

The Guardian, Charlottetown, Thurs., Sept. 15, 1966

ACROSS THE ISLAND

'Christopher's Folly' Building Is Recalled

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"CHRISTOPHER'S FOLLY" was the name neighbors gave to the boat Capt. Christopher LePage. Rustico built in his backyard a long way from the sea, some 76 years ago. But the Captain knew what he was doing.

The interesting story – it was written by Captain Lepage's son, Garfield – has been passed on to me thanks to Mrs. Roy Bruce, North River who is Garfield's daughter, and Harold L. Smith, City is a nephew of the builder. The only son living now is James L. LePage, Hunter River, who was not born at the time the ship was built. Bradford, a one-time Lieutenant-Governor of P.E.I. was another. The ship was the Clara May, named after his two daughters – May died in infancy.

Here is the story as told by Garfield, prior to his death:

In the fall of 1889 my father, who operated a large farm and store at Rustico, decided to extend his business, with the help of his two older sons who took over the operation of his farm and store.

In the early winter of 1890 plans were made for the building of the eighty-ton schooner. It took courage and foresight; although my father was a man of indomitable courage and strong will power he had never learned his trade as a ship's carpenter, but no doubt had been around ship yards in his younger days.

Arriving home from school one day, my brother Elisha and I were surprised to see the model and molds of a vessel being shaped. Then we realized that something was going to happen.

Now at that time the material for ship building in and around Rustico was very scarce, and had to be procured at a place called Springton – twelve miles distant. For forty dollars you procured the cutting rights of fifty acres of good hardwood, cutting any tree you wished in order to get the pieces and shapes needed.

Road Long, Weather Stormy

THE OWNER of the wood lot, a grand old Scotch man, (but not scotch with his wood) whose name I have forgotten, would tell the men when a tree lodged in the falling to cut down the tree it was lodged on, not sparing his own wood.

At the beginning of 1890 the work of cutting and hauling began. The winter was cold and stormy and the road long and hilly so it meant leaving home before daylight and sometimes breaking the roads. After cutting their loads it would be after dark when they arrived home. By the middle of March the well sheltered yard of the old home, one-half mile from the river where she was built, had taken on a lively appearance with logs of all shapes and sizes.

In the early spring her keel was laid, set on blocks four feet from the ground to allow the men to work under her. Three men, my father, Frank and Mosey Doiron, worked on

her all summer; they shaped and bolted the timbers together and to the keel. It was necessary that she remain on the stocks in order that the timbers dry out and be ready for planking.

Tobacco Spits Help

BEFORE THE planking could be done the timbers had to be smoothed off by a process called "dubbing". Often times I got quite a kick out of watching Archie, the dubber, spit tobacco juice on the timbers then cutting it off with his adze thus using his tobacco juice for a guide.

In the early fall the planks arrived. To Rouge Doiron and his two sons, Peter and Jo: thus having "Big Joe" and "Little Joe". The father, Big Joe, was a man weighing around two hundred and seventy-five pounds with red whiskers and a big red face. He was a jolly old fellow who kept us entertained the long winter nights telling stories of which he was a past master. After supper he would straddle a chair, arms under chin, with pipe in mouth and we knew then "the show was on". Some of the stories sounded very good to a boy of my age. One of which I still remember "Sunday to-day Comeau", in which he portrayed the life of a young boy who was always getting into trouble on the Lord's Day and being reminded by an unseen voice saying "It is Sunday to-day Comeau".

When bed time arrived he would lead the parade to the sleeping quarters which were upstairs over the back kitchen reached by steps to a small hatchway in which we always expected him to get stuck.

Peter, the son, was a great workman and but for him the work would not have gone on as well, "Big Joe" and "Little Joe" spent a lot of time wrangling, "Little Joe" having to be told many times: "Mind yourself, "Little Joe", I'm your fadder".

Task Was Long And Tedious

THE WORK of planking was a long and tedious job as the planks had to be steamed and clamped into their place while still hot, and fastened with iron pins and wood trunnels.

Next came the caulking and I can still see Leong, the caulker, spinning the okum and driving it into the seams with the caulking iron and mallet. The sound of it still rings in my ears.

Ten men were now working on her and with the family this made seventeen in all. The cooking was quite a chore and I often wonder how my dear mother, even with help, could have overseen it all.

By the last of March after her bottom had received a coat of copper paint she was ready for the "Launching". Hardwood runners with greased skids underneath were placed on either side of her and the building blocks were knocked out from under her.

The power for hauling consisted of double and triple blocks on each runner with teams of horses on the falls. The hauling took six days and went on very smoothly until the second last day when the descent became greater and she started on her own power, running off the skids and into the mud. It caused quite an excitement as a large crowd had gathered to watch the launching. I remember quite well one man, Andrew Billy Martin, with his arms against her bow trying to stop her.

Craft Was Finally Afloat

NEXT DAY she was back on her skids and on to the ice and the next morning having sunk the ice she was afloat. Now the deck rail cabin and fore-castle had to be built and then she would be ready for the spars.

The spars, sticks 60 feet long, 10 inches at the small end, were located at County Line – now called Norboro – 18 miles distant. The job of cutting and hauling took two days with six men and eight horses.

They were made ready for installing by that grand old man of his day, George Smith, and his son, Lee. After being installed her top-masts and stays were set up; she was ready for her sails. They were made at Kennedy's in Charlottetown at a cost of \$250., a large outlay at that time.

Maiden Trip – Coal 50 Cents A Ton

ON DOMINION DAY 1891, with a crew of four men, she left the Bridge at Rusticoville. The day was fine with a brisk north wind causing her to beat to the harbor giving the country side the chance to judge her working qualities and call her a success. Next morning she was off on her maiden trip. Her sailing schedule was to Sydney, Glace Bay, Pictou and Port Hood for coal, (Incidentally, at that time some kinds of coal could be bought at the mines for fifty cents a ton.) to the Miramichi and New Castle for lumber, to Port Daniel for lime stone. She also had a couple of trips each spring and fall to Halifax and Sydney with farm produce.

At that time eight large schooners were sailing out of the port of Rustico and with the large number of fishing boats Rustico Harbor was a bustling sight.

In the fall of 1899 while on her way home from Halifax my father, who had been captain of her all this time, not wishing to take the chance of staying on the rocky coast made port for Jeddor. While beating into the harbor she mistayed, (not obeying her helm) and the mighty roll of the Atlantic roller her up on the pebbly beach where her bottom was completely worn out.

This was the end of the once beautiful schooner "Clara May".

Gone are the ships and the men who manned them and today the port of Rustico is peaceful and quiet. The sturdy fishermen with their slick, noiseless motor boats go in and out, scarcely noticed bringing from the deep a goodly livelihood.