SHIPWRECKED on SABLE ISLAND

Janet Carnocham

1879

Edited by John L. Field

Niagara Historical Society

Pamphlet No. 44

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PRESIDENT'S INTRODUCTION

The Niagara Historical Society is proud to sponsor this addition to our well-known series of publications. Our last pamphlet, No 43, "Records of Niagara, 1812", was compiled by General E. A. Cruikshank in 1934. Then followed a barren period of fifty-two years, happily broken this year by Janet Carnochan's account for her adventure of Sable Island.

One may wonder why Miss Carnochan did not arrange to publish the story as one of the N.H.S pamphlets during her lifetime. Perhaps she did not think the subject relevant for a society dedicate to preserving the history of the Niagara area. More likely her innate modesty may have made her feel that the story was personal rather than historical. Whatever the reason, we have fortunate that she left behind a record of that shipwreck and that it has come into our possession.

We are grateful to Mrs. Della Carnochan, who discovered the manuscript, had the thoughtfulness to inform us, and then generously donated it to the society. John Field, who has been for many years an enthusiastic supporter of the Niagara Historical Society and its ideals, spent many weeks patiently editing Janet Carnochan's manuscript. His work continues the excellent research and writing which the society maintained in its earlier years. He follows in the wake of many local contributors who were inspired by the example set by Janet Carnochan.

It is especially appropriate to resume our series of publications with this latest pamphlet. Not only is it a true adventure that happened a century ago in a little-known corner of Canada, but it is a new story told by our founding president herself.

(Mrs.) Nancy Butler

EDITOR'S PREFACE

My first acquaintance with this shipwreck story began with a phone call from Mrs. Della Carnochan in April 1981. She told me that among her late husband's papers there was an 1879 manuscript written by his great-aunt, Janet Carnochan, when she was not quite forty years old. Among other things it included two accounts of that disaster, one of 25 pages, the other 48. She thought I would be interested in reading it.

When I had done that, I realized that here was a fine piece of first-person reporting, high in human interest, told with considerable detail and feeling, about which only the bare facts were already known to me. Della and I agreed that the manuscript must be preserved; she kindly donated it to the Niagara Historical Society, and it was placed in the vault of our museum.

At that time it occurred to me that the story of this adventure was worthy of being published in some form. Other events intervened, however, and it was not until the early months of 1986 that Mrs. Nancy Butler, president of our society, gave me her approval to undertake the project. We concluded that the 25-page version was the more suitable, for it was a length that would make a reasonable N.H.S.

pamphlet. With the aid of a grant from the Ontario Ministry of Culture and Citizenship, this has now been accomplished.

Through Miss Carnochan's angular script is not hard to read, the editing was much more than a matter of a copy-typing. First the ponderous Victorian paragraphs were divided up, and some of the sentences were shortened or simplified for easier reading. Then the story was divided into nine episodes, with a sub-title for each. The two on the history and geography of Sable Island were moved back from the end of the manuscript, so that the rescue of the castaways would provide a more dramatic ending. Finally the account of the week's sojourn on the island was rearranged into chronological order, for it was obvious that she had not written it in a day-by-day sequence. In all this I took care not to interfere with Janet's charming style of narration, nor did I feel it proper to alter her spelling of such words as "wagon" and "honor" or the capitalization of "Island".

Though Miss Carnochan did not state where she actually committed the story to paper, or some of it was likely done on Sable Island, and the rest aboard the *Hibernian.* It was published in 1882 as a two-part story by the *Methodist Magazine,* and as far as we know this was her first appearance in print. The United Church Archives kindly supplied a photocopy of that version for comparison with our edition. The story has also been presented in serial form in the *Niagara Advance* during this present summer, by arrangement with the Niagara Historical Society.

This adventure may also have provided material for one of Miss Carnochan's speeches, for she was in frequent demand to address groups in this area. The only occasion we are sure of, however, occurred on April 26, 1919, when she spoke to the Ladies' Literary Club of St. Catharines on the subject "Sable Island", which included the story of the shipwreck.

By that time, Janet Carnochan had made her mark on Niagara as a well-respected teacher and local historian. She served as president of our historical society for its first 30 years, and when she retired from teaching in 1900, poured her energies into the campaign to build its museum. She died in 1926, nearly 87 years old, having led a most active and productive life.

The publication of "Shipwrecked on Sable Island" has been made possible through the co-operation of various people: Mrs. Della Carnochan, who donated the manuscript to our society; Mrs. Nancy Butler, who, with the executive of that organization, promoted its publication; and the Ontario Ministry of Culture and Citizenship, which provided a grant for half the cost of printing.

One question still troubles me: Could Janet Carnochan swim? If she could not, then we must be thankful she got into the first lifeboat instead of the second. For the clue to that comment you must read the story for yourself.

John L. Field

July 1986

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1. THE SHIPWRECK

Steamer "*State of Virginia", July 12th, 1879* – At sea at last! The object of my ambition for years is at length attained. We are on the broad Atlantic, out of sight of land. Although trying to jot down a few ideas on my new surroundings, I by no means intend to keep a journal: with the warning example of one of Mark Twain's "Innocents" before me, I refrain. No decidedly I shall not keep a diary, but shall for my own amusement (if I feel thereto inclined) at intervals as delightfully irregular as I like. describe any of the new sights or sensations that await me. There are to me, unlike Solomon, many new things under the sun, for I have never seen the sea, nor an ocean steamer, nor any of the monsters of the deep. In this microcosm, an ocean steamer, life puts on new aspects, for each has left behind his own little world, the circle in which he revolved, whether it be home, political, religious, or business, performing his part as idle looker-on or busy workman.

Now for ten days in this little autocracy we shall be utter strangers to the whirl of business, fashion, or dissipation; to the monotonous round of dirty, of busy household cares, or quiet greenery of country retreat. There will be no formal calls to pay, or to receive; we are at once in a new orbit, and find ourselves after a little adjustment quietly accepting the new situation.

As we left behind the hot and dusty city of New York we found ourselves breathing a different atmosphere and enjoying long inhalations of health-giving salt sea air. Many old travelers declared they had never started on a sea voyage under more favourable auspices.

