



A SHIPYARD LAYOFF AND A TABBY CAT - H. David Vuckson

Anyone in their senior years with roots deep in Collingwood's industrial past knows that the Collingwood Shipyard was the mainstay of the town in the 1950's. There was a familiar saying that as the Shipyard went, the economy of the town went, so connected was the Shipyard payroll to the fortunes of so many families and, by association, the fortunes of the town's merchants, particularly in the years of the post-war baby boom. Following the production of several large tankers and one bulk carrier—all of them 620 feet long—in the early 1950's, with the last of them completed over the winter of 1953-54, there was a lean spell in terms of ship orders and the size of the ships ordered.

No ships were launched in 1954, although construction of the *Fort Henry* began in August of that year on the west building berth with the launching taking place on March 10, 1955. Then on June 4th of 1955 we were treated to *two* launchings on the same day. The canaller *Iroquois* was launched from the east building berth into Drydock No. 1 and, later, the car ferry, *James A. McPhail* was launched into Drydock No. 2. This small ship—115 feet long—which barely made a splash and was put together in less than two months was built to carry automobiles and passengers between the twin cities of Sault Ste. Marie Ontario and Sault Ste. Marie Michigan. The *McPhail* served this purpose for seven years until the International Bridge between the two cities was completed in 1962, making the ferry redundant.

After the *Iroquois* “cleared” Collingwood to enter service in mid-July 1955, there wasn’t much activity at the Collingwood Shipyard (the next “keel laying” would not happen until November) and the payroll was much diminished and the effect was felt in many households. There was the usual annual two week shutdown in August so that families could go on vacation with their children while maintenance people serviced the cranes and other machinery. With little work on hand there was a layoff of workers, including my father who worked in the Sheet Metal Shop. Two dump scows of 130 feet in length which did not require the finishing trades were launched in late January 1956. The three actual “ships” launched that year in April, June and July utilising the east and west building berths were all canal-size vessels (*Montclair*, *Sarniadoc* and *Calgadoc*) to fit the old St. Lawrence canals in the pre-Seaway era.

Throughout the lean fall and winter months of 1955-56, my father found work in a metal shop in Guelph where they manufactured furnaces and ducting. He boarded in Guelph and came home occasionally. When it was time for him to be recalled to the Shipyard in the spring of 1956, the people in Guelph, very pleased with his work, wanted him to stay there permanently and that would have involved our family leaving Collingwood and moving to Guelph.

The proposed family move to Guelph was not well received by relatives and friends in Collingwood where the roots on my mother’s side went back to 1875. My maternal grandmother Hewson was still living in the home on Hurontario St. to which she had come as a bride in 1905. Her two sisters, Zoe Storey, the mother of Dr. Bob Storey, and Vetta O’Brien (unmarried) were still living in the Storey home on Maple St. They and various other elderly friends of the family were wringing their hands at the thought of losing my mother (“What will we do without you?”). So we stayed and, as it turned out, in 1957 the Collingwood Shipyard got back to building larger ships and did so almost continuously for many years thereafter. My father worked in the Yard until he retired as Sheet Metal Foreman in 1980.

Now, we need to backtrack to the summer of 1955. My mother's older brother Reginald Hewson, who owned a furniture factory in Toronto, had owned for some years a small summer cottage in town on what today is known as Glen Rogers Rd. in an area which we called, at the time, the Rifle Range (a rifle training location left over from the First World War was nearby). In 1955 Uncle Reg bought a lot near his old cottage and had a much larger cottage built which still stands today among modern homes at #13 Glen Rogers Rd. I was present the day the cement was poured for the foundation of the chimney and fireplace and saw someone take a stick and write "1955" in the wet cement. As many cottages did in that era, Uncle Reg's cottage had a name. He named it "Brigidene", a reference to the Broadway musical "*Brigadoon*" by Lerner and Lowe that had been made into a movie by MGM in 1954. One thing the cottage did not have was a bathroom and running water because this area, then on "the edge of town", had no municipal water or sewers. Multiple attempts to drill water wells on empty land on the opposite side of the road, at what is now #12, were futile. The proposal at the time was to have a communal water source for all the cottages on the street. Cottagers had to fill containers of water for drinking and cooking and bring them with them or fill them in town (Uncle Reg occasionally filled up his containers at our house) and every cottage had an outhouse except for the Pardon family who were said to have a "grinding toilet" (like a garburator) that used minimal water and a cess pool or septic tank.

In the fall of 1949 we got a black and white male kitten and he was named "Dixie". I have two photos of myself holding Dixie—as a kitten in October 1949, and holding a fully-grown Dixie on my birthday in November 1952. Sometime after that, Dixie disappeared and was never seen again. When I asked questions, I was given evasive answers. In fact, my parents had gotten rid of the cat. The explanation I heard many years later was that Dixie had an aggressive streak and had attacked someone visiting our house (I wasn't aware of it) and my father had taken a particular dislike to the cat.

