

GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY

ORDEAL AT SEA

OF

THE SCHOONER "PRUDENT"

NEW CARLISLE

CAPTAIN JOHN BILLINGSLEY, MASTER

1832

KEN ANNETT

## ORDEAL AT SEA OF THE SCHOONER "PRUDENT" OF NEW CARLISLE

The seafaring life of earlier generations of Gaspesian mariners in the days of "wooden ships and iron men" has left records of many true ordeals that stir our imagination and admiration. Such is the account of the ordeal of the schooner "PRUDENT" of New Carlisle recounted by her Master, John Billingsley, Mate James Popley and Seaman Hugh Morrison, all residents of that Bay Chaleur community on whose shore the "PRUDENT" had been well and truly built.

### THE STORY OPENS

Late August of the year 1832 found the schooner "PRUDENT" far from her home port of New Carlisle in the port of Limerick, Ireland. A cargo of biscuits, butter and limestones was being loaded for the outbound voyage to St. John's, Newfoundland and from thence to the port of Québec on the St. Lawrence.

The Atlantic crossing of some three weeks was made without incident. By late September "PRUDENT" had reached St. John's and was discharging that part of her cargo destined for Newfoundland in that sheltered seaport. Additional cargo of codfish and some cases of cigars was then loaded and at dawn of October 14th "PRUDENT" cast off her lines and sailed from St. John's bound for Québec.

### THE ORDEAL BEGINS

The moderate wind that prevailed at sailing time increased on the following day to strong gale force with seas running very high. Having a split topsail, "PRUDENT" was hove to under close reefed foresail and mainsail peak. The pumps were tried but it was found that despite the gale and pounding seas the schooner made no water.

After brief moderation of wind and sea in the early hours of October 16th., the wind shifted suddenly to the North West and came on to blow with tremendous force. The seas increased in like proportion. "PRUDENT" was again hove to with seas breaking cleanly over her deck while her hull and rigging strained excessively. The main mast threatened to go by the board and was saved only by the

shipbuilders. By noon the wind began to moderate. By late afternoon "PRUDENT" was able to make sail and stood off Cape Race.

### THE ORDEAL CONTINUES

The respite for Captain Billingsley and his crew was shortlived. West of Cape Race the wind again increased to such intensity that the schooner had to be hove to under close reefed sails. One ferocious gust of wind carried away the jib and caused the jib boom to break under the strain. Through a long night and up until noon of the day following the wind continued unabated preventing "PRUDENT'S" crew from repairing damage to sails and rigging. It was not until the evening of October 17th that the schooner was able to make sail and proceed.

On October 18th strong South West wind and heavy sea carried away the schooner's jib stay, pulling the vessel into the wind and imposing great strain on her already weakened main mast. Throughout that day and the following "PRUDENT'S" crew continued valiant efforts to save the mast but it was clear it was finished. The Island of St. Pierre Miquelon having been sighted, it was decided to try and make harbour there in the hope of finding a replacement mast.

### TEMPORARY REPAIRS

October 20th in high wind and rain "PRUDENT" entered the harbour of St. Pierre and found anchorage. Captain Billingsley went ashore to try and find a new main mast but could not obtain one. An attempt was made to sail on Oct. 23rd but proved futile and the schooner was forced to return to anchorage. A second search for a replacement mast proved successful and until October 28th the crew of "PRUDENT" were occupied to hoisting out the damaged mast and installing the replacement. They were encouraged by the fact that the schooner still remained free of water.

### ONCE AGAIN INTO THE FRAY

Having sailed from St. Pierre on the morning of October 28th

the new main mast but the efforts of the crew enabled the schooner to continue on her way.

On November 4th., with "PRUDENT" off Bird Rock, the wind rose to gale force from the North North West. Battered by tremendous seas the schooner had her decks swept clean, her bulwarks stove in and great portions of her sails carried away. Her weary crew made temporary repairs and carried on. On November 7th., in thick weather and snow Miscou Island was abeam and that evening "PRUDENT" ran in under the lee of Bonaventure Island.

#### MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

When "PRUDENT" attempted to proceed on its way to Québec from Percé on November 8th and 9th, unfavourable winds, freezing cold and damage to the vessel and its rigging made the attempt impossible. Consequently, on November 10th., Captain Billingsley, decided to shape his course for the harbour of Gaspé Basin. The experienced mariners of Gaspé would have agreed with Billingsley's decision as they noted the state of "PRUDENT" with her main mast sprung, her bulwarks stove in and major damage to her rigging and sails. And the schooner's storm tossed crew must have welcomed the calm and peaceful waters of the sheltered Basin of Gaspé with genuine relief after their long struggle with the winds and seas of the Gulf.

#### WINTER HARBOUR

Before Captain Billingsley and his crew felt free to return to their homes for the winter they unloaded and stored "PRUDENT'S" cargo, removed the schooner's rigging and sails, and saw that she was made secure and safe for the winter months. Only then had they the leisure to reflect on their ordeal and to return to their anxious families to recount the tale of their experiences.