

BAY OF QUINTE

From the book **When Canvas Was King - Quinte and Prince Edward**
by Robert B. Townsend

The Bay of Quinte is an arm of Lake Ontario, "a hundred mile Z shaped scroll of olive green water running from Twelve O'clock Point, at the east end of the Murray Canal, near Trenton Ontario, to Forester's Island (Capt. John's Island), near Deseronto Ontario, then down Long Reach to Picton Bay, then up Adolphus Reach to Collins Bay near Kingston Ontario, or out the Upper Gap to Lake Ontario. The bottom bar being the Adolphus reach, running down to Kingston and the open lake, the diagonal being the Long Reach from Picton to Deseronto, and the upper bar leading through the Telegraph Narrows on past Belleville and Trenton to the Murray Canal and so to Presqu'ile Bay and Lake Ontario.

A hundred miles through the sheltered Bay of Quinte, where it is safe for those that follow the channels to navigate a boat of 10 foot draught. It is not blessed with the seas and roll of the open Lake Ontario, but the short chop of some wide parts of the bay, notably Big Bay, can be quite uncomfortable at times.

On one side are the counties of Northumberland, Hastings, Lennox & Addington, and on the other side the County of Prince Edward, 'the Island County.' 1048 square kilometres of agricultural and scenic beauty which projects out into the vastness of Lake Ontario. The bay's narrowest water is Long Reach between Deseronto and Picton where the east west axis of the bay veers sharply south west around Capt. John's Island (Foresters Island)." - Captain John was the Mohawk Chief 'Deserontyon' after whom the nearby town was named.

The Bay of Quinte is a summer paradise, with birds singing all day long in the woods on either bank, and good fishing in every nook and cove. Sometimes the shores are steep-to, as at Glenora with its Stone Mill and Lake-on-the-Mountain. From the deck you could, in schooner days of old, pick blueberries from the limestone crags. Elsewhere are stretches of shoal water and marsh, haunts of ducks. Rich farming country surrounds the Bay, with brisk towns, large and small like Bath, Picton, Deseronto, Nappanee, Trenton, Belleville and lesser known, but at one time very important "bay ports" such as Rednersville, Northport, Shannonville, Port Milford and Coles Landing.

In winter the Bay of Quinte freezes over, its shores high and low, mantled in snow, its waters a firm pavement for over 100 miles. In the 'old days' more teaming was done on the Bay than on the Dundas highway or the Adolphustown Road which paralleled it. The Bay was more level and less drifted. Now it is home to snowmobiles, fishing huts and cross country skiers.

The Bay of Quinte was the first highway in old Upper Canada, now the Province of Ontario, a thronged highway for both steam and sail. In winter its frozen-solid surface gave a level track for the teams of the pioneers. In summer its reaches, coves and windings offered sheltered passage for canoes, bateaux and rafts. The bulk freighting was done in the early days by the sloops and schooners. Steamers with their massive steam engines and machinery to drive the side paddles, and their need for coal storage facilities, were more suited to carrying passengers. Crossing of the bay was by ferry at a point where its shores were closest together. Every reach had its wharves and warehouses, and the farmers teamed in their barley crops and shot them into the schooners' holds, sometimes by the shovelful, sometimes by wheelbarrow, sometime through square chutes built out from the warehouse, as at Rednersville - sometimes by troughs formed of the vessel's own sails, stripped for the purpose and stretched up the high bank.

It was a grand place in barley days, that is before the U.S. government passed the McKinley Act which put a stop to the import of barley from Canada, when ploughshares and centreboard were twin sovereigns, and the County of Prince Edward waxed rich on the appetite of Oswego breweries for the best waterborne barley in the world. There was a brisk, homely, local trade within the Bay, little scows and schooners loading wherever they could, from the bay ports or often from the very farm where the grain was grown, and carrying it down the smooth bay reaches to Kingston, for transshipment in larger schooners to Oswego, across the lake, or in barges to Montreal.

Bay ports meant anywhere along the shore, for a tiny cargo of a thousand bushels might represent calls at half a dozen farms. Stella, Emerald (both on Amherst Island) Millhaven Picton, Rednersville or Northport might be mentioned, for 'bay ports' meant them all. Music of the simple life, close to the soil and close to the wave, sheltered, secure. The bay can be referred to as a large land locked harbour. Few gales can vex the Bay of Quinte, though it has its other perils. It has had more than its fair share of shipwrecks and has had its tragedies.