One day in the summer of 1955 when we were visiting at Uncle Reg's new *Brigidene* cottage, I happened to discover on the property a tabby cat that appeared to be starving, almost skin and bones. With the memory still fresh in

my mind about the disappearance of my cat Dixie, I decided to take this kitty home and hid her in the back seat of the Studebaker until we got home to Ste. Marie St. My father wasn't happy about this situation but I pleaded. We brought her into the house and gave her a saucer of milk and then another saucer of milk and...she purred and I fell in love. She revived and grew and filled out with a beautiful fur coat and a thick tail with distinctive markings of grey and black. When my uncle Reg saw her in full bloom he asked if she was part raccoon. Somehow my mother had managed to find out that my new cat had been chased by dogs from her home somewhere in the east end of Collingwood and that a young girl had cried and cried because she lost her cat but, surprisingly, the family didn't want the cat returned. Dr. Burnside, the Veterinarian who spayed the cat, determined she was about six months old when I found her.

In 1955 the legendary American frontier hero, Davy Crockett, was all the rage thanks to Walt Disney. Disney had released the movie *Davy Crockett-King of the Wild Frontier* a few months before I found the stray cat. With my name being David, and the cat looking raccoon-like, we named her "Crockett". The original recording of the song *The Ballad of Davy Crockett* was released in 1955 sung by Bill Hayes. It was subsequently recorded by Fess Parker who starred in the movie, and also by Tennessee Ernie Ford and others including Burl Ives, Mac Wiseman, The Sons of the Pioneers and Louis Armstrong [!], and in England by Max Bygraves and others. The song sold millions of records and copies of sheet music. We had the sheet music with the cover photo of Fess Parker wearing his coonskin cap on our piano.

Walt Disney caused a mania for Davy Crockett merchandise, especially the coonskin cap with the tail. Like millions of other boys I owned one but I don't remember sleeping with it on or wearing it to school like some kids did. The coonskin cap was also forever etched in the annals of television in 1955 with the filming of the "Classic 39" episodes of *The Honeymooners* wherein Ralph Kramden and Ed Norton were members of a lodge called "The International Order of Friendly Raccoons". The raccoon "salute" involved grabbing the tail of the cap (while wearing it) and shaking it over one's head while howling like a wolf. The

coonskin caps are apparently still being sold in the gift shop at the Alamo in Texas where Davy Crockett died in the famous battle in March 1836.

So here I had a beautiful cat, but my father was still not in favour because of his previous experience with Dixie. He went away to work in Guelph and when he would phone home he wanted to know if we still had the new cat and wanted her gone before he returned. When he did return to stay in Collingwood as work picked up at the Shipyard, Crockett would play up to him and she won her way into his heart. It developed that she had an internal clock that told her when he was coming home from the Shipyard on his bike and she would be let outside to meet him. My father would pick her up and she would “ride” into the house on his shoulder proud as could be.

Crockett provided us with much entertainment. Our kitchen and dining area floor had 1950’s-era tiles with a pattern of spots. Crockett would “play” with the spots and believed she was batting them around the room and would then go crazy like a balloon with the air let out of it “chasing the spots” all over the room. 1955 was also the year we got our first television, a 17” RCA from Russ Campbell. At times Crockett would sit a few feet from the television screen and watch it. She would drink water from a trickling kitchen tap.

Less entertaining were her hunting escapades when she would bring home a dead mouse to us. We learned to recognize the deep throated howl that signified she had brought a “trophy” home in her mouth. We would then take it from her and bury it. When my mother couldn’t understand why Crockett would go hunting “when we give her a good home and good food”, Dr. Windrem, the Veterinarian in Elmvale, tried to explain that hunting is part of a cat’s nature.

Crockett was adept at climbing ladders. Access to the attic of the rear portion of our house was by leaning an old, weathered, wooden ladder with round rungs (instead of flat “steps”) up against the house and opening a door at the attic floor level. One time when my father was doing some work in the attic he left the ladder up and the access door open for some hours and later closed up the door and took the ladder down. When Crockett didn’t show up for supper, I suggested that maybe she had got into the attic. Sure enough, when my father put the

ladder back up and opened the door, there she was sitting just inside and she gave him a vocal piece of her mind. Another time, Crockett climbed the ladder attached to the wall (straight up) in the garage of my neighbour Wayne Clute across the street and I found her curled up having a nap in his attic.

Crockett and I sort of grew up together. When I was away at York University in the late 1960's, if I were coming home for Thanksgiving weekend, that mysterious internal clock of hers would tell her I was coming and for a few days before my arrival she would start sleeping on my bed. Crockett lived to the age of 16 ½ years and one day in 1971 my mother said she couldn't be found. I went around the property looking and discovered Crockett dead and stiff as a board in the flower bed just a few feet from the back door. Her time was up and she had gone outside and lain down in the flowers and died. I buried her where I found her and had a good cry. My parents never had another pet.

1955 was a pivotal year in our family: the Collingwood Shipyard had little work to do in the second half of the year, so my father had to seek work in Guelph in the interim, my Uncle Reg built a new summer cottage where I found a stray cat, and we got our first television. In the fall of 1955 the first episodes of *The Honeymooners* Classic 39 episodes began airing and Pam and I still watch these on DVD 65 years after they first played. Many memories came flooding back as I typed this story from so long ago, some pleasant, some not, but I treasure the years of love and companionship that a beautiful cat gave to me and my parents.

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