

# The Grand Dispatch

A brief history of Beckley Beach and the surrounding area.

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## The Grand Dispatch is taking Sabbatical!

### It's been fun, but also a ton of Work!

The Grand Dispatch began out of a desire to tell the story about Port Maitland. I believe it has in part accomplished my goal. Researching for The Grand Dispatch opened another venue to tell the story to a larger audience. As a result of my weekly trips to the Dunnville Chronicle I began a monthly column. This column, required by its nature that I write about more than just Beckley Beach.

thought I would learn all there was to learn through oral histories. A lot of history was made here and only some of it can be preserved in this manner. Did you know that at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Port Maitland had for nearly twenty years hosted a number of famous Buffalo area artists known as the Bohemian Sketch Club? They painted hundreds of pictures in this area and used this area as one of their art schools. The club included artists by the name of W. Cary Ide, George Merritt Clark, Paul King, James Francis Brown, Edward Dufner, George Brant Bridgeman and George W. Bridgeman and others. In 1892 they held their annual art show in Buffalo, where they offered for sale, at least eighteen paintings of the Port Maitland area. Names of some of these paintings are obviously titled in a way that you knew they were Port Maitland scenes. *Shore by Port Maitland, Cottage on the Beach, Port Maitland Canada, Sketch at Port Maitland, Sketch from Hotel Veranda at Port Maitland, Lock at Dunnville, On the Grand, On the Feeder, Slabtown, Old House at Port Maitland* and others. The sketch *Old House at Port Maitland*, I believe is my old home (lot 11).



The Grand Dispatch is going to be retired for a year or so and *God willing* it will return, with a new look and expanded subject matter. It has been fun putting it together for the past four years, but it has also been a lot of hard work. The experience has opened up two doors to me that I never thought of in 1998.

One is my monthly history column in the Chronicle and the other is the Port Maitland History Day that began in 2001. One can only do so much and a decision has been made to put my energy toward these tasks.

When I began researching Port Maitland information, I

### Our Port's history has been grossly undervalued.

Were you aware of how many ships, barges, schooners and other marine vehicles travelled our waterways? Our Port's history has been grossly undervalued regarding its importance to the 19<sup>th</sup> century economy of both Canada and the United States. In the 1800s, the local papers tracked many of the local schooners, and barges, recording their every passage up or down the Feeder. There is information of the many varied cargos they carried; gypsum, plaster of paris, cheese, cattle,

eggs, grain and lumber destined for Chicago to rebuild that city after its disastrous fire. They also carried sand and gravel for piers in Cleveland and other ports on the Great Lakes, fish for New York City, Boston, Pittsburgh and many more far flung destinations. One of the more surprising aspects of our marine story is the number of cruise ships that made Port Maitland their port of call. These modern-day ships provided all the amities of the day while transporting their passengers to and from our community. Rooms for at least 150 guests could be found locally. This was in addition to those that could be accommodated in Dunnville.



The Cruise ship *ALCOTT* pulling away from west pier. Note, the lighthouse before it was enclosed.

Photo courtesy the late Edwin J McKee Collection.

Many questions have been satisfied about the Grand River Naval Depot located primarily on the east side of the Grand River. But there are many more questions still not answered. Precisely where was it? Are there any remains to be found? How big was it? I believe John Dockers, recent book, *Grand River Naval Depot* answers many but not all of these questions. I offer this very speculative suggestion. Not any part of it will ever be found other than maybe a slight chance on the Coté property (lots 39, 41, 43). The reason for this conclusion is rather simple once I realized the amount of sand and gravel removed from this area. For more than a hundred years after the opening of the Feeder Canal, sand and gravel was taken by barges to places all over the lakes. This activity continued into the late 1950s when sand was being used by the TH&B for engine sand. When I look at early maps and then take a walk through Beckley Beach, I can see where at onetime there were sand banks extending well up-river and inland from its mouth. These sandbanks are now gone leaving only a hint of their existence. If you look

behind the cottages with lot numbers ending in "A" you will find a ridge of sand bordering the marsh. I suspect these ridges are the back portions of an early sandhill which once extended to the river on the west, and the lake on the south. Any hope of finding the former Naval Depot has been long hauled away!

