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## THE 1950'S—A TIME OF TRANSITION AT THE COLLINGWOOD SHIPYARD

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Saturday, June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1955 was a momentous day in the life of Collingwood and its famous Shipyard. On that day, two ship launchings took place—one in the morning and another in the afternoon. For very many years the prosperity of Collingwood was largely tied to the fortunes of the Shipyard and public school children usually got out of school early for ship launchings that were held late in the morning. If these two launchings had taken place on a school day, no academic work would have been accomplished because the students would have been so wired.

The first launching of the day in the morning took place when the 115 ft. long Motor Ferry *John A. McPhail* (Hull # 153) was launched into Drydock No. 2 at the foot of Hurontario St. This small vessel was built to the order of the International Transit Company to ferry motor vehicles and passengers between Sault Ste. Marie Michigan and Sault Ste. Marie Ontario in the years before the International Bridge between the two cities was built. The *McPhail* joined an earlier Collingwood Shipyard product, the *James W. Curran*, (Hull # 143), a similar sized vessel launched on June 14, 1947. Both

of these ferries were double-ended and designed to carry 19 cars/trucks and 450 passengers between the two "Soos". When the International Bridge opened on October 30, 1962, both ships became redundant overnight and were to be re-purposed for service between Kingston, Ontario and Wolfe Island. In May 1964 they were under tow on Lake Huron bound for Kingston when a terrible storm came up and caused them both to sink in about 200 feet of water. They remain there today, the *McPhail* sitting upright on the sandy bottom and the *Curran* upside down near it, the tow cable between them still in place. These products of the Collingwood Shipyard now serve as a popular site for divers.

The second launching on June 4, 1955 took place in the early afternoon when the "canaller" M. V. *Iroquois*, (Hull #152), 259 feet long, was launched into Drydock No. 1 at the foot of St. Paul St. for Canada Steamship Lines. Some explanation of the term "canaller" is in order for those not familiar with the term. In the years before the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway (opened in the spring of 1959) which can accommodate ships 740 feet long in its locks, there were older canals for bypassing the rapids on the St. Lawrence River at Lachine and at several other locations west of there, such as Cornwall, and the maximum length of ship those locks could accommodate was about 261 feet. Because of these limitations to navigation with the old canals there was an immense fleet of smaller steamships called canallers that plied the waters between Kingston, at the eastern end of Lake Ontario, and Montreal, moving cargoes of all sorts: grain, cement, coal, iron ore, pulpwood, fertilizer, etc. When the Seaway opened, a similar situation to the two ferries mentioned above occurred with the canallers: they became not only redundant, but also obsolete.

The new Seaway-size ships could carry immense cargoes. In 1959 the Collingwood Shipyard's first Seaway-size ship *Menihok Lake* (715 ft. long) was stated to be able to carry a million bushels of grain or 25,000 tons of

iron ore in one load. The much smaller canallers with multiple crews and small capacities were just not economical anymore and many of them were “laid up”. The bread and butter income of the Kingston Shipyard and its small drydock came from servicing and repairing this aging fleet of canallers and, eventually, this change of circumstances spelled the doom of the Kingston Shipyard in the 1960’s. The older, tired canallers were gradually scrapped. As an example, a 253 ft. canaller named *Wallaceburg*, built in 1923, was owned since 1936 by the Upper Lakes & St. Lawrence Transportation Co. Ltd. The ship was discarded in 1960, early in the Seaway era, and sold to Jemmig Enterprises Ltd. At some point in this time period the *Wallaceburg* lost its propeller and was towed to Collingwood where it languished for some time, tied up along Heritage Drive just north of the Paint Shop. Under new ownership it got a brief reprieve but was scrapped in Hamilton in 1966 after a 43 year career.

The newer canal-type ships, built just a handful of years before the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway, still had many miles left on their modern diesel engines and found new uses when sold to other owners. The *Iroquois*, for example, following two name changes, lived on to 1989 when, under Mexican ownership it sank. Two more canallers of identical dimensions to the *Iroquois*, the *Sarniadoc* and *Calgadoc*, identical twins built for N. M. Paterson & Sons Ltd., were launched at Collingwood in 1956 and they, too, were sold to Mexican interests in the 1970’s and survived into the 1980’s. Under their new names, the careers of these twin ships ended by scrapping (*Sarniadoc*) and sinking (*Calgadoc*).