Sable Island, July 16th – By this time we expected to be nearer the old worls that the new, but here we are, on our own side of the Atlantic, and (as someone has just said) a hundred miles from anywhere. Little did we think that our trip would afford an opportunity of exploring this barren island! It seems strange that while others have made some twenty or thirty trips without accident, my first should yield this adventure. We no longer associate the idea of danger with crossing the Atlantic, and I expected nothing more eventful to record than the sighting of such chance callers as our present element affords, and that at a respectful distance. But now we have made closer acquaintance with this *terra incognita* we have something really important to record, and also what one does not always have at command, an abundant time for that purpose.

Let me recall what has happened, the amusing and strange, and sad and terrible scenes witnessed in these last few days. On my first night at sea I established the points

of the compass with the aid of the North Star, watching Venus slowly sinking into the sea and Jupiter rising, appearing almost as large and brilliant, and recognized Cassiopeia and the other constellations in their regular positions. The next afternoon I was more interested in watching the peculiar tumbling head-over-heels movement of a shoal of porpoises than the spouting of a whale at short distance, and the black fins of several sharks still nearer.

Our log so far was satisfactory – 297 and 289 miles in the two days at sea – but it was destined to meet with a sudden check. All Friday night the fog whistle blew at short intervals, and the next day the thick grey mist seemed to envelop us like a shroud. So far the sea had been almost as calm as our own blue Lake Ontario when at rest. The only danger we feared was collision with another steamer, but with as close a watch as ours, and the incessant fog signals, an accident did not seem possible. An inspection of the day's record. However, showed the somewhat ominous words "*not accurate"* following the latitude and longitude, since the fog had of course prevented any correct observation at noon.

In the evening, as everything on deck was damp, we went to the saloon instead of staying in the open air. While everything above was gloomy enough, below all was bright and cheerful. Several hymns had been sung, preparing for the service the next day, "Rock of Ages", "Nearer, My God to Thee" and others, when suddenly we felt a slight jar, then another, but not violent enough to move a chair, and all rushed on deck.

A woman, a perfect stranger to me, rushed up and seized my arm frantically. Such a look of terror I never before saw on any countenance, the features fixed, the eyes glassy, the voice almost inarticulate, as she asked, "Is the ship sinking? Are we all going to the bottom?"

Of course I could give no information, but obtained a little from a gentlemen standing near, who said "We have run ashore; the ship is not moving, and where we are God only knows!" As the engine was still working, though reversed I had not noticed that we were still stationary, and fancied from the running about of men with ropes and chains, that we had run down some small vessel and that these efforts were intended to save the lives of those in the water.

Where are we? was the next question. It had been supposed that we were twenty-five miles from Sable Island, but it was now concluded that we must be on sandy shoals of that spot so dreaded by the mariner. On sounding it was found that we were in eighteen feet of water, though our ship drew twenty-two. Anchors were put out, and the crew worked incessantly at what proved to be vain efforts to haul her off.

The passengers as a whole were remarkably quiet and calm, but this perhaps arose as much from ignorance of the danger as any special courage possessed us. To me it seemed almost impossible to think of disaster: our ship was apparently uninjured, the night was calm, and surely our voyage was not over. The captain's hope was that we might float off at the rising tide of midnight.

Shortly before that time, however, occurred the most alarming moment of any up to that point. We heard grinding, crushing, grating noise such as one might suppose would arise from striking on rocks. Our knowledge of the sandy bottom all around did not prevent a strong feeling of alarm – alarm not without some shadow of reason, for it was found that this peculiar sound was caused by the breaking of the rudder chain. Though our ship had struck the sandbar bow on, it had been gradually swinging round till her stern also struck hard. This was a new phase of our disaster; besides being imprisoned, we were now crippled. All efforts for the present were accordingly abandoned till the next tide, when the cargo was to be thrown over-board to lighten the ship.

2. PREPARING TO LAND

What a night was that! Many sat on deck, becoming quite wet from the fog, since the awnings had been taken down. Some lay on the lounges in the saloon; others were packing up valuables they hoped to save, and not many retired to their berths. What strange sounds rocked us to sleep, the indescribably alarming noise of the straining, creaking, and grinding of the timbers. The roar of the surf, the lapping of the water on the sides of our poor ship all formed a not very soothing lullaby. I managed only one hour's sleep, from four o'clock to five. When the most persistently wakeful generally yield. I was unconscious of the evils past, present, or to come.

And what a waking! All the events of the night before seemed but a hideous dream. When day dawned, or rather should have been done so, nothing was yet to be seen of our surroundings. We took breakfast with what appetite we might, then went on deck. During a momentary lifting of the fog shortly after, cannons were fired as a signal of distress. We made out a lighthouse looming through the mist, and then a low sandy shore at a distance of apparently half a mile.

The sight was inspiring but the captain no doubt thought his passengers' exclamations of delight misplaced, for what could that shore or its people do to set free his imprisoned ship? When the fog which again had fallen, next lifted, we saw on the shores horses, men, a wagon, and boats. The peculiar atmosphere created a wonderfully deceptive appearance: everything was of colossal size, the men giants, the horses larger than elephants, the wagon some immense structure like a bridge in the air.

Shortly after we watched with anxiety one of the ship's boats making a landing through the surf. Dangerous as it appeared, this was done without accident, and likewise the return. Soon there came a lifeboat, from the Island, with message to land the passengers at once as the surf was constantly becoming worse.

But one last effort was yet to be made for the relief of our ship. The crew now commenced to throw the cargo overboard. We had on board a number of cattle, and these were the first to go. This line of steamers had not for long time carried cattle, but it happened fortunately after all for what some had feared might prove disagreeable fellow=passengers were utilized later in providing our dinners. The temporary partition hiding them was taken down, then the poor animals were dragged and pushed and hauled (for they resisted strongly) to the side of the steamer, and shoved over.

As the heavy splash of one after another was heard, they swam round looking up in our faces with large mournful eyes of dumb entreaty, as if we who were so helpless ourselves could save them. Although the same fate might soon be our own, we all forgot our own danger in pity

for these dumb creatures. An unsuccessful attempt was made with a ship's boat to lead them to the shore, but they seemed to wish to keep near us. However, when they had been for hours in the water, after apparently consulting in groups with a low crooning noise, they finally startled for the shore, which over seventy out of a hundred reached. Their gallant struggle for life in the case of some was only rewarded by their slaughter to supply the wants of hungry travellers.