From the earliest days there has been a need for transportation across the "Bay" from Belleville to the "County". This was by ice in the winter and, until the first bridge was completed in 1891, by ferry services. At first the ferries were merely canoes or row boats, then, as the need increased, to large flat bottomed scows propelled by sweeps which were able to transport horses, cows or hogs to market in Belleville, and then by horsepower (usually two horses). In 1859 the steamer *H.P. Redner* operated 7 round trips per day, to be superseded in 1868 by the commodious *Prince Edward*, built by Simpson in St. Catharines. It was 96' long and 36' beam with room for 20 teams and 100 passengers, or up to 300 passengers without teams of horses. Because of complaints of poor service as a ferry (it was used too often as an excursion boat to Massasauga Point) this was replaced by the steamer *Mary Ethel* which continued in service until the bridge was built.

The first bridge across the bay from Belleville to Prince Edward County was 1871 feet long. Altogether this involved about a mile of bridge and causeway, with a swing span of 238' which allowed a 100' swing for the passage of boats. When completed on April 15th, 1891 it was the longest highway bridge in Canada. It was narrow, designed for horse and buggy and passengers. Between 1927 and 1931 the bridge was completely rebuilt into the massive span that so many sailors remember waiting for the opening bell each hour. The present bridge with 73 ft. clearance was completed in 1982.

One of the more famous of the ferry crossings of the bay was on Long Reach in the 1800's. This was Coles Landing, a narrow part of Long Reach, about three miles south of Deseronto "where the oaks of the old High Shore of Sophiasburg in Prince Edward County could almost trade acorns for cones with the pines, firs and cedars of Fredericksburg North on the opposite Addington County bank."

At first a cable ferry was tried but it was nearly two furlongs to Huff's Wharf, on the Addington side. There was the oared ferry, sculled by one man with a great sweep through a chock in the stern, big enough to carry a loaded farm wagon and a team of horses - for one shilling. Then the sail ferry, a shapely boat with its loose footed lug sail high enough to clear the heads of men and horses. The horsepower ferry, with its farm horse on holiday plodding its treadmill, was eventually replaced by a pontoon propelled by a gas engine, lashed alongside a decked scow big enough for two cars.

But Coles landing was more than just one end of a crossing. Half a dozen steamers called there regularly - the *Ella Ross* twice a day. the *Eletha*, *Varuna*, *Reindeer*, *Deseronto* and *Alexandria* every day. on excursions, or for passengers. The *Ella Ross* for example made 4 stops after leaving Coles Landing on

her daily run on the ten mile stretch between Deseronto and Picton: Huff's Wharf across the Reach; at Bogart's Wharf for Hay Bay; at Roblin's cove; at Thompson's Wharf on the other side; and occasionally at Hallowell Mills or Glenora; and then into Picton.

There was a large building at Coles Landing, which eventually was devoted to the storage and shipment of grain, hay, apples and root crops. The Coles operated a grain warehouse for years, charging 2 cents a bushel for weighing, unloading and reloading and tallying the farmers grain. A million bushels of Prince Edward County gold went in and out through the wharf at Coles Landing which was a shipping place up to the time of the first world war.

Sloops and schooners were of fair size, ranging from six to sixteen thousand bushel capacity, or from 30 to 700 tons burden, bringing in loads of coal and picking up loads of lumber from the Trent and Moira rivers and other cargoes, gathered here and there for Kingston, or Oswego, or Ogdensburg down the St.Lawrence. Some went to England and even South America. But many of them were the small fry from 100 down to 30 tons, carrying a bare 1000 bushels. From Kingston or Oswego, they brought in hardware, dry goods, groceries, coal oil and all the growing luxuries of life for trade with the many little bay ports, - for trade with butter, eggs, cheese, apples, peas, oats and barley. The local goods destined for the Richardson Grain Elevators or the market square at Kingston,

There are many quaint names on the Bay of Quinte, some almost forgotten, like "Calf Pasture" as you come in from the lake at Presqu'île, to reach the bay by the Murray Canal: Twelve O'Clock Point, where they made it "noon hour" after sweating at hauling the boats across the Carrying Place from the lake to the bay on Asa Weller's wooden railway, a hundred years before the canal was cut; Pig Point over on Amherst Island; and Ox Point and Horse Point near the *Minnie Blakely* Shoal where the schooner so named, (a Port Credit schooner scow built by Alex. Blakely in Port Credit, a local hotelkeeper, and named after his pretty daughter) struck and perished, consumed by her cargo of potash. Asheries were common on the shores of the Bay of Quinte in the old days, and potash and pearlash were among the exports. (in early pioneer days one acre of hardwood, maple, ash or elm, could be slowly burned to produce \$80.00 worth of potash used to make soap or gun powder). The wreck of the *Minnie Blakely* was a land mark for many years.