### **He suggested that I not get on a *Bandwagon!***

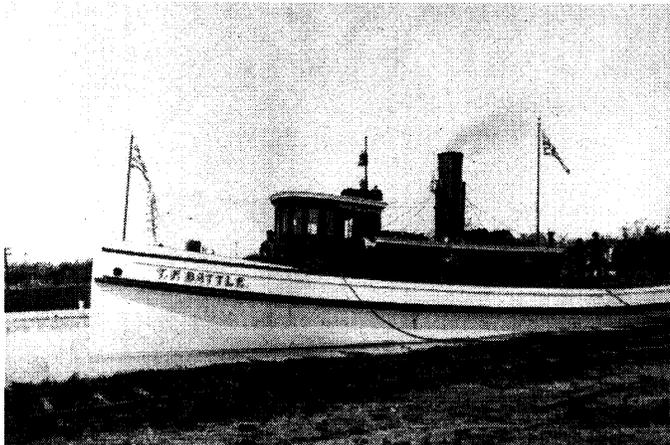
A story that could easily take numerous Grand Dispatches is the Port's connection to both commercial and sport fishing. When I began writing the Dispatch, I approached a commercial fisherman asking him for information. During our conversation he suggested that I not get on a *bandwagon* about commercial over fishing. Like himself, I do not think the reduction of fish in the lake can be attributed solely to commercial fishing. However, when I look at the numbers of fish that have been removed from our lake and river at Port Maitland and other ports, by both commercial and sport fisherman it does make me wonder. I have found stories, - mind you, fish stories, where sport fishermen could not pull the lines out of the water fast enough to bring in the fish. It seemed that as many hooks as they could put on a line would be filled as soon as the line hit the water. Remember, these are fish stories! But fish stories or not, they were likely based on some measure of truth. Early newspapers were filled with reports of tons of fish being caught by commercial fishermen on a daily basis and being shipped to Buffalo and other American cities. Herring, sturgeon, whitefish, perch, bass, pickerel, muskellunge, rough fish including carp, suckers, channel cat, billfish, were all commercially and sport fished. Pound nets, seine nets, gill nets, hoop nets, as well as hook-lines were used in commercial fishing.

There are many newspaper articles detailing the fishing excursions to this area by Buffalo's richest who took great pleasure spending a week or more in fishing and hunting camps and boarding facilities taking more fish out of our waters, and game from our marshes then they could ever hope to consume, or transport home. Not only were the numbers of fish large, but so were the fish! Thirty or forty pound and higher muskellunge or sturgeons were often the case. Perch were caught by the hundreds in only an afternoon of fishing. There is

a well-known local story of fish being stacked on the river's bank like cord wood. Numerous local sports fishermen are mentioned in these article telling stories of large catches either from the Grand River or immediately offshore from Port. It is not my place, nor within my ability to place the blame on anyone or anything, but I do wish for the good old days, and yes I would be one of the first to have my hook and line in the water waiting for the big one(s)!

### Ships wrecked or damaged in this area!

I think most surprising was the number of shipwrecks that have taken place within a very few miles of the mouth of the Grand River. In school, I learned of the collision of the Commerce and the Despatch in 1850. That disaster has been well documented over the years. I have often seen the graves of many of the sailors and



Work tug *T. F. BATTLE*, sank in the river in 1907 at Port Maitland. Later she would be refloated, rebuilt and renamed the *THOMAS FREEL BATTLE*.