Meanwhile the lifeboat waited, while the general cargo of cheese, flour, meal, etc. was also being thrown overboard. At length the word was given to send on shore the women and children. So far there had been little confusion or uncomfortable fright, with only two exceptions. One poor man, suffering from sunstroke, had become so violent as to require confinement. One woman had that morning gone up to the captain, berating him in no measured terms, "And sure what do you mean by leaving us standing here in the middle of the sea? Why don't you get away from this place like any other captain, and not be staying here!"

We people are strange beings. Even at such times we criticize one another's conduct. There rises now in my mind's eye the picture of one, and not of the weaker' sex, hastening hither and thither, asking the identical question he had asked the moment before, then rushing off to tell what he had heard, taking up the time, where they would give it, of officers and crew – and this repeated *ad infinitum.*

On what slender threads or our destinies hang! I was advised to go with the first oat, but had decided to wait for the second. When again urged to go at once, I hesitated a moment, then said, "Very well, I will do as you say," and went down the ladder into the lifeboat. So far O had no fear of actual loss of life, for our ship was not yet leaking, and in the absence of storm was quite safe. We were well provided with boats, there being eight and we had already seen one go to shore and return in safety. Though the surf looked dangerous enough, I who knew nothing of its treacherous strength was the first to step into the lifeboat. We were assisted by the fourth officer, a fine young Scotchman whose cheerful face and pleasant smile we have not yet forgotten.

Descending into a lifeboat is not the most pleasant maneuver which one might make, nor the most graceful. As sometimes happens, if the person hanging thus between the deck above and the boat beneath does not drop at the right moment, but hangs clinging wildly as the ship swings back over the water, neither is it the most safe. How we remember little things that happen at such moments! When I had taken my seat I felt something touch my shoulder, and turning found it was my valise. This was kindly lowered by the stranger who had the moment before advised my going by the first boat. He had in fact accompanied me to my room for that valise, and he had asked, "Have you your brushed and other accessories of civilized

life?" This reminded me of that many articles were lying round which afterwards proved useful, and but for his kind forethought they would have been left behind.

After ten ladies and two children had taken their places, the steersman, who seemed to be in command, said, "I will do my best to take you all ashore, but it looks bad." Then the first idea that our lives were in danger dawned on me. The calm courage of this steersman I much admired as he stood giving orders. Just before staring someone on the steamer called to one of the rowers to come on board to show them the way round the island to the smooth shore. I can yet hear the tone of quiet command, with a touch of scorn, of the steersman. "Keep your place! You are under my orders; do not dare to leave this boat," and then in a lower tone to himself, "The idea of asking such a thing when I have only five men."

3. DEATH IN THE SURF

As our boat started away and went steadily on to the point of danger, I do not remember a word was spoken by anyone. The surf rolled in three rows of breakers, now in a hurried rush and again more slowly; here would appear a break, a calm area intervening, but the next moment that would become the most dangerous spot of any. The men on shore were making signs where to land; twice we backed water and waited for a more favourable moment.

Now our steersman showed he could take advice as well as command. "Boys, what do you think, shall we try it now or wait?" After a moment, "Try it now" was the answer. "Go on, then, in the name of God," this not with the careless, almost profane tone accompanying the words, but in a serious reverent tone, as of a prayer. The next words were, "Put on life-preservers." None had been served out from the steamer and there were only five belonging to the lifeboat. While I was hesitating to pick up the one at my feet, someone more ready seized it, and that chance was lost.

Now came the one supreme moment of danger. What the thoughts of others were I know not; my own would be difficult to tell as we tossed about. The world of home was left behind, and perhaps in a moment we might be ushered into the other world. What might those distant friends think of our fate? As one wave washed partly over us I bowed my head. How it was I cannot say, but in a moment we were carried triumphantly on over the top of an enormous wave and found our boat on shore, the men there rushing out into the water to their waists to carry us to try land and draw up the boat.

Even at that moment of gratitude to God for our deliverance came the incongruous thought, bringing a smile to my face, that the poor fellow who carried me must have been disagreeably astonished at my weight. Besides the before-mentioned rather heavy valise in my

hand, I had on two dresses, an ulster, and a shawl given into my hand at the last moment by someone.

We were met by the superintendent of the island, a fine stalwart-looking open-hearted man who offered his hand, assuring us that we had a narrow escape. We sat down on a little hillock of sand. At once innumerable birds began flying wildly about our heads, flapping their wings, uttering peculiar sounds of defiance and fear or astonishment at such an invasion of their domains. We soon saw the reason: the ground around us was one vast succession of nests. We could hardly stretch our hands without touching their eggs or the young birds, little downy things, some just hatched out, others hopping about, the nests many of them unprotected. No wonder the mother birds flew so pugnaciously at our heads.

We now watched the lifeboat leave for another load, and after some delay it started from the ship. The surf was now worse, and the boat overloaded, so that only two oars were in use. They came on slowly, hesitating as it were on the edge of the surf, then tossing about helplessly. While we gazed with bated breath, we saw the boat with its living cargo, one moment in the top of an immense wave, the next moment hurled *end over end,* and all its passengers struggling in the water. The horror of that moment cannot be forgotten, to see the people falling out and black specks tossing about, and to know that these were our late companions and that we had just escaped so dreadful a fate. Some of our party ran wildly about, others knelt in a silent prayer. I can even now hear the voice of one shrieking, “Oh God, save them!”

Next we saw the lifeboat bottom upwards, a few men clinging to it and dragging up others. To my surprise (for I did not know such was the nature of a lifeboat) it righted itself and all were again in the water struggling for safety. The only part of all that terrible scene that I cannot clearly recall is how they ever reached the shore, but the boat was washed up by the force of waves. I remember seeing sharply outlined against the sky the figure of a man with an oar in his hand, standing in the boat trying to guide its course; then those on shore rushed into the water and carried the women out of reach of the waves.

Next, frightful sight! At my feet lay two dead bodies washed up, with the white foam on their lips. To think that these might have been our bodies, and that others might be thus gazing on us, but for God’s mercy. Besides the five islanders and the ship’s fourth officer, there had been in the boat eleven women and five children. Of those, only seven women and all the men had escaped; four women and all five children were drowned.

The first words heard were from the mother of a beautiful golden-haired girl, gasping almost inarticulately, “Oh, those cruel, cruel waves!” My Marie is gone.” Here was a poor girl with blood pouring from her mouth, as if a blood vessel had been broken; another with face

livid, it seemed darkening in death. What would we do for their relief? Little indeed, as such calamity had not been anticipated, no preparations had been made. We had no restoratives, no fire, nor change of clothing, and no house nearer than three miles. Three mothers, two of them widows, had each lost an only child. The wife and two boys of the poor man referred to before as having become so violent were all gone together into the mysteries of another world.

