

Recollections of the Ship "Ticonderoga" of New York

Written by Christopher McRae in 1917, (passenger on the 1852 voyage)

Addressed to Mr Kendall, Officer in Charge, Quarantine Station (Port Nepean)

In reference to our conversation re above, when visiting the Station recently, I promised to see or communicate with my brother, I knew to be possessed of a keen memory. By arrangement we met and had a couple of days recalling sad, though interesting events of the years long past; (I) gave him your address - (he) promised to write (and he) may have done so.

Many of the events as stated in Mr Donald Macdonald's article in the Argus (6/1/17) are utterly incorrect - some of them indeed are unjust (not intentionally, I suppose) at the same time they are a reflection upon the officer in command. Captain Boyle was careful as far as possible for the well-being of those committed to his charge. From a sense of duty and the possession of a humane and kindly disposition he used every means at his command to prevent such a condition of filth as referred to in the said article.

There were no doubt many on board who had very little conception of sanitary laws but their conduct was governed by what was most conducive to the interests of others associated with them.

To carry out established rules, and conditions imposed by direction of Captain and doctors, men suitable were selected to act as constables - The names of two of these I remember, one being Dempster - a single man, the other, a young married man named Dugald Rankin. There were many others - I remember the captain accompanying the Dr going through to see things were in proper order ie. as far as it was possible under the circumstances. To provide as much fresh air as possible canvas ventilation tubes or funnels, were always suspended. An instance of how careful the captain was (regarding) comfort of passengers. Frequently on coming on deck and finding the ship carrying full canvas, he ordered the shortening of sail, not because the ship could not carry it, but to avoid consternation amongst passengers on board. The statement that the Captain was the only man who escaped is equally wide of the fact. My father had not been affected.

A Mr McKay who was a prominent figure who lived many years afterwards as a school teacher in Kilmore enjoyed good health - proved from the fact that on Sundays (weather permitting) he ministered to the spiritual wants of the highland passengers by conducting

services in Gaelic. This he did throughout the voyage, as well as after landing on the Station. Two other I remember by name were Dempster and Rankin, already referred to. Others in the singles men's compartment also escaped sickness; also only one sailor had fever. I still maintain that the fever was taken from the Immunization Depot at Birkenhead where there was quite as much overcrowding as on board the ship, just at that time, at least. I am particularly led to that conclusion from the fact that a ship sailing a few days previous to us bound for Sydney had some deaths and two more for (Melbourne), the *Priscilla* and the *Allison* followed us and both (were) quarantined here. The three ships being there at one time the two last had less mortality due probably to the fact they were "single deckers", whereas ours was double. The ship was overcrowded by the fact that the space amidships which should have been for the accommodation of passengers was fitted up with berths. The single men's' compartment had six of these, one of which I occupied; another brother had another.

You may not be aware (that) the berths in those ships were not along the side as we find in passenger boats, but were so erected that the occupant's feet were against the side of the vessel. The berths were two deep on each deck.

My brother believes the majority of deaths on shore was due to dysentery. Personally I suffered (from this) most of the time. The immediate cause of my Mother's death was the same. Here I may add that she did not suffer from fever before landing. Many suffered from the same complaint on the voyage. My brother next in age to me who died was so.

I cannot say anything as to the tonnage of the *Ticonderoga* but must have been a fair size. My brother reminds me that she carried eight or ten pieces of cannon. Although I had forgotten this fact, I now remember how on weighing anchor, a volley of blank cartridges was fired to mark the occasion. He also believes she was later engaged in the American Civil War, and was finally wrecked on a voyage to China. She belonged to New York. Moreover she was a noble craft conducting herself admirably as a sailor. Making at the time a record passage but just eclipsed by the *Great Britain* entering three days before her although sailing some two days later. On one occasion only was there cause for "fear and trembling", which was said to be the fault of the man at the wheel. It was during the night when all were asleep the ship was struck by a sea (wave) causing a sudden lurch, sending all loose articles from one side to the other.

All these incidents may not be very interesting for your purpose, but you can extract what may be useful and discard the rest.

There can be no doubt about the date of arrival being 6th November 1852 (Mr McDonald put the arrival date at 4th Nov) as it is indicated on the tombstone which was done at the time; my sister having died early in the day, but in sight of land, my father wishing to have his child buried on shore interviewed the captain who gave his permission.

