

## **ABIGAIL; BECKER - THE STORY OF CANADAS HEROINE**

"Billows may tumble, winds may roar,  
Strong hands the wreck'd from Death may  
snatch  
But never, never, nevermore  
This deed shall mortal match!"

# **ABIGAIL BECKER**

## **THE HEROINE OF LONG POINT CANADA**

From a soon to be published book

WHEN CANVAS WAS KING

BY ROBERT B. TOWNSEND

### **PROLOGUE**

Little enough is known of the hardships suffered by some of the early pioneer women in Canada. My own great grandmother was left a widow, to raise seven daughters on a small farm near Hespler Ontario. As a young lad I was shown a piece of linen woven by her from flax she planted and harvested on land cleared by her and her daughters. I always think of her as a special pioneer lady.

The story of Abigail Becker is a story about a very special pioneer lady who, while not typical, certainly exemplifies that pioneer spirit that should be an inspiration for generations to come.

Born at Frotenac County, in 1831, Abigail Jackson matured to be a fine handsome lady, over six feet tall, "who feared God greatly and the living or dead not at all". As a young girl she moved with her parents to Parkhill Ontario, where, at the age of 17 she met and married trapper Jeremiah Becker, a widower with six children. She moved with him to an isolated trappers cabin on lonely Long Point, which was then an island jutting out into the lake Erie. By 1854, the time of the loss of the sailing vessel *Conductor*, the chronicle of which is the basis of this story, she had three children of her own. Eventually she was mother to seventeen children, the six step-children, nine of her own and two adopted children..

Sometime after a storm which occurred in November of 1854, Capt. E.P.Dorr of Buffalo travelled to the bleak wilderness of Long Point to appraise the damage to a vessel owned by a Mr. Jones which had been stranded somewhere on the point during a recent storm. It was during this investigation that he learned first hand, from the crew and others, of the heroism of Abigail Becker, who could not swim, but had "waded out till the water was up to her lips" and rescued the whole crew of the schooner **Conductor**. Through the telling of the story of the heroism of Abigail Becker by Capt. Dorr, her great deed became known to the world. Sometime after a storm which occurred in November of 1854, Her place in history as Canada's greatest heroine was (hopefully) assured.

A Mr. Whittier obtained further details of the loss of the **Conductor** and the rescue of it's crew some years later from a Captain Barr, who was allegedly the last man off the stranded vessel *Conductor*. Amanda T. Jones, an American poetess, born in New York state, but who was raised near St.Catharines Ontario, wrote a poem, based on the story written by Mr. Whittier, which she entitled the "Heroine of '54." This poem was published by Century magazine, in the U.S.A. The poem was later reproduced in the Ontario high school reader, published by Rose & Co. 1886. and was in use in Ontario schools as the 5<sup>th</sup> reader until the mid 1920s.

The story of the heroic part played in the rescue of the crew of the schooner *Conductor* is an important part, but not the whole story, of the life of Abigail Becker. She was truly an amazing woman.

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, Robert B. Townsend

# ABIGAIL BECKER THE HEROINE OF LONG POINT

## THE *CONDUCTOR*

*"A hurricane blew up out of the south-west about five o'clock in the afternoon, and all the canvas was snugged down, the vessel driving before the gale."* this was on Thursday November 23rd, 1854 on Lake Erie.

The Schooner *Conductor*, said to have been owned by a merchant named McCleod of Amherstburg Ontario, was boiling down Lake Erie with two men sweating at the wheel and a cargo of 8,000 bushels of corn for Toronto under the hatches. She was making the best time she could before a screaming sou'easter, because if the Welland Canal froze up on her, as it might any day, the voyage could not be completed.

The corn had been laden at Amherstburg Ontario, according to some accounts, which are most probable, or at Cleveland according to others (it may have been both places). The corn was insured for ,000. and the *Conductor* was insured for ,000.00. All of which would indicate the *Conductor* was not a large vessel, even for her time.

The crew of the *Conductor* consisted of: Captain Hem Hackett, Canadian, First Mate John Jones, American, Crew, James Cousens, Canadian, Crew, J.McCauley, Canadian, Crew, ? Chalmers, Canadian, Crew, Jerome ? American Crew, Jack Carver, Canadian.