As soon as they were able, those who had escaped were sent away in the wagon. While the rest of us stayed on the shore. How anxiously we saw another attempt to land, made by two of the ship's boats full of gentlemen passengers. Their coming seemed to us madness, for almost certain death awaited them. In a lifeboat 35 feet long could thus stand on end, as it were, by the force of the surf. What hope for them? They expected to be met on the edge of the surf and transfer their load to the lifeboat, but as it was stove in this was impossible. While their fate seemed trembling in the balance, the sickening feeling of apprehension lest the scene of a few moments ago should be repeated cannot soon be forgotten. Some of our party ran wildly about, shrieking, "Go back, go back!" but the wild waves suffered no voice to be heard but their own hoarse roar. To our relief they all returned to the steamer.

Meanwhile rain was falling and a fire was lit. I noticed the slight frame and sickly appearance of our steersman, who seemed to feel bitterly the loss of life which had occurrred. The wagon now returned, and almost unwillingly we drove away to shelter, not knowing what might be the fare of those still on our poor old ship. Our conveyance was a strong heavy structure with wide-rimmed wheels, drawn by three heavy-built horses. These were the Sable Island horses with no strange a history. To our astonishment our conveyance drove directly into the water, not the sea but a salt-water lake in the middle of the island, whose water was only a foot deep. At least, after riding about three miles to the east, there appeared on a slight eminence a long low wooden dwelling was extended to us, and to our relief we found that all the injured were doing well.

4. SETTLING IN

How differently is sorrow met, and what contrasts of character does it reveal! Here were three mothers, now childless, one calm and resigned, another frantic and raving. But I draw a veil over such grief. All the ladies, about twenty in number, were taken into the superintendent's house. What a night of anxiety was that, with the various possibilities that might arise coming before our imaginations like the shifting views of a kaleidoscope. Here were wives anxious for their husband's safety, and on board must be those who, having witnessed the upsetting of the lifeboat, were yet in uncertainty as to whether their loves ones were saved or lost. In the grey mist of the next morning one poor wife, reproaching us with our apparent indifference, even insisted on starting to walk round to the other shore, a distance of seven miles.

However, news soon arrived that a boat had gone out to the steamer and found on board one man alone who was engaged in constructing a raft to reach the shore. Eight boats had left early in the morning to row round the Island to the smooth water on the north side. When they arrived about noon, almost the whole population of the Island went down to greet the newcomers. They had first landed three miles away and then had re-embark, since there were no facilities for managing the laborious task of hauling up such heavy boats through the sand. They presented, to say the least, a novel spectacle: crew and passengers appeared almost to a man with boots off and legs bare to the knee, many of them wet to the waist. Added to this, some carried blankets, life preservers, and a heterogeneous collection of valuables.

In the first boat, the captain's, was his daughter. The poor girl was quite worn out, having been the only lady on board all night, since she preferred to stay with her father. The meeting can be fancied of those who till now had been fearing the worst. We learned that the night before all had left the ship, except the first officer and one passenger, a U.S. naval officer. Fortunate indeed it was that they remained, as by their sounding the fog whistle boats which lost their way were enabled to return. Some actually sat in the boats all night rather than go on board When all had landed by two o'clock, a cup of tea with bread and butter was found most acceptable by the weary travellers. It was learned that there was an abundant supply of provisions on the island, augmented by much of our cargo that had washed ashore.

The afternoon was spent in equipping a crew for one of the ship's boats to proceed to Halifax, over a hundred miles distant. This was now our only hope of making our situation known, for there was no submarine cable to the mainland. Since the unenviable reputation of the Island caused all seamen to give it a wide berth, we had the delightful prospect of spending our summer holidays here, as the Government steamer was not expected for two months.

There were plenty of volunteers for the relief party. The purser and the third officer, a skillful seaman, were put in command of a picked crew, and furnished with a chart of the Island and its surrounding waters. It was eight at night in a thick fog before they started.

The allotting of the different divisions of passengers and crew made me think of billeting soldiers. The ladies were in the governor's house, some fortunate enough to have beds, others on the floor. The gentlemen were accommodated in two large boathouses, the sailors in what was already appropriately called the Sailors' Home, where they cooked for themselves. As the passengers who came last brought blankets, and plenty of hay was available on the Island, far less comfortable quarters might have been ours.

On Monday afternoon some of our party took the task of performing the last sad offices for the two bodies washed ashore. What feelings were theirs! The thought of the homes of those unknown women whose friends so little dreamed that stranger hands were now so

occupied with their loves ones, could not be banished. They were buried quietly, no one being told, probably to prevent the excitement which might ensue some among those whose dead lay in the sand somewhere or tossed among the restless waves. It was pitiful to see wandering about the poor man already spoken of, ceaselessly moving round asking in monotone anyone he met, “Where is my wife? Did you see my wife?” and often not waiting for an answer. Again he spread out to dry the contents of his trunk, packed no doubt with wifely care, and now to him so useless, for “nor wife nor child has he”.

A few words as to my own personal disasters and good fortune. When the gentlemen came ashore on Monday, a few trunks were brought. Among them mine left the ship but had an adventurous experience before reaching me. After re-embarking, whether from accident or design, it either fell or was thrown into the water. On becoming aware of my loss, I tried to receive the news with equanimity; in view of such heavy and bitter loss as some had sustained, such things as trunks seemed of secondary importance.

That night I was furnished with a new subject for reflection: should I go on to my destination if we got away in any reasonable time, with literally no more than Miss Flora McFlimsey and her “nothing to wear” complaint? I considered the problem, pro and con, always with a strong leaning to the affirmative, and that carried the day. I determined to go ahead.

The next day, having heard that my trunk had washed up on shore and was lying at the lighthouse, we walked almost there for tidings of it. On opening the trunk (the lock had to be broken) the wet, swollen, unwholesome-looking mass may be imagined. So utterly other person’s property. The condition of ribbons, lace, linen, feathers, and stationery, all lying wet for two days, the damage to each item need not to be told.

