

Re-Submitted to The Dunnville Chronicle Via E-mail
Submitted May 26, 2000 - For Publishing June 14, 2000
By William A. Warnick
180 Rosslyn Ave. South
HAMILTON, ON L8M 3J5
Phone 905 549-6086 E-mail wwarnick@netinc.ca

Belladonna Wreck?

Exposed, in The Dunnville Chronicle January 5, 2000 (1636 Words)

The Dunnville Chronicle of January 5, 2000, had a photo of the remains of a sunken hull of a ship. The story suggested that these are the remains of the river tour boat Belladonna. This picture was taken by the owner of Riverside Marina, Gord McLeod. Gord never used his measuring tape but he did estimate the visible remains were about one hundred and ten feet in length. This set me to wondering, if this could be the Belladonna. After a few well-placed questions and of course some answers I decided, not likely! My friends in the know tell me the Belladonna, was not more than sixty, or maybe at most seventy feet. If not the Belladonna what mystery did Gord uncover?

I am only fifty-two years old, hardly old enough to claim to be an old-timer except maybe to those teenagers I talked to at the Rowe's B-B-Q last summer! And, of course to my sons friends! Where does a young fellow like myself go to find out what boat this is lying just down river a few feet from Riverside Marina. Luck was on my side. Through the kindness of my friend John Burtiak, of Brock University, I have had the loan of some early and rare newspapers from Dunnville. The Reform Press, began in Dunnville in 1872 and stopped publishing in 1925. At about the same time that Gord was discovering his watery cadaver in the Grand I was transcribing an article from it. Here is what that article said; "The wreck of the Elmira, which lies immediately east of the dock, will probably be moved shortly. We copy the following account of the burning of this boat from The Reform Press of December 4, 1878. The steam barge Elmira owned in Bay City MI., was burned to the water's edge last Saturday morning. The fire was discovered about two a.m., and the fire bell rang. The fire brigade was soon on hand, and worked several hours, extinguishing the fire above deck. There was a large supply of coal in the bunkers below the deck, which the fire had reached, and the dense smoke made it impossible to go below or cut the deck sufficiently for the purpose of reaching the fire. She was lying at Taylor's wharf below the dam. The tug Aikens towed her a short distance below, where she was grounded and slowly consumed. The Elmira was a very large craft, used for freighting only."

Those not interested in the technical stuff, should skip the next three paragraphs.

Thanks to modern technology, I have discovered some forgotten facts. On the internet I find a sight dedicated to shipwrecks called; "The Great Lakes Shipwreck File: Total Losses of Great Lakes Ships 1679 - 1998 by Dave Swayze." There is all kinds of information about the Elmira. It is all abbreviated, but you can still read it. "The propeller Elmira burns at Dunnville, Official no. : 7335, Type at loss: propeller wood, Build info: 1856 Lafrinier & Stevenson Cleveland, Specs: 180x28x11 781g 599n, Date of loss: 1878, Nov. 30, Place of loss: at Dunnville, Ont. Lake: Erie, Type of loss: fire, Detail: Burned to a total loss; She was a loss of \$11,000, "Burned in 1878." Out of Bay City, MI, Major repairs in 1862."

Dave was good enough to send me a couple newspaper clippings regarding the Elmira. Here, for you shipwreck fanatics who need to know all the details is one of those clippings copied exactly as I received it. Please don't ask me what it means, I'm a land-lover! Detroit Free Press, Aug. 17, 1856, Titled "ANOTHER NEW PROPELLER." - Cleveland shipyards fairly hatch out propellers. The Elmira, now ready to sail, has just been

completed for the New York and Erie Railroad Company, and will be placed in the Dunkirk, Cleveland and Toledo line. Her hull was built by Lafrenier & Stevenson; her engines by the Cuyahoga Steam Furnace Company; her sails and rigging furnished by V. Swain. The Elmira is of 600 tons burthen, and her capacity is 5,000 barrels of flour. Her engines are duplicates of those in the Jersey City, and on an experimental trip, a few evenings since, she made 10 miles in 57 minutes, with 40 pounds of steam, cutting off at half stroke. She is permitted to carry 70 pounds of steam and will run 12 miles an hour easy. This model propeller has been built from the keel up, under the direction of Sheldon Pease, and under the superintendence of Capt. J. G. Huff. Her master, Capt. Geo. Blackman, her mate, S. Bond; first engineer J. H. Hemmingway; clerk and steward G. S. Jeffers. The Elmira cost \$40,000, and in hull, engines, model, workmanship and finish, it is claimed that her superior was never built in Cleveland. - Cleveland Herald, 14th.

