



THE S. S. JAMES CARRUTHERS—COLLINGWOOD'S TITANIC-STYLE DISASTER

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The Collingwood Shipyard had its origins in the 1883 Queen's Drydock at the foot of St. Paul St. The "Queen's" was trumpeted as a state-of-the-art facility for its time ("...the largest and finest in the fresh waters of Canada"). The Queen's, after a couple of name changes and reorganizations, emerged as the Collingwood Shipbuilding Company Ltd. in the late 1890's repairing wooden ships and building new wooden ships, the larger ones like the 184 ft. long *Germanic* being built *in* the drydock and merely floated instead of "launched". Around the turn of the 20th Century the original drydock was lengthened from 325 ft. to 519 ft. and widened as well. Starting in 1901 steel ships were now built along the east edge of (and side launched into) the drydock using home-made hoists until the gantry crane was erected in 1907. At least one photo from 1907 shows dump scows being constructed along the west edge of the drydock while a larger hull was under construction on the building berth on the east side. At the foot of

Hurontario St. was a wide slip for boats to tie up. It would soon become the second drydock.

As business increased and the need emerged for space to build ships longer than could be accommodated in the original east yard, the Hurontario St. slip was turned into Drydock No. 2 in 1909. It was not as long as Drydock No. 1 but was much wider at 105 ft.—wide enough for two ships of the day to be in drydock side-by-side. By July 1910 a new building berth had been set up along the west side of Drydock No. 2 extending north beyond the drydock gate abutments into the open harbour. This new building berth was provided with a gantry crane identical to the one on the east side. The keel for the first large steel ship ever built at the foot of Hurontario St. was laid in July 1910 for the 525 ft. long *Emperor*, “the largest steel vessel built in a British colony”, Hull #28; it was launched into the ice-crusting water on December 17th, 1910.

Collingwood was now building ships longer than either drydock could accommodate. The last ship to be launched into Drydock No. 1 was a small canal-size tanker, the *Tyee Shell*, in 1958. Thereafter, all ship construction took place on the building berth at the foot of Hurontario St., and, even a few times in the early 1960's, on the Town Dock at the extreme north end of the main building berth when the *Hopedale* and *Taverner* ferries were built for CN Marine . The concrete Town Dock which was

never intended to be a shipbuilding berth, was some distance above the water whereas the main building berth sloped to the water's edge of Drydock No. 2. Building a ship on the Town Dock which was not sloped required the ship to sit rather high in order for gravity to take over when the launch triggers were cut. When we watched these two 188 ft. long passenger and cargo ships launched from their high perch on the Town Dock we hoped they wouldn't land on their side when they hit the water. They went in at quite an angle but the water in their inboard ballast tanks helped to right them after the initial splash.

105 years ago the Collingwood Shipbuilding Co. Ltd. built the *James Carruthers*—the largest Canadian ship ever built up to that time—at the foot of Hurontario St. It was launched on May 22, 1913. Dick Ward (whom we met in my story about David A. Manson) was working in the shipyard in 1913 at the age of 19 and he told me in the 1970's that he wrote his name and the date in chalk on one of the anchor chain lockers on the *Carruthers* at the time of its launching. Little did he realize that in slightly less than six months his signature would be on the bottom of Lake Huron never to be seen again.

The *Carruthers*, a bulk freighter, was Hull #38: 550 ft. long overall (keel length 529 ft. between perpendiculars), 58 ft. beam, and 27 ft. draft. It was named in honour of James

Carruthers (1853-1924) a prosperous grain merchant who became the first President of Canada Steamship Lines in 1913 (the ship was actually built for the St. Lawrence and Chicago Steam Navigation Company of Toronto that was absorbed by CSL a few years later).

On November 6, 1913 the *Carruthers* took on a load of 375,000 bushels of prairie wheat at Fort William (today's Thunder Bay) on Lake Superior destined for one of the four grain elevators at Midland on Georgian Bay. She made her way down Lake Superior in stormy weather, through the locks at Sault Ste. Marie and then took on more fuel at a Michigan coal dock on Sunday November 9th before entering the open expanse of Lake Huron, being followed by another ship before she turned toward Georgian Bay. It was the last-ever sighting of the *Carruthers*. A storm of apocalyptic proportions raged over the upper Great Lakes from November 7-10, particularly over Lakes Huron and Superior. Two different nasty weather patterns collided over the Great Lakes and turned into a combination blizzard and hurricane—a “white hurricane” they called it with winds up to 90 miles per hour and waves, said by some ship captains who survived the storm, to be up to 35-40 feet high. In the heavy blowing snow mariners couldn't see beyond the wheelhouse. Ships became top-heavy, encrusted with hundreds of tons of caked-on ice from the wind-driven spray

and this affected their stability making navigation near-impossible as well as dangerously increasing their weight and the strain on their hulls. In addition, on a ship fully loaded, the extra weight of the ice made the vessel sit even lower in the water. The reduced freeboard made the ship even more vulnerable to being swamped by the 35 ft. waves. At least one freighter is said to have broken in half, others rolled over and sank. One ship was suspected of having hit the lake bottom while in a deep trough. Twelve ships were sunk (eight of them on Lake Huron) and a much larger number wrecked but not sunk (severely damaged and/or blown ashore). One freighter, the *Charles S. Price*, 524 feet long and only three years old, was found floating upside down in southern Lake Huron on November 10th, and some days later it sank landing upside down on the lake bottom as did several other ships. Her entire crew of 28 perished. Some other wrecks have been found sitting upright on the bottom.