Peculiar associations must ever cling to two or three books. At the moment we struck I was reading Maury’s “Physical Geography of the Sea”, and was enjoying the clear and beautiful description of this great and wide sea, just when it seemed as if I was shortly to make a closer acquaintance with its depths, and without his help. A new Green’s “Short History of the English People”, taken for perusal on shipboard, now serves as a relic of our adventure, its appearance far from new, cover loose and leaves soiled. The July number of “Scribner’s” was swollen to thrice its size; the article describing the wordly, ambitious, unfeeling, utterly unwomanly Madame Bonaparte has three beautiful faces much defaced by salt water and sand.

Of one thing I am glad to bear witness in this age of flimsy work; it is refreshing to be able to acknowledge the honesty of that trunk-maker and the soundness alike of his principles and his hinges. Various pangs of conscience were felt when I remembered the neglected hint to have it corded, and thought of those people who never take good advice. I pictured it lying on

the shore with contents scattered on the sand and in the sea. But this turned out to be purely imaginary, for not only did the modern trunk stand railway banging, steamboat pounding, and Sable Island surf, but reached home, its glitter no doubt gone and minus inside divisions, but still whole, and (it must be confessed) ignominiously bound round with a Sable Island rope, no doubt from Her Majesty's stores.

5. STILL WAITING

Tuesday proved too rough to go through the surf to the steamer, but on Wednesday four boats started to bring the baggage ashore. Great anxiety was felt all day, for it seemed wrong that lives be risked for mere property, however valuable. Many passengers stayed up until midnight when the last boat returned, directed where to land by foghorn, a bell ringing, and a light on the shore.

On Thursday morning a public meeting was held in the large boathouse. Three motions were carried, the first of condolence with the caption, the second of thanks to the Canadian government and people of the Island, the last to take up a subscription to reward those who had risked their lives for the baggage. The address read as follows:

Sable Island, July 17th, 1879

Whereas – We are unfortunately detained on Sable Island . . . the protection afforded by the Dominion of Canada. We take the greater pleasure in doing so, as but two of our numbers are subjects of that government. Without the provision thus made, the trials of our situation would have been much increased, if indeed they could have been borne. To the Superintendent of the Island, Duncan MacDonald, his wife, and the faithful men who risked their lives to save some of ours, and who have done all that we could desire and more than we could expect for our comfort, we express the feelings that are in our hearts towards them of warmest gratitude and personal regard. We feel deeply the debt that we owe to them, a debt because of their sacrifice of ease and comfort in our behalf which we can never repay. We would commend the Government of Canada for its selection of a man to take charge of the affairs of this Island, where there is so much danger to those who follow the sea, so eminently fitted by his largeness of heart for the position that he occupies."

(Signed) etc.

The second address, to the Managers of State Line and Captain Moodie, closed with these words: "Resolved that we must devoutly thank God by whose goodness we have been spared thus far, and that we trust Him for further deliverance." It was regretted by many of us that no open-air thanksgiving service was held, which could have been attended alike by

passengers, sailors, and Islanders. It is true that a short service in the parlour was held on the same evening, but of course it could necessarily be attended by but few.

Friday. This suspense was the hardest thing we had to bear. If we knew that in two days, two weeks, or even two months relief would come, we might have settled down to some regular way of spending the time, but so far some have been busy enough. Our hosts were kid and hospitable, doing everything possible for our comfort, but the prospects before us were not particularly bright, though after such an escape gratitude is, to say the least, becoming.

But what must be the worry of our hostess at our lengthened stay? Fancy having one's house thus taken possession of; Mrs. McDonald must sometimes have doubted if she or we owned it, but all this she bore with the greatest good nature. The kitchen for days was hung round with wet clothes drying, and the lines outside.

Since no dishes had been brought from the ship, we had to depend on the supply in the house. Think of giving up one's best china to horde of vandals such as we were! As only a dozen could be served at one time, and all the passengers and ship's officers had their meals in the house, two hours was required for each meal, but not from the protracted length of numerous courses. After the first two days the stewards and cooks waited on us as usual, thus relieving those in the house of that care and responsibility. Not all the shipwrecked fared as well, four our meals consisted of bread, beef, potatoes, beef soup, tea, coffee, cheese, and seabiscuit.

On no previous occasion could the Island boast of so many inhabitants, since no passenger steamer had been wrecked here before. We number in all one hundred and fifty. Respecting the actual loss of life, various opinions are flying about on the air. The ship's people accept no blame, as the loss occurred on an Island boat manned by Islanders. On their part the latter say that there would have been no lives lost had the directions to land at once been followed.

By Friday some of us began to feel discouraged, in fact blue, having secretly been hoping to hear from our relief party. However, to make up for our disappointment the sun for the first time shone out in full force. The climate so far had seemed not very delightful, an alternation of rain and fog, but now we saw this dispelled by bright sunshine. We scattered in all directions, some climbing the dunes, others wandering along the shore. At first we gathered strawberries, which were abundant, small but sweet, then we watched the seals in their hundreds. In the evening we went to view the remains of the "**F**rench gardens", made about 300 years ago by those unfortunate convicts whom we shall speak of.

6. THE STORY OF SABLE ISLAND

The first mention we find of the Island is in 1518 when the Baron de Lery left cattle there. When Canada was at first a French colony, we read that King Henry IV sent out the Marquis de la Roche in 1598 to make a settlement in Acadie. He left our part of his colony, fifty convicts from French prisons, at our island, intending to call for them when he had selected a suitable spot on the mainland, but he sailed back to France without doing so, as a violent storm came on. Fancy the condition of those men, left to their own devices for seven years! But they profited by the misfortunes of others; from a French ship, wrecked there soon after, they obtained provisions and torn timbers for huts.

The King, hearing of the matter, sent La Roche's pilot, by name Chetodel, to bring them home, but he, cunning man, said not a word to them of this, but drove a shrewd and hard bargain. Finding them, by then reduced to only twelve in number, dressed in the skins of seals they had killed, he agreed to take them home on condition of delivering up their whole store of furs thus collected. This they gladly did, but when the fraud was discovered on reaching France, a lawsuit resulted; as the story goes, they obtained sufficient to set them up in business, which reads like a chapter in modern days of law court damage.

The next reference brings up the explorers of Elizabeth's time, the courtly Raleigh and his brother-in-law Sir Humphrey Gilbert, that Christian navigator who, before his vessel went down in 1583, encouraged his men with the words, "We are as near heaven by sea as by land." Before his own tragic end Gilbert had seen one of his ships, the *Delight,* strike in a fog on the northeast bar of Sable Island, when nearly all of the 100 men on board perished.