From the Wisconsin Marine Historical Society we learn the following. She had various owners including the New York & Erie R. R. Co., Erie R. R. & Steamboat Co., Union Steamboat Co., and lastly William Kelley of Bay City Michigan. She was likely carrying lumber for William Kelley when she burnt.

Note to Chronicle; If the article is going to be a two parter, it is here that I would divide it. My comments would be;

"Next month July 12th, I will continue the story and pursue the question of what ship Gord found in the river just off his dock. A hint. If you have not already figured it out, I don't believe it was the Belladonna!"

To begin the August 9th story;

"Last month I wrote about the question of what ship Gord McLeod found just off his dock in December last year. I told you of two ships, the Belladonna and the Elmira. Today, we will pursue this subject a bit more. You can decide for yourself what ship it is or maybe what ship it is not!"

Gord McLeod, said he thought his wreck was at least one hundred and ten feet long. Actually while talking with him he suggested that it may in fact be longer than the one hundred and ten feet mentioned in the Chronicle. He felt that from the appearance there might have been more under the mud of the riverbed. The information above says the Elmira was one hundred and eighty feet in length. Could this be the Elmira?

This is not all that I found in the 1904 Reform Press. Throughout the summer of 1904 are a number of articles describing the many public works' projects going on along the river and feeder canal from Port Maitland to Dunnville. The river was dredged to fourteen feet from the dam to its mouth. Sunfish Creek was dredged to remove some unspeakable settlement which was plugging up the creek, preventing the flow of you know what! For those of you who say; "What" Sunfish Creek was, as it is today the home of Dunnville's sewage plant. The lock at Port Maitland was undergoing a major overhaul. As well as other updates, a new wooden bottom was built in it. Before this could be done, the Feeder had to be completely shut down and earth barriers built above and below it. Once drained, the lock was completely repaired.

Back on the river the dredging operation found three sunken crafts at Port Maitland. The propeller Pittsburg (without the "h") and the barge Walton, had sunk and remained submerged. More exciting then the Pittsburg and the Walton was the finding of another vessel of between fifty and sixty feet in length, that was obstructing navigation in the river. When the stern was raised it rolled over and about thirty British cannon balls and part of a bayonet were fished out. That is another story, one which many of you are already familiar. It won't be told

today! However, I will tell you something I learned recently about this ship. I have read numerous accounts of it before, and all suggesting (by omission), that it was first discovered in 1904. I now suspect that this same ship was discovered by Dell Thompson in 1892 when bones, supposed to have belonged to a human being were found in it, as well as a couple of knives, a pistol and an auger. A hole had been bored in the bottom, proving the boat was scuttled

I started writing this article about the Belladonna and have now told you about four other ships, a lock at Port Maitland, -which by the way accidentally filled with water during the repairs operation, - the dredging of the Grand River, a load of bones, oh, and about Sunfish Creek's environmental past!

We know the Elmira remained visible until the dredging of 1904, when the dredge General Meade blew her up with dynamite removing any above water obstacles. At this time the wreck of the Elmira was described as lying east of the dock and will soon cease to be a landmark.

The Belladonna, was built in 1902 for Charles Ross as a river tour boat. I have learned that Charles, continued to own and operate the Belladonna until at least 1935. My old-timer friends tell me that during a flood in the 1930s the Belladonna broke loose from her moorings and settled on the embankment on the south side of Sunfish Creek where she simply decayed over the ensuing years. I am told that even today, there remains at that place, the carcass of a vessel. Some believe that this is the Belladonna!

Something else for you to think about. Did you know that the Edmond Fitzgerald sank west of Long Point and that a body was found at Port Maitland? This is true! In 1883, a wood schooner named Edmond Fitzgerald, sank in the shallows south of Port Rowan during a storm with loss of the complete crew. A yawl came ashore at Port Maitland and the body of a woman was found lying on the beach near it. The body was identified as that of Mrs. Sheriff's daughter, a cook on the schooner Edmond Fitzgerald.

My last and so far only two articles have dealt with boats, or ships, if you like. If I do anymore stories on this subject people are soon going to get the idea I know something about them. I don't. In my upcoming column which will be on July 12th I am going tell you about postcards of Port Maitland, of which there are considerable. Don't forget to let me know what you want me to write about and I look forward to seeing some new photographs. You can reach me at 905 549-6086.

Note to Chronicle if this was done as a two part story the above paragraph goes here and the date of the next article will read "August 9th" (Look at last paragraph for alternate date.) If it is done as one part story the above paragraph remains as it is. Please always end with my request for more story ideas, photos and my phone number.

C:\BILLADUNNVILLE CHRONICLE\Shipwrecks in Grand River and Near Port Maitland.wpd