



Elegant steamships
that graced the waters
of Lake Simcoe
frequently met
with a terrible end

under the waves

BY VALERIE PRING

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It was just a half an hour past midnight on Aug. 4, 1857. The residents of Barrie were sleeping. The heat from the scorching summer warmed the lake and a moderate wind churned the water, causing constant northward waves. Attached with thick ropes to Barrie's wharf, the *Joseph C. Morrison* — a 46-metre sidewheeler steamer — creaked and groaned, waiting to be unleashed for her morning run.

At just three years old, the *J.C. Morrison*, as the ship was usually called, was the pride of the Ontario, Simcoe and Huron Railway Co. With its lavish decor, including a Chickering black walnut grand piano, and excellent food, everything was in place to make the experience of the guests equal to the spectacular lake that surrounded them. It seemed no less fitting that the death of this vessel would be of equal grandeur.

At 12:30 p.m., Captain C.T. Bell awoke to find his ship in flames. From around the firebox, the flames grew. Greedily they devoured all the timbers in their race to reach the surface; sucking in oxygen, the flames spewed immense heat. They showed no mercy.

A wall of fire had enveloped the core of the *J.C. Morrison*, so Bell knew there was no hope of saving the vessel. Thick black smoke filled his lungs, and he feared for his passengers and crew. Kicking open doors, shouting out for survivors was all he could do before abandoning ship, and for a while it seemed even he would not escape the flames.

Two days later, it was reported in the *Barrie Advance* newspaper that all of the "many" people aboard the ship had survived, escaping the vessel with nothing but the clothes on their backs. The *J.C. Morrison* had not been as lucky. Engulfed in flames, it was cut free and set adrift into the bay.

The pounding waves enticed the vessel to the next wharf, creating fear that loss of the wharf was imminent. Through the brave efforts of the fire brigade, however, the wharf was saved. The ship was sent back out into the bay, where she burned to the waterline. In the darkest hour of the night, she succumbed to the power of the lake.

The *J.C. Morrison* was just one of several sidewheelers to come to rest on Lake Simcoe's lakebed. The story of the *J.C. Morrison* has the most intrigue, however, not in the sinking but in the mysterious circumstances leading to its demise. No one knows the cause of the fire that sank the ship, and suspicions of arson survive more than 150 years later.

Diver Ron Marshall discovered the remains of the *J.C. Morrison* in 1974 in Kempenfelt Bay. Two years passed,

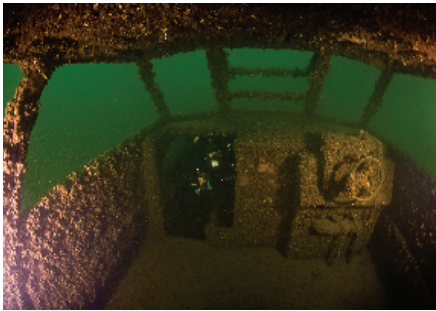
Opposite page: The steamer *Islay*, formerly the *Orillia*, takes on excursion passengers at Big Bay Point, circa 1896.

Right: The remains of the *Joseph C. Morrison*, which was only three years old in 1857 when it caught fire and sank



however, before divers Ken Lloyd and Roger White re-examined the wreck and made the information public. Artifacts from the vessel are kept in the Simcoe County Museum in Minesing, about five kilometres northwest of Barrie, and can be seen by appointment.

At Dive Central in Barrie, owner Steve Lafortune estimates 10,000 dives are made each year in Lake Simcoe. The *J.C. Morrison's* remains are just 100 metres off Centennial Beach in Barrie and in less than 10 metres of water, making the shipwreck a popular destination for divers. A



The wrecks of ships found on the lakebed of Lake Simcoe have many stories to tell visiting divers

historical plaque has been attached to the wreck by Save Ontario Shipwrecks, a non-profit organization dedicated to conserving the province's marine heritage.

The owners of the *J.C. Morrison* also ran a steam sidewheeler known as the *Morning*, which plowed the waters of Lake Simcoe between 1849 and 1862. The *Morning* had been built as direct competition to the sidewheeler *Beaver*, which took one day to transport passengers from Holland Landing to docks at Belle Ewart, Barrie and Orillia.

With both vessels running the same circuit and not enough business to share, the faster and more modern ship *Morning* won, leaving the *Beaver* to serve the Bradford Bridge Landing. The *Beaver* had an ignominious ending: it was moored at an old wharf in Barrie and filled in to extend the shoreline.

The *Morning*, in contrast, met a dramatic end during an early winter storm in 1862. Forced onto the shoal just off Roches Point, the *Morning* foundered against the menacing waves. Its anchor clawed helplessly at the lakebed, and at the height of the storm, the ship was violently beaten. Over the next few days, the temperatures dropped quickly and the

lake froze before the ship could be salvaged. Winter had taken its prize.

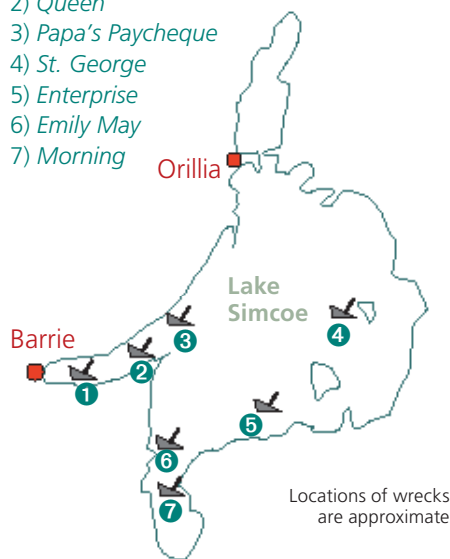
By the following spring, all that remained was the ship's side wheel, which was carried with the ice to Roches Point. Even that eventually rotted away.