A large French expedition of sixty vessels, among them eleven ships of the lines, sailed in 1746 to attacked Annapolis and Boston, and to retake the fortress of Louisburg. A furious gale scattered the fleet; many vessels were wrecked on Sable Island, and only a few reached Halifax. The results were as tragical, for the admiral took the matter so much to heart that he fell down in a fit of apoplexy, and the vice-admiral threw himself on his sword and died.

In 1799 the Duke of Kent, father of Her present Majesty, lost all his military outfit, costing £ 10,000, as well as an extensive library, on the *Francis.* Strange to say, this was the seventh outfit the Duke had lost, either by wreck or capture by French cruisers.

In early times the Portuguese left cattle on the Island for the relief of mariners shipwrecked, but by the cupidity of men willing to risk their lives for profit they were again and again carried off. Governor Armstrong at Annapolis denounced this conduct, threatening severe penalties, but without effect. Ponies were landed from a wreck, and some say the horses on the Island are from these, others from those left in 1518.

The present establishment for the relief of wrecks was started in 1803 by the government of Nova Scotia, and in 1827 the British government undertook a certain share of the expense. A record of the wrecks for a short time will show how many lives have thus been saved. In one winter previous to that establishment being formed two hundred lives were lost, and in a few years forty wrecks took place. However, in a record book beside me there were listed thirty-four wrecks from 1885 to 1873, and only on one occasion was there any loss of life, though the landing was frequently made with a line.

In the chart of the Atlantic belonging to the first officer occurs a detailed description of the dangers of this neighborhood in terms plain enough to cause all seamen to give it a wide berth. A remarkable instance of a vessel braving the fury of the surf occurred in 1846 when the schooner *Arno* was driven towards the shore in a storm. The lashed to the ship with instructions to deal out the contents of two casks of oil; he himself was lashed to the helm. Seas were breaking all around, each one sufficient to smash the schooner to fragments, but the oil acted as a charm, making the surface perfectly smooth. The schooner at length struck the beach, but all hands were saved.

There are at present (1879) on the Island two lighthouses, one with a fixed, the other a revolving light 120 feet high. These are normally visible seventeen miles away, but as a matter of fact in fog they are not seen at all. There are six stations under the command of the Superintendent (in common parlance the “Governor”) with a population of twenty men and twenty-four women and children. The West Flagstaff stands on a hill with its Crowsnest or lookout one hundred feet above the sea. The men have a certain beat over which they must ride, so that the whole coast is visited every twenty-four hours. All the needful apparatus of life-saving force is kept on hand, such as surf-boats, rockets, and ropes.

We recommend that the reader consult the *New Canadian Enclycopedia* (1985), Vol. III, pages 1612-3, for the articles on “Sable Island” and “Sable Island Horses”, as a comparison with Janet Carnochan’s 1879 description.

7. THE ISLAND, ITS FLORA AND FAUNA

Sable Island – name of dread! What ominous thoughts and visions do those words summon up to the mariner! If those sands could tell all they have witnessed, all the brave men and good ships destroyed by that insatiable, what a record we should have, what a chapter of horrors.

I was much struck with the apparent ignorance among us on the subject. As the name implies, the island is merely a large sandbar, and is supposed to owe its origin to the meeting of the Gulf Stream and the Arctic Current, the debris being deposited from the melting icebergs and the sand thrown up. It is situated at 44 degrees North latitude, 60 degrees West longitude.

The accompanying sketch is copied from the chart of the island belonging to the Superintendent. *

This obstruction is located right on the former track vessel to Europe, but of late years such is the dread of this dangerous area that the sailing route has been changed. There are many constituents of this danger: the island lies very low, and its dull color is so like the sea on a dark day; the shoal water extends very far out at each end; the heavy swell, the mysterious and uncertain tides and currents sometimes drag a ship out of her course altogether, till the unwary seaman finds himself caught in the arms of this, as it were, Devil-fish, which gives up his prey only when it has been torn and dismantled.

The island is shaped like a bow, the south side convex, the north concave. The former is the more dangerous shore; a landing is almost impossible in an ordinary boat, though with surf-boats it may be safely done in fair weather. The extent of Sable Island from end to end is twenty-two miles, fifty including the bars, and it is one mile broad. In the centre is a salt-water lake nearly a mile wide and twelve miles long; in some places this is twelve feet deep, in others only one. During storms the sand is constantly shifting, scooped out in crater-like hollows and elsewhere uplifted into hills sometimes one hundred feet high, these later scattered to disclose their hideous prey.

It seems strange to think of anything growing here. In the bulky report of “Lighthouse & Sable Island”, however, it is mentioned that last year 146 tons of hay and 1000 bushels of potatoes were raised. Besides this, 200 barrels of cranberries were sent away; at seven dollars a barrel these last form a valuable item in the exports of so unpromising a spot. The experiment of raising trees has frequently been tried, but always failed; they reach a height of only two feet and then die. However, an immense pile of wreckage, masts, heavy

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*The sketch of the island which Miss Carnochan copied 1879 was apparently lost before her manuscript came into our hands. – Editor

timber and spars showed that plenty of fuel was to be had from the spoils of the sea.

Of course, where the gardens are so productive there is a mingling of earth with sand. At the spot shewn as the site of the old French gardens the soil seemed a dark loam, but ordinarily the sand is white, very coarse like quartz ground up. There are at one end of the island freshwater ponds, and it is a remarkable fact that by digging down a few feet below sea level fresh water may be procured at any spot; it is of a dark colour, almost brown, but sweet and good. What is now a salt-water lake was formerly an inlet having a narrow passage from the sea. It is said that two vessels were closed in there in 1836. Fish of various kinds are found in it.

On the seashore we saw hundreds, nay thousands, of seals. Curiosity seems to be a predominant trait with them, as they will follow people for miles, approaching very near the shore. They seemed clumsy-looking animals, but a nearer inspection presented them in a more pleasing aspect. The Captain captured one which he brought to the house for examination, its fin secured by a rope. It flopped along observing us as carefully as we it, gazing with soft, mournful, intelligent eyes. Its colour was a soft grey with brown spots.

