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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Perilous Winter Trip Is Recalled By Lady

By NEIL A. MATHESON

THE NORTHERN Light was the first excuse for an ice-breaking steamer the government of Canada sent here in 1881 in an effort to keep our supply route open to the mainland.

A column reference several months ago quoted the historian of the Department of Transport to the effect that the wooden ship was not effective.

Thanks to Mrs. Heath Harding, Kensington RR2 I have a story of one of the Northern Light's trips in which passengers had to scramble for their own safety as best they could, with the willing assistance of officers and seamen crew of the ship.

Mrs. Cuthbert MacLeod, later of Regina, Saskatchewan who was a daughter of John Ross, publisher of Ross's Weekly, tells the story in an item written for a Charlottetown newspaper almost 40 years ago.

Mrs. MacLeod and her husband were on the Northern Light when it left Pictou for Georgetown back in February 1881. The ship was expected to reach this Island by nightfall.

But the ship hit heavy ice after passing Pictou Island. Soon despite every effort to get her through the ice field – she was under command of Capt. Alan Finlayson – “she was wedged in the ice and could go no further.”

Tried To Walk To Shore

THE STORY skipped some valuable details, like how long the ship was ice bound, but it did say food and fuel were running low. A company of men decided to make an attempt to reach land, after consultation with the Captain. At the time the ice was carrying the ship farther away from shore, and there was no knowing how long before there would be any improvement in conditions. February, it is explained, usually is stormy with cold northwest and northeast winds.

The second company started for shore – a first had gone previously – and the Captain asked them, when leaving, to light a fire on the shore when they landed. But no fire was sighted by those who stayed aboard the Northern Light.

Later it was learned that the people did land, but only after terrible hardships. They were “badly frozen and much exhausted” when they finally made it.

The departure of two groups, each with a lifeboat, left only one lifeboat available to the ship, and it was feared the ice might crush the ship that was supposedly built to fight it successfully.

Once when those aboard were eating dinner, “there came a rending and a crushing that startled us. We escaped almost by a miracle as heavy beams were bent and doors could neither be “shut or opened”, Mrs. MacLeod wrote.

Two Women In Party

THE NEAR disaster meant that another conference was called and a decision made that another group should try to make the shore. Two women volunteered to go this time, "a Mrs. Dingwell from St. Peter's Bay and myself", wrote Mrs. MacLeod whose husband was also in the party and one of the eight men in the group, two of which were sailors.

They left the steamer's side about eight in the morning, they were given a gallon of water and a gallon of tea "and as much provisions as could be spared".

"As near as memory serves me," Mrs. MacLeod wrote "those who left the steamer were D.D. Ryan, purser; Andrew Doyle, seaman in charge of the lifeboat; Mr. Price and Mr. Bickle, commercial travellers. There was Warren Miller of Miller Brothers, Charlottetown. There was a Captain Anderson and a Mr. Dixon of North River in addition to Mrs. MacLeod's husband."

Mrs. MacLeod wrote in part:

"We all started walking beside the boat . . . These boats are heavy to haul over ice and snow. The walking was very bad. On a level piece of ice the snow would be about six inches deep . . . On bumpy or hummicky ice we'd have to climb and haul the boat over.

"The water, tea and provisions did not last long, and some of the men began to eat snow and were getting discouraged. About four o'clock I brought out and divided among them some fruit and cake I had brought from Pictou and that was the last any of us had to eat until we landed at Murray Harbor."

All day they had walked, with the men pulling the boat. One lady who could not walk rode in the boat. The men started to get discouraged - apparently there was no sight of land. They wanted to turn the boat on its side and huddle in its shelter during the night.

Water Leads Were Sighted

THE CAPTAIN and Mr. MacLeod persuaded them not to do that. The two went on ahead walking and sighted some leads of water that gave promise of easier going. The two had been away about an hour in all.

This helped to revive the courage of all the party, and the men took turns at rowing when they would get the boat onto clear water. They persisted through the night, and by the light of break of day they could see the red shores of the Island.

About 10 o'clock in the forenoon they spied a boat coming toward them pulled, and propelled, by a sturdy crew of men.

"Before long we were landed at the lobster factory cook house at Murray Harbor North," Mrs. MacLeod wrote. By that time many of the men in the party were badly frost bitten and all of the group were "much exhausted".

Everything was done for our comfort, Mrs. MacLeod said. There was special praise and thanks for Mr. Higginbotham and his wife who were in charge of the cook house - there were also thanks for others who helped in every way possible.

"When we left the Northern Light", Mrs. MacLeod explained, "there were still three women and one child aboard and some men including Captain and crew. Lieutenant Haylewood of the survey steamer "Culnare" who had gone to Halifax to meet his wife and child, with a maid who had just come out from England, and a Miss MacDonald of Cardigan."

I am sorry there are no given names in so many cases but that is the way the names were written in the old newspaper piece.

Ship Had Reached Souris

“AFTER WE had been ashore about a week”, Mrs. MacLeod added, “word came to us that the Northern Light had reached Souris with all on board well but with very little to eat.”

Mrs. MacLeod added that she crossed the strait again in the early 1930's on the palatial steamship “Charlottetown “ and could not stop talking about the “wonderful improvements that had been made in a half century”.

For the benefit of young readers, or newcomers to this province, the “Charlottetown” was put into service in 1931 and was lost at sea about 10 years later when she struck an “uncharted reef” on the way to dry dock in Saint John.

That was the story that came out of the enquiry, or at least it was one of the stories I recall.

The “Charlottetown” was the first ferry on which motorists could drive their cars on to an automobile deck.

Prior to that automobiles had to be loaded on flat cars, shunted on to the ferry, and then go through the same time consuming business to be unloaded on the other side.