If there was another member of the crew, described as the cook, it may have been a person by the name Barr, who was later referred to as Captain Barr.

The *Conductor*, a schooner rigged vessel with a square topsail, which, close reefed, was able to keep her headed before the wind and sea. But on towards midnight the topsail sheets, chains drawing the goosewings of the sail down to the yardarms, carried away, and in less than a minute the topsail had flogged itself to ribbons and vanished in the gale. With it's departure the *Conductor* got out of hand. She broached to, falling into the trough of the billows, and seas bursting aboard stove her bulwarks and made a clean sweep of everything on deck. She had two boats, an unusual equipment for a small schooner, and they were beaten into staves. Her crew of seven lashed themselves fast to ringbolts and stanchions to keep from being swept overboard. The wheel was abandoned, for the vessel was unmanageable.

The masts were still in her. She wallowed aimlessly "in the midnight and the snow" pushed by the raving sou'-wester down Lake Erie all the time; and at four o'clock in the morning she bumped bottom a few miles west of the tip of Long Point. Had the gale given her the chance she might have cleared the point and driven on for another forty or fifty miles before fetching up; that is if she kept afloat.

Where she struck was about 200 yards from the normal shoreline, but with lake Erie fleeing before the scourging gale the water was pushed up fathoms high, and Long Point was flooded on its low sandy beaches for a quarter of a mile inshore.

This made no difference to the despairing crew, for in the snow and the darkness they could see neither light nor land, and they did not know where they were. They cast off their lashings which held them to the bulwarks and climbed as high as they could into the ice-laden rigging, and there, as the poem says, "all night they swung."

And all next day.

It was two o'clock in the afternoon before the blizzard cleared. The crew in the rigging, sleepless, foodless, and freezing, saw a tall woman and two little boys fighting their way against the wind along the shore. The seas were breaking around the schooner on the bar, but they were spreading flood high up the beach, sucking back in swift recoil, and then charging madly forward again in reinforced battalions of billows.

"And, oh the gale!

The rout and roar!

The blinding drift, the mounting wave

A good half-mile from wreck to shore

With seven men to save!

"Up shallow steeps

Raced the long white-caps, come on ;

The wind, the wind that lashed the deeps

Far, far it blew the foam.

"The frozen foam were scudding by -

Before the wind a seething throng

The Waves, the waves came towering high

"The waves came towering high and white,

They burst in clouds of flying spray -"

When she was seventeen, and she had now nine children to look after - three babies of her own and six step-children. She lived, bless her, to mother seventeen in all, nine of her own, her six step-children and two adopted children. Her husband had crossed to the mainland the day before to get supplies, and the south-west gale prevented his return.

Through their glazed eyes the *Conductor's* crew could just make out the figures on the sand. Mrs. Becker was gesticulating and shouting, but it was only when she rushed into the water up to her waist and waved her arms that they understood her message. She was urging them to try to swim ashore.

A sudden gleam among the sand emphasized her purpose of rescue. She had lighted a bonfire, to dry herself and them. The little boys helped her drag driftwood and pile it high; some of the *Conductor's* own bulwarks, blazing on the beach, beckoned to her perishing crew. And again this heroic woman waded waist deep into the billows to wave her message.

As the day waned the captain concluded that between freezing by night and drowning by day there was little choice. He swung off and rode a tremendous billow shoreward like a Hawaiian surf-coaster, but caught by the undertow he was torn lakeward again; and then hurled toward the shore.

He would surely have perished in the ceaseless war of billow and undertow had not Mrs. Becker, "wading out till the water was up to her mouth," waited for his next approach, seized him, and held him. They were both beaten many times by the undertow which caught their feet and threw them face downwards, but this wonder-woman with her two boys tugged the captain up beyond the high-water mark to the bonfire.

Then Johnny Jones, the *Conductor's* mate, swung off from the masthead. the same terrible ride on the combers, the same maelstrom of the undertow. The captain, still coughing up lake water and sand, gasped "No woman can go through what you've done twice!" and waded out to help the man. They gripped. They whirled away. Both went under. Mrs. Becker strode in again, "till the water was up to her mouth,"

watched for their approach, and staggered shorewards with both men on her shoulders.