When the *Iroquois* was launched in the old east yard at Collingwood in 1955, the era of building steel ships in this spot was drawing to a close. Multiple ships of canaller dimensions were constructed here, especially during two world wars, but the building berth, tightly sandwiched as it was between Drydock No. 1 and the Punch Shop/Mould Loft building, could not be

expanded to build larger ships. The “overhead” or gantry crane was a practical fit for the space—indeed the only fit possible—and the needs of the time, but overall, the usefulness of this building berth was limited. The first steel hull *Huronic* was launched into the original 1883 Queen’s Drydock in 1901. As detailed in my March 2020 story *Collingwood Shipyard Had Two Drydocks*, this original drydock at the foot of St. Paul St. was completely rebuilt—lengthened, widened and deepened—in 1902-03 as the need for larger ships became apparent. Starting with the *Huronic*, the first 16 steel hulls were built without the use of any crane—a remarkable feat—the lifting power coming from numerous homemade hoists using poles, cables and hooks and steam power. The gantry crane was in process of erection in early 1907 while Hull # 17, the freighter *Collingwood*, was under construction using those homemade hoists. By the time *Collingwood* was launched in October 1907 the gantry crane was complete. Three years later when shipbuilding began on the west side of Drydock No. 2 at the foot of Hurontario St., an identical gantry crane was erected there.

We have a description of these gantry cranes from the publication *Canadian Shipping and Marine Engineering, Volume IX, No. 1, January 1919*. This publication gave detailed descriptions of various shipyards around the Great Lakes and their equipment. The section on the Collingwood Shipbuilding Company Ltd. (as it was then styled) titled ***The Plant of Collingwood Shipbuilding Co. Complete Establishment Building Vessels and Equipping Them Throughout—Capable Men Are Behind This Organization—Can Handle Any Work That Can Pass The Great Lakes*** stated the following:

*The building berths...are served by travelling cranes running on trestles, the cranes being mounted on A frames. The trestles on the launching side can be dismantled when a ship is ready for launching in about 10 hours. These cranes can handle a weight of 15 tons, have a transverse span of about 65 feet, and can travel the full length of the berths.*

Elsewhere in the article it is mentioned that the Collingwood Yard was acquired in late 1916 by Roy Mitchell Wolvin, H. B. Smith, and J. W. Norcross with the official change of ownership taking place on January 2, 1917. The Wolvin interests had also acquired the Port Arthur Shipyard in 1916. The purchase of the Collingwood Yard also included the Kingston Shipyard (established in 1910) which was a subsidiary of the Collingwood facility. In 1917 H. B. Smith was President, J. W. Norcross and R. M. Wolvin were Vice-Presidents, John S. Leitch was the General Manager and the Chief Engineer, whom we met last month in my story about the town clock, was F. E. Courtice. In describing all the machinery in use in the Collingwood Yard, the article goes on to say that

*Mr. Courtice has built and designed most of the plant as it now is...[1919].*

Elsewhere in the article it is stated that *most of the plant is of home design.*

A display ad in the same publication proclaims:

**THE COLLINGWOOD SHIPBUILDING CO. Limited—PLANTS AND DRY DOCKS AT COLLINGWOOD, ONTARIO AND KINGSTON, ONTARIO. DRY-DOCKS AND SHOPS equipped to operate DAY OR NIGHT ON REPAIRS**

Considering the above statement about home design, it is entirely possible that Frank Courtice designed the two identical gantry cranes for the two building berths. The one on the building berth at the foot of Hurontario St. faced a big change in its utility in the late 1940's when the *Hochelaga*—the first post-war super bulk carrier and the largest ship ever built in Canada up to that time—was so tall that the crane couldn't pass over it. By then, there were also two travelling cranes on the inboard side of the building berth, one steam-powered, the other electric-powered. The gantry crane was taken down in 1951 and moved to a new assignment working at ground level in an east-west alignment in the Steel Stockyard near the Pine St. Gate. Its twin, over in the east side of the Yard remained in place until the last ship was built alongside Drydock No. 1. With the launching of the *Tyee Shell* on

