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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Wreck Recalled Of George N. Orr

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IT WAS 48 years ago this month that the George N. Orr was wrecked off the North shore of this province and 35 crew members were saved from the angry seas. The interesting story was told to me some time ago by Mrs. James Atkins, Mt. Stewart.

She was Zilla Feehan at the time of the incident and she recalls some interesting stories about it.

Dec. 17, 1917, had been a nice, mild day, Mrs. Atkins writes, and the people of the area were still deeply concerned about the terrible explosion that had virtually wrecked Halifax, N.S. 11 days before.

That evening the sky became dark and ominous. By 10 o'clock the wind was howling fiercely and the snow was lashing at the window panes of the homes in the quiet little community of Savage Harbour.

THE WINDS increased and at times there were noises like unto thunder, Mrs. Atkins told me. At the time the people were not aware that the sounds came from sky rockets which were being sent up from a ship which was in distress off shore.

A card play, commonly referred to in that locality as "a nunken" was taking place in a home in nearby Point de Roche. The game had ended and the men were going home – it was shortly after midnight – when they saw the ship. Being fishermen, they knew she was in distress, and drifting helplessly.

Two of the men followed the ship's progress as she drifted, until she grounded on a sand bar not far from shore.

By that time it was three o'clock in the morning. The men from Point de Roche lit a fire in an old cook house where F. A. Piggott had a lobster factory at the time.

'Lifeline' Thrown Towards Shore

AS THE morning light started to break through the gloom of a disastrous night one man named Charles Diaz – he came from Puerto Rico – threw a line towards the shore. James MacKay – now deceased – grabbed at the rope and made it fast.

Then the men made for the shore with the "lifeline" to grasp as they made their perilous way through the angry and destructive seas. They stayed in the fire-warmed building until the storm abated.

Neighbours from the surrounding area came to render assistance as word spread of the disaster. And the men from many different countries, and of many languages were quartered in the homes of the community for a period of four or five days or more, as the roads were blocked from a severe snowstorm, and train travel was also inhibited, Mrs. Atkins explains.

Nine of the men were welcomed in the home of James W. Feehan, and this accounts, in part at least, for Mrs. Atkins being so familiar with the old story. Then Zilla Feehan, she was the daughter of James Feehan.

Back to that interesting part of the story in a minute or so. But first a word about the ship that had been destroyed.

The George N. Orr, Mrs. Atkins told me, was one of five lake boats bought from Canada by the United States government to be used in coastal service during World War 1 – 1914-18.

None Reached Its Destination

THE FACT they were lake boats meant they were unfit for ocean travel. So it's not surprising that none of the five ever reached its destination, which was New York, I was told.

One called "The Tuscarora" was dashed to pieces off Saint Paul's Island. Mrs. Atkins tells me she never did learn the actual fate of the other three.

Back to the story of the nine crew members who were welcomed to the home of the Feehans. Three were from South America, three from England. One, Verl Strokey, was from Nebraska, U.S.A., another was from New Orleans and the other from France.

"Certainly they were an interesting group," the former Zilla Feehan recalls. The crewmen played cards, played the piano and sang songs. Some were talented musicians. They read what was available. They wrote letters to loved ones at home telling of the wreck, and of their escape and subsequent safety.

Doubtless the men from many different countries told their loved ones of the kindness they received at the hands of the people of the area, though Mrs. Atkins modestly passed over that part of the story, as she recalled some of the interesting parts of the old tale. Of course the strangers in the hospitable Island homes ate heartily of the food that was provided them at the tables of the community.

I've only told of the men who stayed at James Feehan's place. Other crew members were received and treated kindly at other homes in the area. The Captain and mates, for example, stayed at the home of Milton Coffin, Mrs. Atkins told me. I haven't their names.

Twist Tobacco Poor Smoking

THE SAILORS' tobacco was taken from the ship but it had been soaked by the salt water and, apparently, it was unfit for smoking.

Charlie Diaz started one morning for Mt. Stewart but he missed his turn and ended up at Blooming Point.

Charlie MacDonald who kept a small store, had some twist tobacco and Diaz came back with a large quantity. He warmed it in the oven – twist is a damp juicy tobacco, manufactured for chewing, not for smoking – but it still wouldn't smoke the way Diaz and his pals wanted it, even though they tried to grind the warmed up or dried twist. They didn't like it. Their faces were pretty wry, I was told.

"My sister took a horse and sleigh, and one of the English sailors went with her to Mt. Stewart," Mrs. Atkins told me. They got some proper smoking tobacco but the sister,

she later married A.R. Harold of New York, nearly froze in the bitter cold, and the slow going because of the heavy roads. The sailor tried without success to drive the horse, and Miss Feehan, as she was then, had to do the driving. "She fainted when she got back," because of the severe cold, Mrs. Atkins recalled.

A SALVAGE company from New York bought the wreck of the George N. Orr, cut it up with acetylene torches and sold it for scrap.

After the salvage company was through with the wreck, Benny Benjamin of Charlottetown paid \$100 for what was left.

But there are still a few pieces of iron around the shore in the Savage Harbor area, Mrs. Atkins told me, "as mute reminders of that dreadful night."