

Looking Back #6

Schooners in Charlevoix

By David L. Miles, Curator

Museum at Harsha House

Charlevoix Historical Society

Adapted from a current exhibit at the museum. All rights reserved.



Schooner entering the lower channel from Lake Michigan under full sail without the aid of a tug, a dangerous, and sometimes calamitous, thing to do. Photo ca. 1905 by a teenage Earl Young, Charlevoix's famous builder in stone



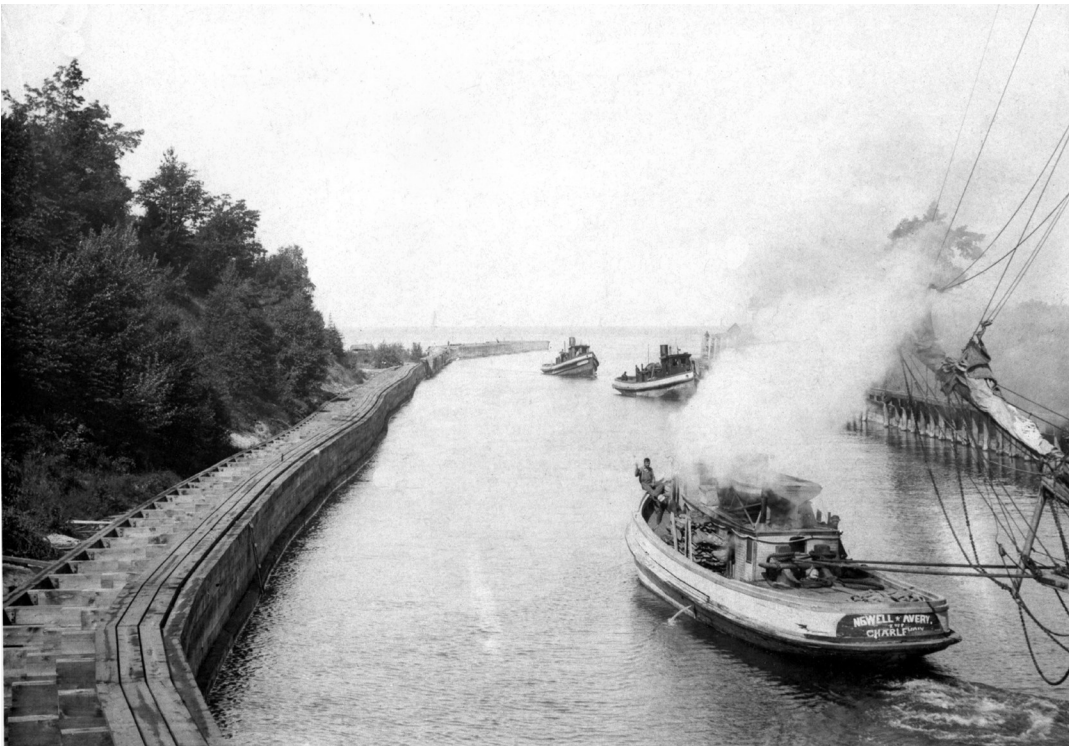
Five schooners drying their sails at the Antrim street dock after a storm, 1890s

The year 1868 has been said to be the apogee of the great age of commercial sailing on America's inland seas, when 1,855 schooners were registered on the Great Lakes. These stately vessels would remain a vital link in the United States' chain of commerce for over half century more.

On October 8, 1869, the small cargo schooner *Mendota* was the first vessel of substantial size to be towed into Round Lake from Lake Michigan through a newly deepened, and straightened, lower channel. This milestone opened the floodgates. For over half a century, schooners connected Charlevoix to the rest of the world. There were days when it was not unusual for a person to stand on the bluff above Lake Michigan Beach and be able to see more than twenty schooners at a time between North and South Points. Several of those were headed into or out of Round Lake; the others, further out on the horizon, were either heading for the Straits of Mackinac to the north or Chicago and other points to the south. Sometimes one tug would pull two or even three of these magnificent sailing ships through the channel.



A tug brings a schooner, with sails furled, into safe harbor, ca. 1900. Note the wooden catwalk on the north pier, a popular pedestrian promenade structure, in place 1885-1904 when it was replaced by a metal catwalk.



