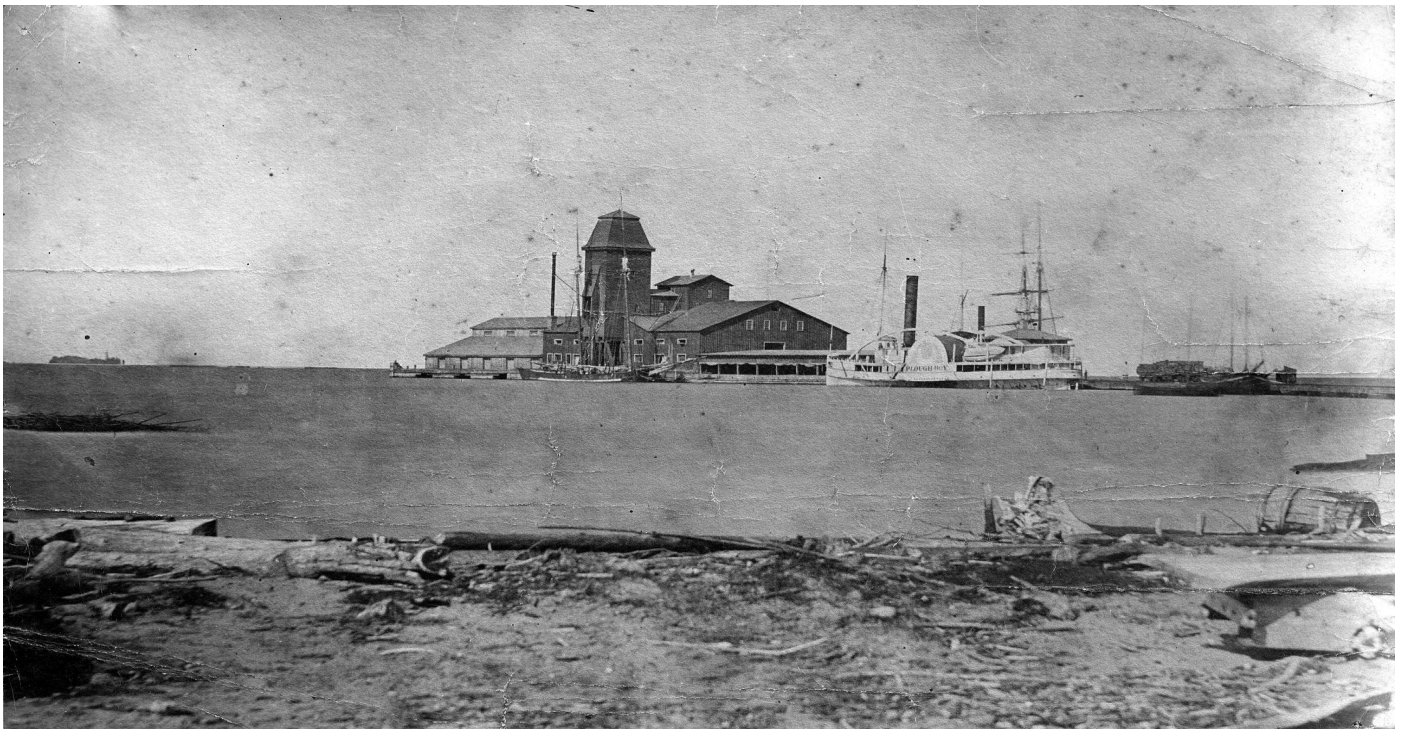
Barrels of flour, butter, wool, buffalo hides, pelts.

complete with a brass band. Park & Co. also initiated regular steamer service to Buffalo and Cleveland.

When the Great Western Railway from Niagara to Windsor opened in 1854, the *Ploughboy* was moved to a Buffalo / Port Stanley route. By 1856 she was moved again to the Detroit, Goderich, Owen Sound, Meaford, and Collingwood route with Captain Duncan Rowan as her commander. Rowan, a Scot, had been captain of sailing ships on the lakes before he was appointed captain of the *Ploughboy* in 1855. In 1856 improvements were made to the *Ploughboy* in the form of added staterooms and additional berths. The vessel



Bruce Mines was the location of a significant copper mining operation in the 1850's



The *Ploughboy* at the wharf in Collingwood. The new grain elevator was located at the end of a long pier and serviced by railway.

was claimed to be “the safest boat of her size.”