Timber island, one of the False Ducks (very early charts called them the "Drakes") situated off the most south east corner of the 'County' on the chart of Lake Ontario, looks like a deflated football being kicked off from Prince Edward County, with Point Traverse as the toe of the boot. It and the False Duck Island mark the lake end of the Upper Gap, through which sailing vessels have steered into the Bay of Quinte for well over two centuries.

Laforce's *Marquise de Vaudreuil*, in 1756, was one of the earlier recorded voyages through the False Ducks. The islands offer shelter anchorage in lake gales. They are still wooded. Timber Island was surveyed for John Welbanks about 1860, who had a tenant there, one Michael Fegan, in a small log house on a twelve acre clearing. Fegan may have been brought to farm the island, cut wood and fish, for two fish shacks, a barn and eighteen cords of wood, "cut recently", it was recorded by Mr. Sweetman of the False Ducks Island, "were the only features of the landscape noted except woods and swamp an old clearing."

Even then, so long ago, the valuable timber of the island had already been removed and what was left was scattered or of small growth. The island was still so densely wooded that at a distance it looked like a green pound-cake. The surveyor thought the soil good for an average

crop, but not worth more than \$2 an acre, "and in case of a lease or deed being granted the occupant should be prepared to render assistance in case of shipwreck, as such mishaps will probably increase with the increase of the navigation of the lake." Prophetic words for now, with nearly 50 identified shipwrecks in the vicinity, it is one of North America's premier dive sites.

In the mid to late 1800's as many as sixty-four riding lights had been counted as wind-bound schooners rode out westerly gales off Timber island, and in South Bay, in the lee of Prince Edward. It was from here that poor Moses Dulmage was blown across the lake from among a fleet of fourteen schooners and perished, on Halloween 1878 as described in the Ballad of the day. Many large vessels still take refuge in the shelter of South Bay to wait out a late fall or early spring gale.

Picton has the prettiest harbour on the Great Lakes. Vessels sail down between the high shores, with the mystery Lake on the Mountain on the port side, till they come to the stake buoys marking the narrow channel entrance to the harbour, with high banks on the starboard side, with a clean gracious town, influenced by the wealth brought by the hundreds of schooners of by-gone years. While below is the modern day affluence of a modern marina and a hospitable yacht club. The modern scene of the harbour belies its ongoing activity into the mid 1900s as a busy commercial harbour when as recently as 1944 Canada Packers alone shipped over 20,000,000 cans of goods by way of Canada Steamship Lines.

Today the Bay of Quinte is one of the most beautiful cruising grounds in the world, filled with islands large and rich and fragrant with hay and fruit and ripened grain, or small and rocky, rimmed with bulrushes or crowned with ironwood, elm, butter nut, basswood, oak and pine. Its scenery has not been diminished with time. Its charm is enduring. No matter how, or how often, one enters the Bay of Quinte there is always that feeling of coming into a world of wonders. Seen from the end of the ancient Carrying Place trail, there is a magic that bathes the ridges, marshes and headlands of the Bay. Between the homes, large and small, the shores are richly wooded or are ripe in harvest. It remains a paradise for pleasure sailors, and other pleasurecraft, and for iceboats in the winter, with minimal commercial traffic. It is a mecca for sportsfishing year round. There is little wharfage or cribbing because it is all natural harbour.

For the sailor that scenery abounds from South Bay, Waupoos Island, Prenyers Cove, the Adolphus Reach, Glenora, Long Reach, Telegraph Narrows, Big Bay, Massasauga Point, Maketewish Narrows, past the start of the famous Trent Canal system to the Murray Canal, a six mile channel without any locks, which cuts the narrow isthmus which connect the Prince Edward peninsula with the main land at the western end of the Bay of Quinte. Passing through it, at Presqu'ille, you emerge into Lake Ontario and your track unites with the one you would have made coasting up Prince Edward by the shelterless, but shorter, outside route.

The Great Blue Herons flap away on heavy wings with long legs trailing behind, and the song birds sing all the summer day among the wooded shores as one sails by. When you wake up in the morning one has to think if it is heaven, or the Bay of Quinte.