Then as soon as a boat could be launched, he perhaps with others on the same errand, buried their loved ones on land. That was the first burial there as a quarantine station.

Transcription of copy (original source unknown) by Julie Ruzsicska, October 2000

Additional Notes:

Although this copy was unsourced and not dated upon receipt (October 2000 from Mr Boyd Hando, *Ticonderoga* descendant), it is noted in **Hell to Health** by Major JH Welch (published by the Nepean Historical Society in 1969), pp.29-30 the author states that one of the few accounts by a passenger of the *Ticonderoga* conditions appears in a letter written in March 1917 to the Officer-in-Charge, Point Nepean. He also states that the author of the letter signed "C.M." which stood for Christopher McRae. He goes on to quote an extract of the letter as follows and it may also be noted that it does not duplicate the above 'precisely' :

"Space amidships that should have been for the use of passengers were fitted up with berths, which created more cramping conditions. The means for conveying air under deck was by canvas tubes or ventilators which were always swung when weather permitted. You many not be aware how the berths were fixed. Instead of being along the side of the vessel, they were so fixed that the occupant's feet were against the side of the ship. The berths were two deep on each deck. It will thus be seen how many would occupy a given space.

Captain Boyle, as far as possible, did everything he could for the well being of those under his care. From a sense of duty as well as a kindly human disposition, he would not allow such a state of affairs to exist. There were no doubt many amongst the passengers who had very little conception of sanitary laws. When however their association had to do with others, they had to abide by such conditions as were established for the benefit of all. In order to carry such out, certain capable men were selected and appointed as constables for the purpose of carrying them into effect. Notwithstanding such appointments, the Captain frequently accompanied the Doctor on rounds of inspection. To show how very solicitous the Captain had been for the comfort of the passengers, and to prevent any panic amongst them, he had frequently been known when coming on deck and finding the ship carrying full sail - which the second officer was given to do - to give order to shorten the sail. Not so much because the ship could not carry it, as concern for those on board. There is no doubt of the ship being overcrowded.

She was what might be called semi-clipper built. My brother reminds me she carried eight or ten pieces of cannon, having a distinct recollection how they were mounted. On weighing anchor and setting sail on the River Mersey, a volley of blank cartridge was fired to mark the occasion. My brother also has the impression this ship took part afterwards in the American Civil War."

From the passenger manifest, it would appear that Christopher McRae was 17 years old at the time of his voyage on the *Ticonderoga*. His family were from Inverness and included his father, Malcolm (49), his mother Helen (39), brothers John (15), Duncan (13), Donald (8), Farquhar (5) and Malcolm (2) and sister Janet (10). Janet, Farquhar and Malcolm died in quarantine. Helen and John died soon after their release from quarantine. In the letter to Mr

Kendall, Christopher speaks of his brother 'next in age' dying and one could deduce that he is speaking of the death of brother John.

In the *Argus* on 15 Jan 1909, Donald McDonald writes in his article on the Quarantine Station Summer School that

"Even the little tombstone which is the memorial of the McRae family here has its story. As a lad amongst the survivors of the *Ticonderoga*, Mr McRae cut the names of his beloved dead upon a deal board and placed it at the head of their grave. When the station was being built afterwards, a stonemason at work there saw the little loving mark, and was interested in it, for he was a kinsman of the McRaes. So he cut and lettered the stone which now excites the interest and sympathy of all who pass through this quiet place of the dead - though the station is all a graveyard - lost, almost forgotten. There is one other interesting circumstance. Mr McRae and two of his brothers survived that holocaust of 57 years ago - and all three are still living. There are some bright patches in that old story".

The headstone (Plate 10 in *Hell to Health* by Major JH Welch) reads:

Sacred to the Memory of Helen McRae, the Beloved wife of Malcolm McRae who departed this life Jan^y 3 1853 aged 41 years. Hir (sic) daughter Janet died 6 No^r 1852 aged 11 years her son Malc^m died 6 Nov^r 1852 aged 2 years her son Far^r died 22 Nove^r 1852 aged 6 years her son John died 22 Jan^y 1853 aged 16 years
Ereced (sic) by D McRae Mason