By 1859 Captain Rowan was running excursions and freight from Collingwood to Sault Ste. Marie to take advantage of the increased traffic to the newly settled communities from Georgian Bay to the Sault.

The *Ploughboy* carried mail, supplies, and equipment to communities like Byng Inlet, Bruce Mines and Little Current on Manitoulin Island. In the hold there was often a cargo of live cattle, sheep, or chickens.



Hon. Philip Vankoughnet was a landowner and member of the Legislative Assembly of Canada West.




John Prince was a politician from Essex county who was eventually appointed as a judge in the district of Algoma.

Excursions on the lakes were popular pastimes of people in the mid 19th century. Church groups, Masonic Lodges, and political associations often chartered a steamer for a one or two day outing.

At the invitation of the Sheriff of Simcoe County, Benjamin Walker Smith, John A. Macdonald's cabinet was invited for an excursion in July 1859. The participants arrived by train from Toronto to Collingwood on the newly completed (1855) “Northern Railway” The intention was to have an extended trip of about five days though the “purest air and cleanest water in the world.”

The Fateful Voyage

 On Friday July 2, 1859, the 170 foot wood-burner loaded supplies and mail for the North Shore at Collingwood. Sheriff Smith met the noon train from Toronto. Aboard were more than thirty excursionists from the government of Canada West. Among them were the Honourable John A. Macdonald, Premier of Canada West, and several of his cabinet including the Honourable Sidney Smith, the Honourable John Hillard Cameron, the Honourable John Ross, the Honourable Philip Vankoughnet, Colonel John Prince, plus several other dignitaries. Their wives accompanied them, and some brought their children along.

The excursion left the docks at Collingwood very early in the morning of July 3 and arrived at Owen Sound about 5 a.m. For those not used to the “clank and bang” of the incessant motion of the walking beam there was little sleep. Colonel John Prince recorded in his diary that most of the passengers were awake at the time of arrival at Owen Sound. He and Philp Vankoughnet went out on deck to observe the small community which he claimed to be a “charming place”. By 7 a.m. Captain Duncan Rowan and his crew of about 20, pushed off from the wharf and sailed north out of Owen Sound . The excursionists sat down for their breakfast all with high expectations of a pleasant trip as the *Ploughboy* passed what were clearly farm fields on the nearby shore.

The intended route was to travel north, keeping well off the east coast of the In-

dian (Bruce) Peninsula with its sharp white limestone cliffs and dark cedar choked coast line. They sailed past Griffith Island proceeding past Cape Croker and Dyer Bay. By 2 p.m. July 3, Cabot Head was well off the port bow by about 15 miles. The plan was to pass to the east of Lonely Island sitting in the middle of



The Honourable Sidney Smith whose actions on board the wrecked *Ploughboy* were praised as “fearless behaviour and effective services” earning him the “the admiration of all on board”

Georgian Bay and then sail towards the northern shore of the Bay. A distant thundershower was noted off to the northwest. A wind began to whip up the waves and whitecaps dotted the open seas off to the north. Visibility remained clear and everything was under control although the rolling of the *Ploughboy* was noticeable to many on board. Some of the passengers were a bit “squeamish” although most were comfortable with the still gently heaving seas.

Just past Cabot Head a new course northeast was set to pass Lonely Island, a small uninhabited place well named for it’s solitary location in the middle of Georgian Bay. Passengers strolled on the deck taking in the fresh breeze and the fast disappearing shoreline of the Indian Peninsula. The ship was soon making good headway six miles off Lonely Island. All were anticipating their arrival at Killarney, the small settlement originally settled as a fur trading post in 1820. Shebahonaning as it was called had evolved into a fishing area and a location for steamers to stop and “wood up” for the regular trip to Sault Ste. Marie.

The intent was to stop there before following the North Channel to Little Current and points west.