We picked up on the shore, where hundreds were lying, a curious oblong brown case called by the sailors “Devil’s pocketbook” or “Mermaid’s purse”, with long twisting tendrils at each of the four corners. This proved to be the receptacle of the eggs of the dogfish, a sort of shark. The young fish make their way out, and in each case there was a lit at the end as if cut with a knife. The empty shell is then cast on the shore; the use of tendrils is to fasten it so seaweed to prevent injury to the young fish.

The gulls before-mentioned have favourite spots where hundreds of eggs were lying, some quite in the open, others sheltered by a coarse low weed with thick fleshy leaf. The shells were very brittle, as many of us found to our cost. All had large brown spots, apparently from the same species of gull.

There seems to be almost an entire absence of troublesome insects. There were fleas, but as some of our party said, they were not very enterprising. Altogether the most important inhabitants are the horses, of Norman type, some three hundred in number. They live out all winter, digging down with their hoofs for water; in severe winters many perish. They run wild, except for the few used by inhabitants and those shipped to the adjusting provinces. Though hardly, they are said to be lazy.

One use of the island has not yet been mentioned. It is utilized sometimes as an Inebriate Asylum by those who have unfortunate friends of this class. As no liquor is allowed and no opportunity to acquire it can generally occur for months, there is a good chance of having the madness cleared from brain and blood without the necessity of bolts, bars, enclosures, or physicians.

In the Superintendent’s house were the remnants of a library of old battered books, generally uninteresting. Here was an opportunity we neglected; it would only have been right and fitting for us to have left on the island something to show our appreciation of the kindness received. A library for the use of all would have relieved the tedium of many a dreary day in the future. Unfortunately the coming of our ship scattered every thought but that of escape, and we may number this among the great army of lost opportunities.

8. THE ROYAL NAVY TO THE RESCUE

Saturday proved also a clear day, and it brought us a friend in need. A steamer was sighted and great excitement prevailed as to whether or not it was coming to our relief. We climbed the Flagstaff Hill and all the opera glasses available were brought into use. As the vessel approached, our hopes rose higher; by noon it was evident that she was preparing to anchor about a mile out. All doubt was at an end when we saw in the small boat now coming to shore the sunburned face of the third officer who had gone five days ago in charge of the relief party. We found that this was the steamer *Glendon,* sent to convey us to Halifax.

Notwithstanding our delight, a feeling of sadness at parting with our island friend was strangely intermingled. The mothers whose children were yet lying in the sea felt as if they would fain remain to see their children dead decently buried. The surf even on this north side of the island was high. Who can wonder that those who had had so sad and dangerous a passage before should now shrink back with fear.

Bye eight o'clock, exactly seven days from the moment we struck, we were all on board the *Glendon,* under the command of Lieutenant Brown of the Royal Navy, who well sustained the reputation of that noble body. Since leaving New York we seem to have been breathing a Scotch atmosphere, the captain, officers, and nearly all the hands being of that nationality. It seems as if the McDonalds were ubiquitous, having as Premier of the Dominion Sir John Macdonald, another of the same name as Lieutenant Governor of Ontario. Now we also know Duncan McDonald, "Governor" of a smaller territory, it is true, but one requiring decision, watchfulness, daring, and administrative ability.

We found that our brave relief part had had a difficult task. They had reached land on Wednesday morning but dared not land in the fog till night. Then they had to walk some miles till they could hire a waggon – at a fabulous rate, they said – to the nearest railway station, and they did not reach Halifax till Thursday.

We really had much cause for thankfulness. The weather had been good enough for the relief boat to make its perilous trip to the mainland, and the *Glendon* reached Sable Island in twenty-four hours. Sometimes a week elapses before a landing can be made on the island, but we were all safely aboard the *Glendon* before dark. Had there been stormy weather *one week earlier,* it is not likely that any of us would have been saved, as the ship would quickly have gone to pieces right where she was aground.

Fortunately, Saturday remained clear and bright, and hope was in the ascendant. The *Glendon* conveyed us to Halifax as speedily as she had come. By all accounts she receives more kicks than praise, and though she proved a good Samaritan to us, yet she did pitch and toss and roll about in a most disagreeable fashion. "A very ugly roll," was the verdict of one; "A perfect

tub," from another. Many were seasick but again I was fortunate, my only trouble being the discomfort of being thrown about so unceremoniously.

Another strange Sunday on the water. Something different to one on land had been expected, but how different was our first to anything we could have imagined. How difficult to realize that at this hour our friends at home in Niagara are taking their seats as the sweet Sabbath bell calls them to their own quiet churches, and how little idea have they of *our* different surroundings.

As we watched the nearing land we congratulated ourselves that our entrance into the city would not have the publicity of open day. We felt grateful to the kindly obscurity which thus casting its charitable mantle over us, for we were truly a rather disreputable-looking collection of fagged out, dusty, in plain terms dirty individuals, with weary haggard faces. Indeed many did not care how they looked, having been seasick and feeling altogether too wretched to care for personal appearance. Then the peculiar effect of Sable Island sun and fog was evident in the faces of many: some were burned brown; others had red blistered noses, lips, and cheeks; still others displayed the appearance of erysipelas. The gentlemen, many of whom had not shaved for a week, presented the peculiar, indescribably wretched, unmitigatedly hard look that a week's neglect of the razor gives.

Cabs were waiting, and we were soon enjoying all the comfort that a first-class hotel can offer. Oh! the pleasure, after our experience, of having room to one's self, and water to wash with *ad libitum.* The perfect enjoyment of that bed and bath is something to remember. Commend me to a week's lying on the floor to make me appreciate the comfort of a soft bed! Commend me also to a week of such roughing it to make people forget their minor ailments. Our tourists numbered many invalids, but whether it was the result of the plain food, the sea air, or the excitement of a danger, the fact remains of the good health enjoyed by all, and the disappearance of their languid invalid air.

It was strange to notice at breakfast what a good night's rest and a bath had done for our tourists. Some were wonderfully improved; others, not so altered, looked rather incongruous in their different condition, as though their distressed appearance had been more in harmony with their former situation than with the comfort of Hotel Life. I went out in the morning to do some very necessary shopping; in the afternoon went for a walk and had a fine view from the Citadel of the harbor with several men-of-war at anchor.

On returning I found a pleasant proof of the thoughtfulness of my kind Ontario friends. A gentleman had called to offer me the hospitality of his house, since my friends in Niagara, anxious for my comfort, had telegraphed him. I spent a pleasant evening at the house of this

clerical gentlemen, a luminary of the Presbyterian church, whose kindly rubicund face I remember with pleasure.