Photo courtesy of the late Earl M. Siddall

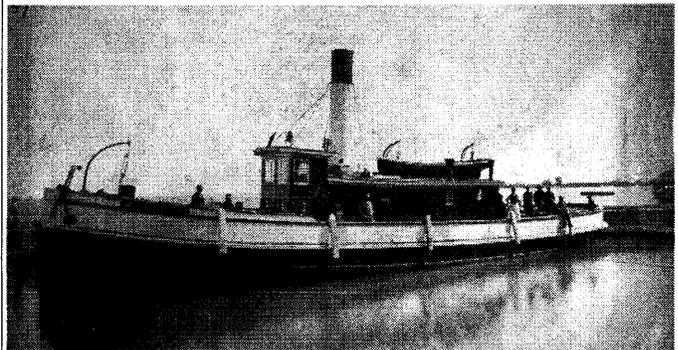
officers who are buried at Christ's Church Cemetery. It is the many other disasters and loss of lives off Mohawk Island and on the nearby shoals that surprised me. My research has found details of many wrecks nearby, including the following ships. These are only a few of what is a much longer list.

To help you a little I looked up some terms and then abbreviated their descriptions. Sch = Schooner - at least two mast, Bark/Barque = Three masted ship with at least one square rigging, mid ship, Pro = Propeller driven, Sft = Shaft, a boat with a shaft. Ie. A propellor.

- 1842 Sch *Adventure*
- 1848 Sch *Pilgrim*
- 1851 Schs *Atlas, Big Z, Lady Bagot*
- 1854 Schs *Ino, Lizzi Throop, Twin Brothers*
- 1860 Scow *Ayrshire Lassie,*
- 1862 Schs *Huntress, Scottish Chief, Empire, Sarah Ann,*
- Propeller California,*
- 1865 Bark *S. A. Marsh*
- 1867 Sch *Isabell*
- 1878 Steam barge *Elmira*
- 1899 Sch *Alfred Allen*
- 1870 Steamer *Gliding Star*
- 1876 Sch *Mary Grover, Pro Calabria*
- 1878 Sch *David Sharp*
- 1882 Sch *Florida*
- 1883 Schs *Edmond Fitzgerald, New Dominion*
- 1887 Sch *Neelan*
- 1891 Schs *George C. Finney, Montcalm,*
- 1899 Steamer *Niagara*
- 1895 Sch *G. W. Davis*
- bef 1900 Pro *Pittsburg*
- 1907 Work boat *Thomas Freel Battle*
- 1917 Sch *Abyssinia*
- 1919 Sft *Choctaw*
- 1927 Tug *David G. Thompson*

### Ships and other Boats Built in this Area.

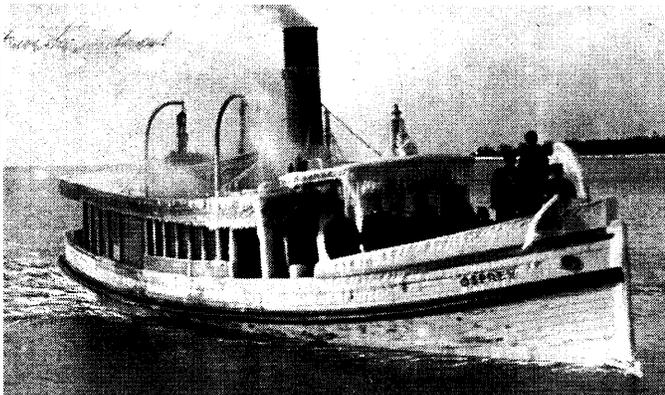
Not only were many ships and barges destroyed near Port Maitland, the area is also the birthplace of many ships and locally known boats. In the last sixty years the G. S. Powell Shipyard and the Powell Shipyard owned by Steve's son have accounted for many new boats not listed below.



The Tug *MARY ANN* is believed to be the first ship registered in Canada after confederation.