It was then that passengers on the upper deck noted a lot of steam hissing from

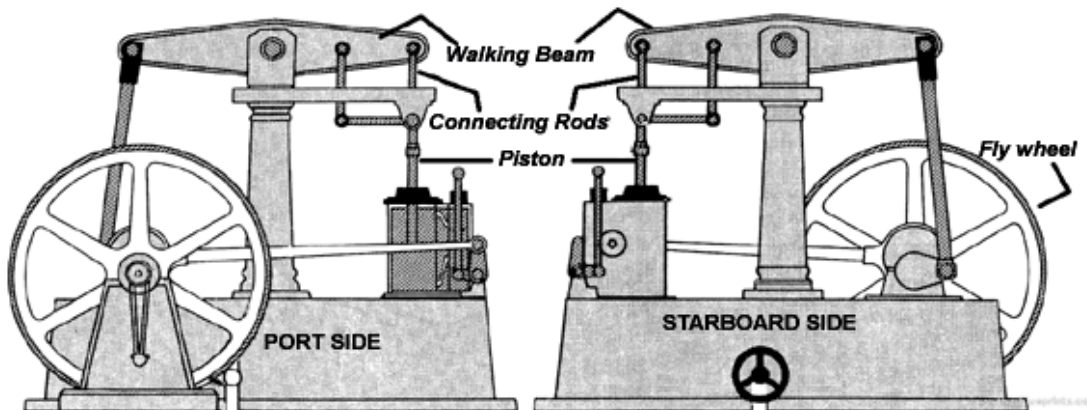


Toronto Public Library. Painting by William Armstrong.

The Ploughboy loses control near Lonely Island

the engine below. Some said that it was a normal situation as a result of putting too much steam into the engine, in other words giving the piston attached to the walking beam more power than it could use. This was quite a common occurrence they claimed. Those with more experience with steam engines were not convinced although there was no immediate alarm. That was until the connecting rod from the engine to the walking beam was observed to be broken and the whole banging and clanging of the rocking apparatus that made up the walking beam stopped. The engineer shut off steam for fear that the piston would let fly and kill someone. Now, without steam, the *Ploughboy* was dead in

the water.



The Pistons were connected to a steam engine below that drove the pistons up under pressure. The connecting rods pushed the walking beam up at one end of the structure, automatically pushing the other end down. This in turn was connected to a driving rod mounted on an eccentric to offset a straight up and down motion. The result was that the fly wheel turned which in turn drove the paddlewheels on the sides of the ship

The ship did not carry a sail as many paddle wheelers did in the 1850's and 1860's and it soon became clear that not only was power shut down, the ship was at the mercy of even the a moderate northwest gale blowing them only God knew where. There was no control of the rudder and no power to keep the paddles turning. If they slipped into a trough they could possibly wallow taking heavy seas over the side or worse, capsize.

Captain Rowan dropped the anchors, but the hooks failed to catch on the bottom. They were in water too deep for them to touch the floor of Georgian Bay. The nearest land was Lonely Island, six miles away. It was decided that it would be fruitless to launch a lifeboat to the island. No help could be found on that desolate island. (There was no lighthouse or keeper on Lonely Island until

1870). Cabot Head, the nearest mainland was equally out of the question as it too was uninhabited. (A lighthouse was not built there until 1896). It was too far astern to even consider an attempt to ferry passengers the safety of the mainland in rough seas.



to

At that point Sheriff Benjamin Smith volunteered to take the yawl boat carried aboard the *Ploughboy* and attempt to sail 75 miles back to Owen Sound to

Benjamin Walker Smith Sheriff
of Simcoe County

seek help. Along with three additional crew members, the small boat was made ready with a makeshift sail, some food, and oars. All passengers would remain aboard and await rescue

At 6 p.m. Saturday, Smith and crew pushed away from the *Ploughboy* while those aboard gave three cheers and shouted best wishes. It was all they could do. But something more ominous was happening. The wind picked up to a full gale and the four men in the small craft disappeared. The last they saw of them was as they approached Cabot Head well off in the distance.

As the wind intensified by 9 p.m. to a full gale, it shifted direction to northeast. This was bad news. It was now possible that over the approaching night the helpless *Ploughboy* would be driven back to the Indian Peninsula and washed up on the unforgiving limestone shore where giant cliffs dropped directly into the water from a height of several hundred feet. By midnight Captain Rowan calculated that they were drifting to the west at two miles per hour which would place them on the rocks before dawn. To the far west he could see a revolving light.