July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1958, 57 years of building steel ships (and even more ships if you count the wooden vessels built there before 1901) in the east yard came to an end. Eventually the gantry crane, erected in 1907, was taken down and joined its younger twin working at ground level in the Steel Stockyard while its elevated tracks (except for those along the edge of the drydock) remained in place until the Shipyard closed in 1986. The twin cranes survived a head-on collision with each other during a terrible wind storm in the 1960's. They had not been tied down for the night and, as my father related, one of them took off down the tracks, propelled by the wind, and crashed into its twin. They were well-built and kept on working until replaced by newer, more powerful cranes in a new, larger Steel Stockyard and in the south prefab building.

As the era of canallers was coming to an end and methods of ship construction were undergoing a vast change from riveting together countless small pieces from the Punch Shed to construct a hull (like a giant child's Meccano set) to the new way of welding huge prefabricated hull panels before taking them to the building berth, the old east yard building berth became a storage place for countless giant wooden spools that had contained cables and wiring. Hull Superintendent George Cooper, one of the three superintendents I worked for in the Administration Building in the 1960's said that the Yard was keeping the east building berth "in case there was another war" (this was the era of the "Cold War" when President John F. Kennedy and Comrade Nikita Khrushchev stared each other down over the Cuban Missile Crisis in October/November 1962).

Meanwhile, planning for the future of bigger ships, the Shipyard turned its eyes westward to mostly empty/reclaimed land owned by the Town north of First St. where the big sawmill and log booming inlets were until 1903, and expanded far beyond its original western boundary at the north end of Pine St. with the building of several pre-fab buildings where work could progress

under cover. The blacksmith shop and punch shed from the east yard were relocated to the far west side in one building which was connected to one of the prefab buildings. A succession of larger cranes with lifting capacities far above the 15 ton limit of the old gantry cranes were added to the building berth to speed production. In the 1960's prefabricated hull panels weighed as much as 40 tons and ships up to 730 feet long were now being launched into the former Drydock No. 2, by then known as "the launch basin".

The land between Drydock No. 1 and Heritage Drive was all "made" land, created initially by the Ontario, Simcoe & Huron Railway in the 1850's and later by the drydock company in the 1880's. The old wooden shipyard buildings along Heritage Drive were on land leased from the Grand Trunk Railway for 99 years. The Grand Trunk took over the two railway lines coming into Collingwood in 1888 and when you add 99 years to this date it can be seen that the lease, now with the CNR since 1923, would run out in 1987 by which time there was no future for the Shipyard and this is just one of *many* reasons why the Collingwood Shipyard closed in 1986.

Today, when there is no trace of the Shipyard buildings other than in photos, memories and the artifacts preserved at The Museum, the Walk of History along Heritage Drive and the basins of former Drydocks No.1 and 2, the land along Heritage Drive that once contained the original shipyard from 1883 is now intended to become the home of three 6-storey buildings. At the time of writing (Sept./Oct. 2022) the area between Huron St. and Side Launch Way that used to contain the Shipyard's brick Main Office building and a number of wooden buildings is being excavated for underground parking for a new 6-storey building, the Harbour House condos. A June 1856 survey map of the Collingwood townsite by Henry Creswick, shows that, originally, the harbour water came up very close to Huron St. What eventually became the Shipyard property along Heritage Dr. was all "made" land, as confirmed in the reminiscences of John Nettleton, the tailor, who

arrived in Collingwood in 1857. And now, much of that fill that was brought in is being (or soon will be for additional buildings) excavated to be taken away to another place as the former Shipyard land is remade for other purposes. If John Nettleton could see it now he would be amazed and perhaps incredulous.

The transformation of this once-industrial waterfront, the very heart of Collingwood, has taken many years to accomplish and as the older generations pass on, the current and future waterfront buildings will be taken for granted by strangers who have no knowledge of Collingwood's shipbuilding history as they pass through town.

*David Vuckson, whose father worked in the Shipyard for 33 years, and himself had a summer job in the Yard during his high school and university years, is a great-grandson of pioneer Collingwood merchant R. W. O'Brien. His roots in town go back to 1875. David and his wife Pamela live in Victoria, B.C.*