

Escaping on a coffin: Remembering the sinking of the Mayflower

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Article content

Clutching the wheel with such a tight grip that his hands turned a pale white, Captain John Charles Hudson frantically shouted instructions to his crew.

In the dark, it was difficult to determine what was happening to his beloved ship. All he knew is that the paddle steamer was listing badly. The deck of the ship shuddered violently as the winds buffeted the sides of the hull. Hudson felt as if a force was pulling the vessel closer down underneath the waves.

He yelled to his wheelsman Aaron Parcher to sound the horn. The 47-year-old ship's master knew he had to get his passengers off the foundering boat. It would be a desperate escape because they left their only lifeboat back in port. The evacuation was to prove futile as most of those who had sailed aboard the Mayflower were doomed. Only a fortuitous quirk of fate spared three men from an icy grave.

At the time, the sinking of the sternwheeler Mayflower marked the worst inland maritime disaster in Canadian history at that time. Today, the ship's loss on Lake Kamaniskeg 100 years ago this month remains as a legendary part of Ottawa Valley history - Renfrew County's own "Titanic." Ironically, the Mayflower foundered almost seven months after the great White Star line went down off Newfoundland with over 1,500 souls on board.

Built in Combermere in 1903 by Napoleon Tessier, the Mayflower was a 77-foot long flat bottom vessel made of oak and pine. Powered by two steam engines which drove a single paddle wheel in her stern, the Mayflower was

designed to specially navigate shallower waters especially when hauling mined ore over the York and Madawaska rivers. The vessel also carried other consignments, such as processed foods, steel, cement and bushels of barley and grain.

The years of shipping had taken its toll on the vessel. During its final year in service, the Mayflower was no longer seaworthy. Government inspectors declined to renew the ship's certification. In 1911, the steamer suffered a terrible accident when her hull struck a sunken dead head log on the Madawaska River. Although she only partially sank, her operators managed to refloat the vessel. Given this convergence of factors, was the crew of the Mayflower tempting fate?

On the afternoon of Nov. 12, 1912, the Mayflower pulled into the docks at Combermere after completing its final trip of the season. With winter approaching, the ship would be in dry dock until the spring. Before Hudson and his crew could disembark, he was approached by a village councillor named William Boehme. As Hudson was also the reeve of Radcliffe Township, he knew Boehme well.

The gentleman implored the captain to make one more trip to Barry's Bay to pick up the body of his brother-in-law. The casket containing the remains of Herman Brown were arriving on the Grand Trunk Railway that evening. Brown had

died from an accidental gunshot wound while working in Saskatchewan. His family desired that he be buried near his home at Palmer Rapids before the snow flew.

Hudson knew such a venture would be risky. His ship was not equipped with running lights or travel at night. The Mayflower was also missing an essential piece of equipment - its lifeboat. Earlier in the day, a 28-foot pointer boat was dislodged from the deck and fell into the water. Although the crew managed to retrieve the water craft before it floated away, they chose to leave it tied to the dock. It would later prove to be a fatal decision.

The captain finally agreed to take on make the trip. That evening, the Mayflower pulled into Barry's Bay where Boehme was greeted by Robert Pachel, the relative who had accompanied Brown's body.

The crew agreed to take on more passengers seeking to avoid the long cross-country trek to Combermere. They included John Patrick O'Brien, the 60-year-old owner/operator of the O'Brien House, who was accompanied by guests William Murphy and John Imlach; 80-year-old Elizabeth McWhirter; and Gordon Peverly, George Bothwell and Joe Harper, three young businessmen from Ottawa.

The Mayflower departed Barry's Bay at 7 p.m. Travelling at a speed of five knots, Hudson expected to reach Combermere

in less than three hours. It was a cold night with the wind accelerating as the ship rounded the narrows leading into Lake Kamamiskeg. Sailing into open water, all the bridge crew could see ahead was a black void. On such a clear night, the stars were shining bright, however, cloud cover quickly extinguished their light. Then the snow began to fall.

Shortly after 9 p.m., the Mayflower suddenly began taking on water. Not knowing why his boat was sinking, Hudson ordered everyone on deck in preparation for abandoning ship. The coal oil lamps then extinguished leaving the panicked souls in the dark. Historians theorize that had the captain had more time he may have attempted to beach the boat. When the Mayflower ran into trouble, she was only 600 feet from the lake's north shore.

On the deck, Hudson handed out the only three life jackets on board. It is said that Elizabeth McWhirter refused to take one expressing her desire to see a young person survive the ordeal. The captain then ordered that the casket bearing Herman Brown's body be thrown overboard. Then he ran down towards the engine room where engineer Tom Delaney was still at his post. With the ship keeling over, the passengers either jumped or were washed aboard by the high waves which crashed against the hull.

In less than a minute, the Mayflower plunged to the bottom of Lake Kamamiskeg. Those who jumped into the icy water

watched in astonishment as the waves closed over the roof of the bridge and her single smokestack. Thrashing about in the water, Peverly, Harper and Imlach, quickly came to their senses. Then one of them spotted the floating coffin.

It was a macabre sight but it soon dawned on them that it was their potential salvation. Climbing board the wooden casket, the trio was soon joined by O'Brien, who was in bad shape. It is believed the only other person to make it off the Mayflower may have been Aaron Parcher, who might have tried to swim for the north shore but drowned in the attempt.

Shivering and disoriented, the survivors of the Mayflower clung to the coffin as they paddled their way to the only visible land mass they could see through the blinding snow. In a couple of hours, the coffin came to rest on the shores of Gull Island. By that point, sadly, John O'Brien had succumbed to hypothermia.

At daybreak, the three men built a fire using wreckage that had washed ashore. It was still frigid but at least the sun was up.

In Combermere, folks became worried when the Mayflower failed to arrive. The deteriorating prevented most search parties from setting out for the lake until midday. On the evening of Nov. 13, the steamship Ruby was passing Gull Island when they spotted the three survivors and rescued

them.

Over the next few days, authorities began the gruelling search for the nine missing passengers and crew although no one held out hope any more survivors would be found. When searchers located the wreck itself, Hudson's body was found close by. Eventually all the victims were recovered and taken to Combermere. The news of the sinking shocked the county.

"A thrill of horror at the cruel fate, and compassion for the victims, spread with rapidity from human heart to heart yesterday evening as the news spread that the steamer Mayflower had sunk in the waters of Barry's Bay and it was feared all on board were drowned," so wrote the Eganville Leader. "The worst fears were not confirmed as three survivors were discovered in a pitiable condition after fifteen hours' exposure to the winds on a bleak November night. Who can describe their agony of mind and soul torture as they clung tenaciously, in a death struggle, to a gruesome buoy - a casket containing a corpse - and were floated to shore."

The story of the survivors using the casket became a major part of the lore that surrounded the Mayflower and was featured famously by Ripley's Believe It or Not. Why she sank that night remains a mystery to this day. The commission investigating the disaster, headed by Ontario

justice R.A. Pringle, cited alterations that Hudson made to the vessel as partly to blame for the sinking. Weather and the placement of cargo may have also contributed to the mishap.

Last week, the communities of Barry's Bay and Combermere marked the 100th anniversary of the sinking unveiling two new plaques - one at the Barry's Bay wharf which told the story of that last incredible voyage and a plaque at the Combermere dock which paid tribute to the passengers and crew, as well as Herman Brown. Later, a single wreath was dropped in Lake Kamaniskeg marking the spot where the Mayflower met its tragic end a century ago.

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