(This was Cove Island light which had become operational in 1858).

All evening Saturday and into the dark early morning Sunday the crew and passengers remained awake but quiet, assuming that their days would soon be over. A profound melancholy came over everybody on board. They did not scream and wail or even cry. They sat silently contemplating their imminent death. Families sat together in tight knots inside the parlour. Adrift in a black world where there were only a few kerosene lamps on board and a distant flash of the Cove Island light there was nothing to do but wait in silence.

The *Ploughboy* rolled drunkenly in the surf, pitching chairs and anything moveable from side to side inside the saloons. Spittoons, dishes, and bottles skidded across the upper cabin parlours. Water poured across the deck, soaking anyone brave or foolish enough to venture outside. Lookouts at the bow watched and saw nothing except the fact that the distant light at Cove Island was gradually growing closer .

The Rescue

About 2 o'clock Sunday morning one of the anchors caught in 180 feet of water. The anchor dug into a limestone ledge below. The line tightened and the drifting of the ship stopped abruptly. The bow swung seaward. It was none too soon. First light revealed that they were a mere half boat length from a towering escarpment. It seemed they were saved from the disaster of sinking, but the ordeal was not yet over. Each mounting wave threatened the *Ploughboy* as huge breakers smashed onto the shore wall then surged back straining the anchor lines. Spray from the crashing waves shot skyward to the top of the overhanging rock. The prospects of survival in the such wild seas were slim. They were possibly going to be dashed against the formidable face of the cliff just feet away. A frail wooden vessel was no contest against limestone rock. It seemed inevitable that everybody would die. Families said their final good-byes and prayed. Mothers, children, and fathers held hands waiting for the end.

Just after dawn, when the seas calmed slightly, an attempt was made to launch a lifeboat to see if it was possible to land somewhere along the unforgiving coast. Captain Rowan, 2 members of the crew and 2 others pulled at their oars and rowed west to find a safe place to land when the seas subsided.

There seemed to be no place suitable so they returned to the *Ploughboy*. After their unsuccessful attempt those aboard decided to have a church service. Hon.



Photo by Willie Waterton showing the rocky east coast of the Bruce Peninsula

John Hillard Cameron, a staunch Anglican, held a brief church service and offered prayers for survival.

In the afternoon the Captain and his team decided to attempt another landing. They got close enough for two of the crew to battle their way through the surf and gain the shore where there was a small beach. Once there they started a fire while the team returned to the *Ploughboy*. By then the seas had calmed even more and it was decided to remove all the passengers to the shore.

Some of the strongest crew members were detailed to assist women and children first into the waiting small boats. All that day, the crew struggled to ferry everyone ashore from the stranded ship. An encampment was made from spruce boughs leaned together like a teepee. As was only proper in the Victorian era

women were given a separate shelter from the men. A large larder of food was eventually hauled onto the beach and a makeshift kitchen was set up. Kettles and cutlery were landed as well. Women set up cooking pots while the men hacked at the forest to bring in fuel for a possible long term stay at this desolate place.

Blankets, mattresses, and sheets were brought to the small encampment in preparation for another night of misery, this time without fear of drowning.

By late afternoon a campfire blazed and an evening meal was prepared. Conversation turned to the providence of God in saving them from death. The assembly of the crew of *Ploughboy* and all her passengers were convinced God's hand had rescued them from a grave in Georgian Bay.



Deliverance

Meanwhile the crew in the yawl boat, having left the *Ploughboy* on Saturday evening, managed to make landfall just north of Owen Sound on Sunday just after 10 a.m. They beached their small boat and walked to the docks where they fortunately found Captain W.H. Smith. Smith's steamer, the *Canadian*, had returned from its daily round trip from Collingwood. His crew had left for home after a week long schedule. Only the engineer was still aboard.



TABLE OF DISTANCES,

FROM TORONTO AND COLLINGWOOD, TO SAUT STE. MARIE AND FORT WILLIAM, CANADA.

PASSING THROUGH GEORGIAN BAY, THE NORTH CHANNEL AND LAKE SUPERIOR.