She could not swim. That was why she stopped "when the water was up to her mouth." But she could lift.

Then came four of the crew. One by one, swinging off for the leap for life; each almost drowned, each dragged up the beach by the great-hearted, great handed mother of many.

One man still remained in the rigging. This was the cook. Like Mrs. Becker, he could not swim but unlike Mrs. Becker, he dared not try.

The children had been sent back to the Becker cabin and returned with food and blankets. All night the bonfire blazed, with her rescued crew huddled around it, and Abigail Becker, in her frozen cotton dress striding up and down the beach in ceaseless vigil, peering into every bursting billow for a dark spot indicating a drowning sailor, and seeing none.

The wind ceased ere midnight. The tramp of the surf up the beach lessened, and lessened, and lessened. Ere morning a breeze offshore flattened out the sullen roaring. By daylight the shallow lake was smooth - and there within two hundred yards of the new shoreline, hung the battered hulk of the *Conductor*, with one mast left standing - and one man still, oh very still, in the rigging.

Capt. Hackett and his crew, with Mrs. Becker's help, built a raft from the wreckwood. On this they pushed off, poling their way to the schooner. Their frozen shipmate was alive, but unable to help himself. He had to be cut from the shrouds. He, too, was brought to the bonfire and thawed out. Then all stumbled and staggered to the Becker cabin, and here the seven men and their heroic hostess and her nine children huddled on short rations for six days, until Trapper Becker broke his way through the ice of Long Point Bay with relief from the farther shore.

In June 1899 The Reverend R. Calvert of Riceville Ontario published the story of Margaret Becker (Mrs., Henry Wheeler). step daughter of Abigail Becker, who was in attendance at the scene of the rescue by her step mother. In that story Mrs. Wheeler stated that there were eight men in the crew, not seven. She also took exception to the verse Amanda Jones poem which states:

*"Get wood, cook fish, make ready all."*

*She snatched her stores,*

*she with haste In cotton gown and tatter'd shawl*

*Barefoot across the waste,*

Mrs. Wheeler, who was aged 67 in 1899, would have been twenty one years old at the time, and was a witness to the events. She also related that her brother, who was lame and walking with crutches, wanted to go in help his mother rescue the mate, who was the second person to leave the *Conductor* but the sea was so heavy that he could not stand, and her mother had to get them, both out of the water."

Mrs. Wheeler recalled that *"one by one they came ashore, but some of them not so easily as the first ones. Some were nearly perished and had to be dragged helplessly to the fire, being unconscious for some time. She took off her shawl and shoes and put them on the men one at a time till she got them, all to the house where I and my younger brothers had a good fire in the large old fashioned fireplace."*

In 1943 Mrs. Sarah Rourke of Cherry Valley, County of Prince Edward, related a story, which was reproduced by C.H.J. Snider in his column, Schooner Days about a rough trip down Lake Erie in 1898, while she was spending 6 weeks on the schooner *L.S. Hammond* with her husband and father-in-law, the Captain. Because of bad weather they had to seek shelter under Long Point.

*"The waste land was used then for a deer park. You remember Abigail Becker, who saved the crew of the conductor from death on Long Point? 'The wind, the wind, where Eric plunged, Blew, blew, nor east from land to land?' Amanda Jones Poem about that great woman used to thrill us in the High School reader. We could see the ruins of Trapper Becker's hut. It reminded me of the little old log cabin in the lane. The chimney was falling down and the door was caving in, and the roof let in the sunshine and rain.*

*"Did it ever blow that night! The sailors climbed in the sails and slept there for it was dry on the deck. We were around a little curve in the small peninsula. The schooner had out two anchors. we seemed safe as in our own beds, except for the heave of the waters. We were there all night and the next day, until about five o'clock in the afternoon. The storm got underway and we got underway for Toledo."*

Mrs. Wheeler, in her story, told of how her mother had saved a child from drowning in a well, and had saved a man from a similar fate at Nanticoke by throwing him a plank, and holding him up till assistance had come.

On another occasion, while living on Long Point Island, her husband and two sons were long overdue from a trip to the mainland to obtain provisions, Abigail waded out into a marsh, "up to her armpits" to recover a rowboat, in which she intended to row seven miles to the mainland for news of their whereabouts. Fortunately before she had set off the next morning on her adventurous trip, the prodigal husband and sons returned to their nest.