Different accounts vary but around 250 sailors lost their lives; towns and cities around the Great Lakes, Collingwood included, were in mourning. On Thursday, November 13th, *The Detroit News* said 273 were lost. Whatever the final total (record-keeping of those on board ships was not done with the strictest accuracy), many families were deprived of their breadwinner in an era when there were no long-term financial “safety nets” such as pensions or E.I. Nevertheless some compensation for

funerals was paid out to the families of some of the lost sailors. Try to imagine the shock and disbelief that permeated Collingwood families and the shipyard where the mighty *Carruthers* was launched just a few months earlier when the news of her loss reached town. Similarly, a year earlier the shipbuilders at Harland & Wolff in Belfast, Northern Ireland must have felt an incredible numbness when the news reached them that their recent biggest and best creation had not completed its maiden voyage and was now on the bottom of the Atlantic due to a collision with an iceberg. The unthinkable had happened.

The *James Carruthers* was the newest, biggest, best and sturdiest Canadian ship on the Great Lakes, a landmark product of the Collingwood Shipbuilding Co. At the time she disappeared she still had that “new ship smell”, the paint still tacky in some of the crew quarters. She was the pride of the Canadian fleet, and, like the *Titanic*, it was tempting to think she was invincible because she was brand new and big. Instead, 144 days after leaving Collingwood on her maiden voyage the *James Carruthers* sank in The Great Storm taking all 22 crew members down with her.

There are different accounts of how many Collingwood sailors were lost on the various ships that sank with the numbers varying between 28 and more than 30. The grief was

compounded for the Sheffield family who lost two family members, Lorne and his brother Robert who were both stewards on the *Leafield* that went down in Lake Superior. The entire crew of 18 on that ship was from Collingwood. Because the Great Storm was so severe on both the water *and* the land, communications were disrupted for days. Hydro, telephone and telegraph wires were down and rail lines blocked in southern Ontario and it took time for accurate information to travel. First Presbyterian Church Collingwood alone recorded 9 of the lost sailors as members of its congregation.

After the storm subsided, frozen bodies and wreckage from a number of ships, the *Carruthers* included, started washing up along the eastern shore of Lake Huron. It was surmised that the *Carruthers* may have been blown off course by as much as 70 miles in the wrong direction considering her destination was Midland. The best available information in 2018 indicates that the wreck of the *James Carruthers* either has still not been found, or if it has been found, the location has not yet been disclosed to protect the wreck site from souvenir hunters.

The Collingwood Shipbuilding Company began work almost immediately on a sister ship to replace the *Carruthers* (this new ship had already been ordered before the Great Storm). This was the *J. H. G. Hagarty*, launched June 18, 1914 which had a long life, most of it for Canada Steamship Lines, of fifty-five

years before she was scrapped. The *Hagarty* was built with the older type of heavy one piece wooden hatch covers, the speculation being that the telescoping steel hatch covers may have been responsible for the sinking of the *Carruthers*. Telescoping hatch covers made of overlapping sheets of steel had to be securely covered with canvas tarpaulins in stormy weather to prevent water from entering at the joints and getting into the cargo hold. This was supposed to be done while the ship was at the dock and it was a very laborious, time consuming operation that deckhands did not enjoy doing especially given the number of hatch covers on a ship 550 ft. long. Attempting to do this out on open water in a storm was virtually impossible and sometimes was not done at all especially if the ship left the dock in good weather. Depending on the cargo carried, water pouring into the cargo hold from waves washing over the ship could cause the cargo to shift affecting the ship's stability. In the case of the *Carruthers*, water would cause the grain to swell and place additional strain on the hull. Eventually, all new ships were built with single piece steel hatch covers that were lifted by a hatch cover crane that runs on a track along the deck.

[There is an account of the *Hagarty* sustaining hull damage during its launch. If this is accurate, she probably struck the

large gate abutment on the east side of Drydock No. 2. And since the ship was too long to fit in either of Collingwood's drydocks, she had to go to a drydock in Detroit for repairs. The next ship of the same size (550 ft.) to be launched at Collingwood was the *Westmount* in the spring of 1917. John S. Leitch, the General Manager, stated in a letter that "we managed to keep her clear of the abutment on the east side of the dock and I have just come out of some of the tanks and cannot find trace of any damage", perhaps reflecting on the launch damage to the *Hagarty*. A different arrangement of drag chains was used for the *Westmount* launch and this may account for keeping her clear of the abutment.]

Even in modern times the "gales of November" can still cause ship disasters and loss of life. The most famous wreck, memorialized in song by Gordon Lightfoot, was the November 10, 1975 sinking of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*, nicknamed when new "The *Titanic* of the Great Lakes", a St. Lawrence Seaway-size freighter 729 ft. long—179 feet longer than the *Carruthers*—which broke in half and sank in Lake Superior killing her entire crew of 29. The wreck was discovered in 530 feet of water four days later—the forward section sitting upright and the stern section upside down—whereas the wreck of the *James Carruthers* remains elusive over 100 years after the end of her very short life.

It would have been reckless thinking in 1913 to have publicly called the *Carruthers* “the *Titanic* of the Canadian fleet” just one year after that unthinkable disaster on the Atlantic Ocean and yet according to author Paul Carroll it seems that she was considered “invincible, according to her builders, her owners, and informed mariners” (pg. 146 in his book *The Wexford-Elusive Shipwreck of the Great Storm, 1913*). Unlike the *Carruthers* which was brand new, the *Edmund Fitzgerald* was 17 years old and had been the longest ship of its time on the Great Lakes when launched in 1958 (until the Collingwood Shipyard surpassed it with one slightly longer, the *Murray Bay*, in 1959). It was estimated to have made well over 700 round trips hauling ore on the Great Lakes whereas the *Carruthers* is reported to have been on only its third trip.

Whether brand new, or many years in service, a number of ships were no match for the storms of November on the Great Lakes. The multitude of shipwrecks at the bottom of the lakes and the human toll in lost sailors is a mute testimony to this danger.

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