

*In Rock Harbor For
Shelter in 1901*

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In Rock Harbor for Shelter in 1901

By FRED LANDON

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Isle Royale, which stretches its great bulk across the northern area of Lake Superior, has been the graveyard of many good ships since the days when early explorers first sighted its rocky shores and learned of the treacherous reefs surrounding it. It has always been avoided by vessels traversing Lake Superior and access to it even today is confined to small passenger vessels operating out of Houghton and Copper Harbor, Michigan, and Grand Portage, Minnesota. The main island, with its more than 200 small islands, comprising a veritable archipelago, has been a national park since 1931 and was formally dedicated as such in 1946.

The island was originally part of the French domain in America and was given its name in 1669 in honor of King Louis XIV. The search for furs gave the impetus to exploration of the Lake Superior region, and Grand Portage, twenty miles west of Isle Royale, became the entry to a route crossing the present state of Minnesota which gave access to the Northwest regions. The American Fur Company, incorporated in 1808 by John Jacob Astor, had fisheries stations on Isle Royale at an early date and its own vessel, named after the founder of the company, traded after 1835 with the Sault. This was the first vessel built on Lake Superior.

Isle Royale as a part of the Northwest became American territory by the treaty of peace with Great Britain in 1783. It continued as Indian territory until 1843 when, by a treaty with the Chippewa tribes, it was ceded to the United States. There had long been rumors of mineral wealth, based in part upon the evidence of prehistoric aboriginal mining which was there for anyone to see. The cession brought prospectors, and today visitors to the island may see both the ruins of these white men's ventures and also the remains of the diggings of long before, particularly in search of copper. Mining continued on the island with varying success until about 1900 when it ceased and has not since been resumed. During the more than half century during which operations were carried on some notable pieces of copper were unearthed. One such mass, weighing 5720 pounds, was exhibited at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876.

In 1901 the writer was preparing to enter a Canadian university and in a day when scholarships and bursaries were almost non-existent, was getting together the necessary funds by waiting on table (“hashing” was the term more generally known) on the old Beatty Line steamer *United Empire*. She ran between Sarnia and Duluth during the summer months but in the later fall, when passengers were few in number, ran only to Fort William and Port Arthur. Wages were small and tips were few but payment for off hours given to Purser Hugh Young helped to swell the monthly earnings.

The *United Empire*, built at Sarnia in 1882, was a wooden passenger and freight propeller. She was archtrussed and originally carried sail on her foremast. In 1901 John McNabb, a veteran of the Lakes, was captain and Samuel Brisbin chief engineer. Hugh Young, already mentioned, was purser and Thomas Inglis steward.

September of 1901 brought considerable unpleasant weather even before the usual date for the equinoctial gales. There were cold, windy days and frequent fogs. It was this month of 1901 which saw the loss of the *Hudson* with all hands. News of this was first received on the *United Empire* on September 20th when the boat was at Fort William. The steamer left for Duluth that night on what was likely to be its last call of the season at that port. The trip to Duluth was uneventful but coming back to Port Arthur on the 22nd the weather was bad, with heavy winds and spray from the bow flying high over the pilot house.

The steamer lay in Port Arthur until four o'clock on the morning of the 23rd. Storm signals were up but Captain McNabb decided to make a start down the lake. My diary records that when I was called a little before seven we were well beyond Thunder Cape. Because of a faulty scupper there were two inches of water on the floor and spray was coming through the porthole. The boat was rolling about badly and as we neared Passage Island it became so severe that everything on the tables in the dining saloon was going on the floor and chairs were falling in every direction. Not a passenger had appeared for breakfast. There were heavy black clouds but from time to time they would part and bright sunshine would reflect from the waves.

It was evident that the Lake was too rough to go on and Captain McNabb decided to take shelter. Turning the vessel to starboard he headed straight for the lower shores of Isle Royale. The rolling was increased as the vessel was turned. Ahead could be seen the white water on the reefs. But Captain McNabb knew the entry to the quiet water behind those reefs, though it is doubtful if any other member of the crew had been there at any time.

The eastern end of Isle Royale has as a dominant feature chains of peninsulas and islands, much like a fringe when viewed on a chart. These form five fjordlike inlets which, in order, proceeding from the south, are Rock Harbor, Tobin Harbor, Duncan Bay, Five Finger Bay and Lane Cove. At the extreme end of a long fingerlike peninsula projecting eastward is Blake Point Light, separated from Passage Island by about three miles of deep water through which go the steamers headed for Fort William and Port Arthur, the grain outlets of the Canadian West.

I have no idea where we entered Rock Harbor on that September day in 1901 but I judge that it was just east of Raspberry Island, near where Rock Island Lodge is located today. Rock Harbor is created by a fringe of islands extending for miles parallel to the south shore of the main island. Once we were behind the first island the water was calm and we proceeded to steam westward for several miles (five miles my diary says). We passed a tall chimney on the shore, the last remaining evidence of an abandoned mine (probably the Siskiwit mine) and finally anchored near an old lighthouse, apparently not in service. Nearby was a fishing camp with reels of nets drying in the wind and occasional sunshine. Over the tops of the fringing islands and through a passage that led to the open Lake we could see the stormy waters that we had left behind.

This was long before the days of wireless communication so no word could be received of weather changes ahead. We were safe in Rock Harbor by nine o'clock in the morning but not for five hours was there any indication that weather conditions were improving. It was decided then to raise the anchors and move out. The *United Empire* was not equipped with steam winches on deck but we had on board 25 Italian laborers, deck passengers for the Sault. They took on the anchor raising task on promise of being given their supper and by three o'clock we were ready to leave Rock Harbor. There was a passage outward from the old lighthouse and by four o'clock we were again on open Lake Superior.

The wind had gone down somewhat and for an hour after leaving Rock Harbor was moderate but suddenly it changed in direction and by six o'clock the boat was rolling as badly as in the morning. Captain McNabb decided to follow the Canadian north shore and head for Michipicoten. All night long there was a continual din, the creaking and groaning of the vessel, the noise of the engines as the propeller screw lifted out of the water or dashed into it again with the alternate heaving of the boat. Streams of water ran the length of the decks but fortunately it was not cold enough to form ice. Chief Brisbin and his men stood hour after hour by the engines, while

deckhands were sent to the help of the firemen in keeping up steam. Many of the passenger cabins were flooded, to the discomfort of their occupants.

When morning came we were between Michipicoten Island and the south shore. While the wind had lessened in strength the swell was as great as ever. Whitefish Point was passed at two o'clock on the afternoon of the 24th and we went through the Canadian Canal in the early evening. It might have been expected that the remainder of the down trip would be uneventful but when we reached Detour we found that the storm had passed from Lake Superior to Lake Huron. It was unwise to go on so we remained in Mud Lake over night and in the morning tied up at Detour. Leaving at noon, Captain McNabb, instead of following the regular course for Sarnia, headed for the Canadian shore. The height of the waves that afternoon on Lake Huron was the greatest that I saw in four seasons on these boats. The *United Empire* finally arrived in Sarnia at mid-afternoon on the 26th. Eighty-three hours had elapsed since the boat left Port Arthur on the 23rd.

The old lighthouse near which the *United Empire* anchored in Rock Harbor was erected in 1855 by an Act of Congress passed two years previously which appropriated \$5000 for that purpose.

The old *United Empire*, later bearing the name *Saronic*, survived as a Passenger boat until 1915 when she was partly burned and was afterwards turned into a barge.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *In Rock Harbor for Shelter in 1901* by Fred Landon]