Other sidewheelers of the 1800s met fates similar to that of the *Beaver*. The excursion steamer *Ida Burton* (1866 to 1876) was sunk at Orillia to serve as a wharf. The *Carriella* (1862 to 1885) was burned and buried in the narrows at Atherley. The *Otonabee* plowed the waters of Lake Simcoe for four years until 1916, when it was



RIP, ships in Lake Simcoe

- 1) *J.C. Morrison*
- 2) *Queen*
- 3) *Papa's Paycheque*
- 4) *St. George*
- 5) *Enterprise*
- 6) *Emily May*
- 7) *Morning*



set on fire at Big Bay Point. The steamer *Orillia*, renamed the *Islay* in 1895, was blown to bits in 1922, after workers salvaged her engine and boiler, just off Couchiching Point. A good pyrotechniques show was considered entertainment.

The two most famous sidewheelers to sail the lake were the *Emily May* and the *Enterprise*, both of which rest on Lake Simcoe's lakebed. The *Emily May* was built in 1861 and was designed to carry 500 pas-

sengers. According to the ship's registry, it was 151 feet (46 metres) in length — a grand vessel designed to transport cargo, mail and people. In 1872, it was sold and renamed the *Lady of the Lake*. It continued as an excursion ship, but as trains became a cheaper and, therefore, more viable option for getting around the lake, the *Lady of the Lake* was abandoned in 1883 off the shores of Belle Ewart. To this day, a few of the boards are visible.

Stephen Leacock brought fame to the twin-screw steamer *Enterprise*. Even though he claimed the *Enterprise* was not the *Mariposa Belle* described in his famous novel, *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*, local citizens were always convinced otherwise.

Originally built in 1868 as an 89-foot (27-metre) schooner and named the *Couchiching*, the vessel faithfully plied the waters of lakes Simcoe and Couchiching. After a refit in 1883, including the installation of the twin-screw propellers — the only boat on the lake to have them — it was rechristened *Enterprise*.

In 1896, the vessel was sold for \$500 and then underwent yet another refit. After changing hands again just a year later, she continued to service the lake. By now, the *Enterprise* was an old vessel. Mechanically, it was tired, and yet it plodded on through all types of weather.

Fortunately, the *Enterprise* was at the Mulcaster Street wharf in Barrie when it succumbed to old age in 1903. Loaded with passengers, the ship had a major mechanical failure that caused it to take on vast amounts of water. Frightened passengers hastily pushed each other aside, desperate to get off the boat. Once safely on shore, passengers watched in shock and with some relief as the ship sank at the wharf. The famous bow reached up to the sky as the stern sank below the waterline.

It did not take the engineers long to refloat the *Enterprise*, and a few days later it was sailed to Jackson's Point. Stripped of machinery and taken into deeper water, the *Enterprise* was scuttled.

Diver Scott Williamson discovered the remains of the *Enterprise* in 1998. Williamson says the location of the *Enterprise* has not been made public yet, and is still waiting government protection.

Williamson has also been instrumental in bringing attention to protecting the marine railway lines that can be seen in the water from the wharf at Jackson's

Point. The best time to view these lines is in the early spring.

In addition to the majestic sidewheeler steamers, other vessels of the 19th century rest on Lake Simcoe's bottom. The schooner *St. George*, built in Orillia in 1851, sank near Thorah Island, and the schooner *Queen* lies off Bear Point near Barrie, according to a newspaper article.

The oldest known vessel on the lakebed was discovered in the year 2000. It is a flat-bottom cargo vessel believed to date back to 1812. Found just off Jackson's Point, historians believe it is similar to the Durham boats used by early settlers to transport belongings and supplies.

In more recent times, a number of craft have been sunk on purpose in Lake Simcoe to create artificial reefs. In Cook's Bay, there is a Beechcraft plane not far from Bayview Beach in Innisfill. Approximately 45 metres north of the aircraft lies an 8.5-metre Trimaran boat. Across the bay, there is an area divers refer to as "The Black." Here, in close proximity to each other, are the remains of four smaller vessels, including an 8.5-metre fibreglass cruiser and an eight-metre cabin cruiser.

Near the mouth of Kempenfelt Bay lies a vessel referred to as *Papa's Paycheque*. For anyone interested in the location of any of these vessels, James Rogers, president of the Dive Shop in Newmarket, is very willing to share his knowledge and expertise.

It is a sad and traumatic event when a ship of any size sinks, especially when it involves loss of life. Even the scuttling of a vessel evokes a sense of melancholy.

Ships resting on the lakebed, however, do become time capsules. Not only do they become artificial reefs that provide homes to fish, plants and microorganisms, but, for the most part, they remain untouched by humans, preserving a rich history.

So often, history is experienced solely by reading books and looking into glass display cases. Lake Simcoe's shipwrecks offer a refreshing alternative — history that can be explored and experienced hands-on. SOS members have been involved in the protection of the *J.C. Morrison* and other Lake Simcoe wrecks by ensuring their protection as archaeological sites through the Ontario Heritage Act. Through the preservation and protection of these wrecks, the historic treasures on Lake Simcoe's lakebed will be here for generations.

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