On still another occasion there was an iron-laden vessel wrecked on Long Point Island, the crew of six escaping to the land. It was winter and the lighthouse keeper had left for the season. The men broke into the Lighthouse looking for provisions. Only four of the men were able to struggle on to the Becker cabin. Two men had collapsed "about a mile and a half away" Abigail, with the help of her boys, provided food and nourishment and nursed the men back to a full recovery

## **THE COMMODORE**

Another time, another wreck. This time with a name like the *Conductor*, probably the *Commodore*. Mrs. Brown, wife of the Keeper of the light on Long Point, Lake Erie, said she had heard a curious story from Mrs. Isaac Becker, widow of the captain of the *Bay Trader*, (and probably a son of Abigail Becker)

It appears that the *Commodore*, barley laden, drove ashore in a gale, and all her crew were rescued, with difficulty, but the cook was missing. The vessel had been grain laden, and the cargo had swelled and burst the hull. The grain was removed, leaving the shattered hull full of lake water and bedded in the sand of the shore. The Becker family, living nearby, found the wreck a convenient well or reservoir, because getting water on Long Point in wintertime, always presented a problem. One had to walk out a long distance on the bay ice to get water clear of weeds. So they drew water from the wreck night and morning, it being close to their cottage.

One morning, one of Abigail Becker's brood - that noble woman mothered seventeen fine children in all, two adopted, six step children and nine of her own - came running back with her little bucket empty, crying "Mother! Mother! there's a woman in the schooner waving her arms at me!"

Brave Abigail, who feared God greatly and the living or dead not at all, strode up the ice banks to the mounded wreck and looked down the open hatch through which the winter sunlight beamed. She had always told her children never to tell a lie, and her daughters had not disobeyed her. There in the hold stood or floated a woman, her arms waving gently as the level changed with the heave of the lake waves outside.

She was the schooner's cook, drowned in her berth next the galley when the vessel waterlogged month's before; released now as the lake ebbing and flowed in the empty hull, gently removed the bulkhead which had separated the hold and cabin.

## **EPILOGUE**

The rescued crew of the *Conductor* returned to their home port of Buffalo. The merchants and sailors of Buffalo were so grateful to Abigail for her heroic effort that they presented her with what was described as a substantial purse. The proceeds (said to have been .00) was put towards the cost of purchasing fifty acre farm on the seventh concession, east of the centre road, North Walsingham, in Norfolk County. The proceeds were not quite sufficient to cover the full cost of the farm.

Life on the farm was difficult. Jeremiah Becker, soon discouraged, returned to "the point" thinking he could earn more by hunting. A few days after his arrival, the point was struck by a heavy storm. His trunk and some of his clothing was later found frozen on the roof of the cabin, where he had apparently taken it for shelter. Jeremiah had attempted to make his way to another cabin some three miles distant. His body was found three months later, frozen to a log, some two miles from the cabin.

At a later date one of her own sons was drowned in Port Rowan Bay. His body was never found.

Abigail Becker and her small boys, had to do the farm work - yoke the oxen, get ready the years wood, plant and dig potatoes, and do other chores. On one occasion she tended ten acres of corn for a neighbour to earn money, besides doing washing and other hard work. When one of the cows drank sour sap and died, and another cow was killed by falling tree, Abigail Becker wove and spun to earn enough money for another cow.

It was a hard and difficult life, one that few women have had to endure. And it was not without personal difficulties. On one occasion, while pitching sheaves of wheat from a wagon in the barn, one of the horses took fright and, running out of the barn, threw her to the floor, breaking her toes and her arm "which she afterwards set herself". On another occasion, while hunting eggs in the mow, she fell upon her head and shoulders. In all her arms were broken on four different occasions.

During all this time she was a devoted mother to seventeen children. It was her boast that she raised eight boys and not one of them used tobacco or liquor. The testimony Margaret Wheeler "No mother was ever more truly good to her children than our step-mother was to myself and the others." is a great epitaph to this truly remarkable Canadian heroine.

Abigail Becker died in 1905. She is buried in Carlton Centre Cemetery, near Ottawa Ontario.