Photo courtesy the late Earl M. Siddall

1859 Scow *Royal Oak* at Stromness  
 1859 Scow *Clyde* at Stromness  
 1863 Barge *Moderate* at Stromness  
 1864 Tug *W. T. Robb* at Stromness  
 1865 Scow *Stromness* at Stromness  
 1867 Tug Steamer *Jessie* at Stromness  
 1867 Tug *Mary Ann* at Stromness  
 1874 Sch *M. C. Upper* at Stromness  
 1889 Yacht *Fanny Moore* at Dunnville  
 Bef 1892 Sch *Bella Brandon* in Port Maitland area  
 1892 Sft *George MacArthur* at Dunnville  
 1894 or 95 Sft *Osprey* at Dunnville  
 1895 Sft *Eleanor* at Port Maitland  
 1900 Gas tug *Beatrice* at Dunnville  
 1901 Tug *F.B. Brady* at Dunnville  
 1902 Pleasure boat *Belladonna* at Port Maitland  
 1902 Sft *You and I* at Port Maitland  
 1902 Fish tug *Saida* at Dunnville  
 1910s Fish tug *C. C. Lloyd* at Port Maitland  
 1924 Fish tug *Maitland Rose* at Port Maitland  
 1949 Fish tug *W H Wheeler* at G. S. Powell's  
 1949 Fish tug *The Dollar Boat* at G. S. Powell's  
 1951 Fish tug *Patricia June* at G. S. Powell's  
 1956 *Power barges* at G. S. Powell's



The fish tug *OSPREY* was built at Dunnville for Freeman Green. Here incrustrated in ice she takes a dangerous trip on the lake.

Photo courtesy of Robert C. Ross

### • **Field Days were the Event of the Summer for Many Years!**

There are still many stories to tell about Beckley Beach and its many personalities but to take leave of publication of the Dispatch without mentioning our Field Days would be very short sighted. The main reason,

I have not written about this subject is the shortage of photographs from the early Field Days. Only recently, I received a number of photos from Karen Redding nee Jones (Lot 76) from the 1980s modern day event. I know that some of you older folks must have photos of the early Field Days and I urge you to loan them to me so I may archive them.



Beckley Beach Field Day 1953.

Photo courtesy Helen Root Nee Ferguson

The earliest record I am able to locate regarding the Field Day was a motion made at the July 1939 general meeting of the Beckley Beach Cottager's Association. It was moved by Mr. Philip Erb (lot 49) and seconded by Mr. Ed Farrell (lot 36A) *that a Field Day be held on Monday, August 5th.* This was not the first event held by the Association to provide entertainment and make a few dollars to be used for the good of the summer community. In 1937 Mr. Wm. Hurford (lot 35) reported *that a successful Housie Party and Entertainment was held on Aug. 21st at the Boy Scout Camp the proceeds of which were \$22.97.*

It would appear that the Field Day was only held for one summer before the war broke out, then restarted in 1947 and ran continuously until 1954. At some point organizers really became organized and began putting out an annual *Field Day Programme.* These programs listed among other items the events and number of prizes to be awarded. They listed special events such as a fishing contest, a horseshoe pitching contest and of course the famous ball games at the mosquito infested and clay surfaced ball diamond located on the lot behind David and Maxine Mulhern (lot 17). The programs also listed the committee members. Throughout the years for which I have programs (1947-

1952) (kindly donated by Ed Boyle, - lots 54 & 33, Pat Hayes - lots 19/21 and Karen Redding) there were always two sub-committees. They were *Sports & Refreshments*, committees. The refreshment's consisted of only women while the sports committee was only men. The sexes knew their places!

Field Day was complete with track and field day events for children of all ages. There were the usual events, such as races for boys and girls of various ages. Some of the more interesting contests were saved for the older children. There were egg tossing contests, and balloon races for the ladies. For the man there was a peanut race, whatever that is! Married ladies had a walking race and the young men raced from Andy Marr's (lot 40) to the Kenney Bridge and back. The Marvin Angle property (lot 36) along with the W. J. Sweeney (lot 38) and the Marr properties were the main fields used for the short races. *For the benefit of you youngsters, the Kenney bridge was a wooden bridge that crossed the Feeder Canal just west of the former TH&B station. You may recall the station as the office building for the fertilizer factory.* When I was a kid, we dove off that bridge into the feeder and never gave it a thought! You wouldn't catch me dead in there now, or maybe that is how you would find me!