The tug *Newell Avery*, with ropes taut, taking a schooner out, 1890s



Eight schooners tied abreast after a Lake Michigan squall, drying their sails at the Clinton Street dock for a few days before they could go back out, mid-1880s



An engraving was made of this photo, titled "Drying Sails in Charlevoix Harbor," for inclusion in an 1887 souvenir booklet titled "Album of Charlevoix Mich."

Round Lake also served as a port where schooners could take shelter from squalls when they erupted on the big lake, sometimes with little warning. These vessels would tie up five or more abreast, their sails hoisted for a few days to dry before they could venture forth. From a distance, so many schooner masts poking into the sky made the Round Lake waterfront look like the edge of a forest.



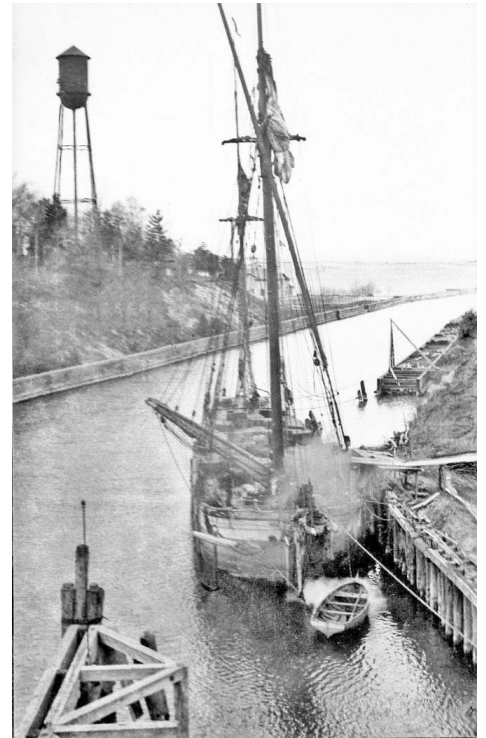
The schooner *Sea Gem* often wintered at the Argo Milling Company's grist mill near the lower channel bridge. The Fountain City House, Charlevoix's first hotel (est. 1867) appears in the background.



"Aaaaargh!" On first seeing this photo, kids immediately say "That's a pirate ship!" It's actually a patchwork quilt of schooner sails at the Argo Milling Company.



Left: The *Rosa Belle* being towed across Round Lake to Lake Charlevoix, ca. 1920



Right: The *Rosa Belle* bringing the mill its grain, ca. 1915

The *Rosa Belle*, a frequent caller in Charlevoix, was mentioned by summer resident and Pulitzer Prize winning American poet Sara Teasdale in her poem "Schooners, Charlevoix Harbor." After the vessel sank in lower Lake Michigan in 1921 with all nine hands lost, by the end of the decade the end of the mighty sailing age would come at last. Wrote Teasdale:

"Where is the gentle Rosabelle / That brot the mill its grain, / Her white sails dripping with the sun, / Or grayed against the rain? . . .

The Good Squaw and the Jasper B, / The Pearl, the Golden Bough, / O gentle ships, O quiet ships, / Where are you anchored now?"



Earl Young took this photo of four schooners at the Antrim Street dock in 1906 at age seventeen. The *Rosa Belle* is second from left. When he built his masterpiece, the Weathervane Inn restaurant beside the lower channel bridge in 1953-1954, he had the tiny image transformed . . .



. . . into a curved seven-foot by ten-foot colorized plastic mural to fit into the alcove above the stairway to the lower level. Earl added original dock planking and pilings plus a stuffed gull. The aged, cracking, and fading mural lasted until 2001 when it finally had to be removed and replaced by a mirror.



The *Porter* at Clinton Street during the 1890s. The Clinton Street dock was reserved for schooners because of its proximity to most of the downtown businesses.

Occasionally such vessels have reappeared, like the topsail schooner *Pride of Baltimore II* (below), a replica of the famed Baltimore Clippers. This boat has sailed as a goodwill ambassador 275,000 miles to forty countries and 200 ports around the world. The *Pride of Baltimore* has visited Charlevoix more than once, seen here in the lower channel, August, 2013.