In a pouring rain we again started Europe-ward. It was thought at first that many would return home rather than again tempt the danger of the deep, but more than half-a-dozen have thus drawn back. We set out certainly not so propitious a sky as before. May our voyage be more fortunate than that which was brought to so lame and impotent a conclusion on Sable Island! In the fine, almost landlocked harbor of St. John's, with commanding heights all around, we again saw several men-of-war, among them the *Kearsarge,* which sank the *Alabama* during the American Civil War.

Were it not for the sad loss of life we should really have no reason to regret our adventure. We might otherwise look at the matter from a humorous point of view. We were tourists looking for a convenient place of summer resort, and we certainly discovered one, the beauties of which were hitherto unknown, not worn, threadbare by description. Here was no vulgar clash of trade, no dust, no noisy street-boys, no locomotive whistle nor heavy waggon thundering on the stony street, no dissipation, no midnight dance, no street corners with their inevitable *gamins.* Instead, nature pure and simple, though certainly unadorned.

9. A TRIBUTE TO THE ISLANDERS

Steamer "Hibernian", July 24th, 1879 – Afloat once more! How thankful we were to be on the open sea, away from sandbanks and land of any kind. Reading on board had now lost all its charms. Just to sit and watch the sky and the sea, ever-changing yet always the same, monotonous yet full of infinite variety, seemed to be perfect enjoyment. While on my way to see the unknown Old World, I must try to record what I have been able to glean about Sable Island by personal observation or from other sources.

We were favourably impressed with the people of the Island. Though we were frequently among them during the week of our stay, not once was an oath or improper word heard. Many of the hands seemed to be intelligent, as well as both physically and morally well-developed. The Governor and his wife and family were kind large-hearted people, the men exceptionally honest and capable. They would accept absolutely nothing for services rendered. Of this one example which I witnessed may suffice. A lady offered to repay a man who had rescued some of her belongings, but he quietly refused any reward. The lady was addressed by Mr. McDonald, who came up just then. "Put up your purse, madam, they are allowed to take nothing in payment." We thought of our noble Islanders when in England, seeing the hand ever outstretched for the expected fee.

Not all our occupants of these seas have so high a sense of right as our Islanders. During one of the trips the Captain made to the wreck, a schooner was found anchored nearby. Its men were busily occupied in carrying away the piano, mirrors, and other cabin furniture, which they did in spite of the opposition offered. Canvas was nailed over the name of the vessel, but it was seen that she was from Gloucester, Massachusetts, so it seems that the old days of the wreckers have not expired.

Many of the Islanders' faces we still remember. The steersman of the lifeboat, poor fellow, lay for days ill, apparently suffering from diseased lungs. Those who went to see him could do nothing but pity him. As the unmarried men seemed to keep the house for themselves, the utter discomfort to an invalid of this way of living may be imagined. Another face distinctly remembered is that of one who rode on the waggon with us to the house. Though in rough coarse dress, his tine was one of education and refinement. Once he stopped the horses to gather a few flowers someone admired. The next day he strode up to the Governor, touching his hat with an almost courtly air. "May I speak to you a few moments, sir?" His was one of the last faces seen as the boats returned to the shore and he raised hi hat to our last farewells.

The description of the Islanders give of the autumn gales in something frightful. They find it impossible to sleep, the noise of the sea being continued thunder. From the Crowsnest can be seen a boiling line of breakers extending for many miles. Think what an isolated life these people lead! The present Superintendent has been there twelve years. Mrs. McDonald remarked to the clergyman that this was the first time on which they had had the presence of a minister of the gospel. No church service, no Sabbath bell, no Sunday School nor other school, no lectures nor stores, no theatre, circus, nor drinking houses; how much they lose and how much they gain.

A pressing want is a submarine cable to the mainland. If the condition of the island landing could be known at once, much delay could be avoided, and help could be procured at once in case of shipwreck. In our case the cargo could have been re-shipped and passengers transferred without delay.

In the lovely graveyard on Sable Island is an inscription to two young men, natives of Nova Scotia, who lost their lives in rescuing the crew and passengers of the *William Bennett.* These were all saved, including the captain's wife, sister, and infant, but at the sacrifice of these young lives. On the walls of the parlour hangs a very nicely-executed model of a Norwegian barque wrecked here last summer. It was done by one of the men and left as a remembrance of their rescue. The captain, his wife, and crew of seven or eight stayed six weeks before they were taken off by the Government steamer.

How little do we who live at home know of the dangers of the seas, and of the scenes of daring rescue going on at the many points of danger along our extensive coastline? How many lonely lighthouses are giving warning by the steady lamp so carefully kept burning by the solitary watcher? What daring is shown by those who launch the lifeboat, facing Death, not for the more pittance they receive, but at the call of Duty? All honor then to our noble life-saving establishments, all honor to the men and women of Sable Island.

In a letter lately received from Mrs. McDonald, occurs a touching reference, showing her kind heart, to the graves of our dead. "I have planted lilies on their graves which I keep in order, and often think of the sad fate of those beneath."

THE NIAGARA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

In 1895 this society was founded by a group of fifteen citizens. Under the presidency of Miss Janet Carnochan, a local high school teacher, it immediately embarked on an active program, holding regular meetings with speeches on the history of this area, publishing its pamphlets each year, placing historical markers, and collecting artifacts.

The outstanding achievement of the society's early days as undoubtedly the erection of the Memorial Hall on Castlereagh Street in 1907. This historical museum has been in continuous operation ever since, and is the oldest in Ontario. Following World War II the society acquired a two-room section of the old high school next door as an annex; in 1973, aided by a federal grant, a bridging section joined the two buildings.

Today the society still maintains its youthful vigour. In addition to the scheduled meetings, some social and fund-raising events are organized. The chief cost, that of operating its museum, is met in part by annual grants from provincial and municipal governments, but also by the voluntary work of many members of the society. Some assist in changing the exhibits; others act as guides for visiting groups that have booked a town tour; still others man the desk, collecting admissions and selling the N.H.S pamphlets, etc., to history buffs attracted to our museum.

The Niagara Historical Society has maintained an affiliation and close connection with its parent body, the Ontario Historical Society, since the early days of both organizations. The annual convention of the O.H.S was held here in Niagara-on-the-Lake in 1897, 1905 (with Niagara fall), 1921, and 1981, when the town celebrated its bicentennial.