<i>Northern Railway of Canada.</i>		MILES.	STATIONS, &C.	MILES.		
MILES.	STATIONS, &C.	MILES.		MILES.		
436	TORONTO	0	71	Drummond's Is., Mich...15	365	
422	Thornhill.....	14	53	BRUCE MINES, Can.....18	383	
418	Richmond Hill.....	4	45	St. Joseph Island.....	8	391
406	Aurora.....	12	39	Campement D'Ours Is... 6	397	
402	Newmarket.....	4	36	The Narrows.....	3	400
398	Holland Landing.....	4	26	Sugar Island, Mich.....10	410	
395	Bradford.....	3				
387	Gilford.....	8		(<i>St. Mary's River.</i>)		
384	Lefroy.....	3	24	Nebish Rapids.....	2	412
372	BARRIE.....	12	21	Lake George.....	3	415
356	Sunnidale.....	16	14	CHURCH'S LANDING.....	7	422
342	Collingwood	14	10	Garden River Settle'nt..	4	426
		94	0	Saut Ste. Marie ...10	436	
				(<i>Ship Canal.</i>)		
	<i>Steamboat Route.</i>					
	(<i>Georgian Bay.</i>)					
312	Cape Rich.....	30	324	Saut Ste. Marie ...	436	
296	Owen's Sound.....	16	318	POINT AUX PINS, Can... 6	442	
262	Cabot's Head.....	34	309	Gros Cap.....	9	451
242	Lonely Island.....	20	299	Parisien Island.....	10	461
226	Squaw Island.....	16	294	Goulois Bay and Point..	5	466
216	Cape Smythe.....	10	280	Sandy Islands.....	14	480
196	<i>She-ba-wa-nah-ning</i>	20	275	Batchewanaung Bay....	5	485
181	Man-i-tou-wah-ning.....	15	265	Mamainse Point.....	10	495
171	<i>Little Current—Great</i> } ..10	265	190	Michipicoten Island.....	75	570
	<i>Montoulin Island.</i> } ..10	265	105	Slate Islands.....	85	655
151	Clapperton Island.....	20	75	Ste. Ignace Island.....	30	685
121	Barrie Island.....	30	60	Ent'ce to Neepigon Bay..	15	700
86	Cockburn Island.....	35	15	SILVER ISLET.....	40	740
		350	0	Fort William , Can 20	760	

When they told Captain Smith about the disaster, Smith immediately gathered a skeleton crew of volunteers and set off for the north, not sure where the *Ploughboy* was or even if it was still afloat. At full throttle the *Canadian* steamed north, retracing the original route of the *Ploughboy*. As Smith rounded Cabot Head he saw the *Ploughboy* anchored near the shore and a fire blazing a short distance beyond. Simultaneously the survivors saw the smoke of the *Canadian* on the horizon just as evening was falling. The hand of God was there to deliver them.

Even before the *Canadian* arrived, Captain Rowan organized the re-embarkment of his passengers and crew back to the stricken *Ploughboy*.

By the time the *Canadian* pulled along side everyone was aboard the *Ploughboy* and ready to leave the deserted shore where they had just planned to spend the night. The trick now was to attach the tow line and get underway. In rough seas it was dangerous to approach too close. Paddlewheel steamers were notoriously clumsy at close quarters and there was always the danger of collision.

Eventually and with great effort a towline was secured to the bow of the *Ploughboy* and the *Canadian* slowly backed up to the anchored ship.

Once the lines were secured Captain Smith signaled to his engineer to start the paddle wheels churning forward. Slowly at first so as not to break the line, both ships moved away from the coast. All night the two vessels moved toward Collingwood where they landed at about 1 p.m. on Monday, July 5.

As the politicians and other passengers stepped onto the quay there were handshakes, and congratulations all round. They had escaped “The jaws of death.” On arrival the excursionists wasted no time in catching the next train back to Toronto.

There are no records of Sir John A. venturing out on Georgian Bay again. Politics it seems was a safer game than sailing on Georgian Bay.



John A. Macdonald Premier of Canada West.

SOURCES

Material has been gathered from previous articles by the author.

Special thanks to Dr. John Carter for his research into the story of the Ploughboy.

Files from the Northern Advance (Barrie), the Owen Sound Comet and The Leader (Toronto)

Photos are courtesy of the Community Waterfront Heritage Centre, Owen Sound, Archives Canada, Toronto Public Library. Willie Waterton and the author's private collection