We old-timers remember the bond-fires that Mr. Jim Grightmire (lot 42A) and my father Maurice Warnick (lots 9/10/11) put on in front of the then empty lot (56) which now belongs to Lynn Smith. Railway ties donated by the TH&B would be gathered from the coal dock and stacked on the beach like a large wooden teepee. With sufficient kindling placed in the centre, the fire was ready to go with the strike of a match. I recall as a youngster the adults being very upset when someone decided they couldn't wait until 9:00 p.m. for the fire to begin. An unknown youngster set the teepee on fire in the middle of the afternoon. We had a fire that night, but it was not up to its usual standards.

Father John O'Reilly (lots 26A & 28A) brought his accordion and his altar boys from Guelph for a sing song and a wiener and marshmallow roast. The boys' self-respect had been tested earlier in the evening when they were pitted against the boys and girls from the beach in a baseball game. We beat them every year. If you listen to them, they will tell you it was the other

way around!

August 3, 1952 would be the worst day in our Field Day's history. Thirteen-year-old Brenda Boyle (lot 54) along with her siblings and Sally McGowen (lot 57) were returning from Mohawk Island in Dr. Wm. Bachman's (lot 6) boat. The girls were returning home for the baseball game which would be starting at 6:00p.m. Brenda jumped out of the boat and was struck by the turning propeller when the engine was put into reverse. Brenda recently wrote this to me. *"Ted McNally (lot 59) who was only 19-years-old, I think, at the time, was the chairman of the Field Day Committee. At the bonfire that night, he organized the Beach residents and sent me a gift in the hospital letting me know that I was in their thoughts and prayers. I remember how touched I was receiving their card and gift."*

Our Field Days would continue for two more years, ending in 1954. I have no records, nor have I found anyone who recalls why they were cancelled.

On August 5, 1979, twenty-five years since the last Field Day, the Beckley Beach Cottager's Association began what would be a nine-year stab at holding annual Field Days once more. Due to the superb record keeping of Karen Redding, we have records of the events and winners for the first few years of the revised Field Days.



Field Day at Beckley Beach - Boat Race 1988.

Photo courtesy Karen Redding Nee Jones

The usual events were recaptured, but new blood was running things now. By 1980 times had changed. So had the prices. The new committee met with local merchants, and were successful in obtaining many gifts.

There was a draw in 1980 for a bar-be-que, a smoke detector, a ceramic potato dish, \$10.00 Loblaw's certificate and a large framed truck picture.

The second modern-day Field Day was opened with Douglas Waldick's entry into the field of competition carrying the Association's Olympic flag. When I ask those of you who were present for the modern-day Field Day, what you remember most about them, it is without a doubt the cardboard boat race, or should I say sinking.

As can happen with the best of plans, things did not always go as hoped and there were some summer residents who wanted to end the Field Days. Among other issues there were concerns about liabilities. One has to remember this was a time when municipalities across the country were very concerned about their soaring insurance rates. The death toll rang on June 25, 1989 when at the general meeting of the Association it was voted 17 to 13 that there would be no Field Day that year. It was dead, but it would not lie down! Tim Smith volunteered to help with yet another Field Day and with some instruction from the Association the event was held on August 6, 1989. I can find no records telling me how this day went or that there was any further Field Days.

## In Memoriam

**WARNICK, Madeline** (Barless) August 2, 2002, Wife of Joseph Warnick (formerly lot 37) Step-mother of Sarah and Albert Groothedde, Peter and Gale Warnick Tim and Teresa Warnick.

**WARNICK, Helen Elizabeth** (nee Grightmire) R.N. - October 26, 2002, Wife of the late Ambrose Warnick. Helen's parents were James and Marie Grightmire. (lot 42A). Mother of Gregory (Kathleen), Michael (Debbie), Mark (Nanci), Deirdre Elizabeth (Brian) Harrington and John (Sharon). Loving sister to Rita Quinn, Louise (Raymond) Dubois, and Joan (Wilf) Curtis.

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