

A Tall Ship Tale

BY GREG LASCHUM

On November 18, 1887 a vessel from another era departed Bayfield, Wisconsin, bound for the fish camp at Siskiwit (now Cornucopia). Encountering a gale when approaching the open lake, the venerable old vessel came into a situation it could not overcome. As the boat drifted toward shore, the crew set the anchor and waited out the night.

That vessel was the *Alice Craig*, ex. Retired US Revenue Cutter *John B. Floyd*. It was one of six cutters built in Milan, Ohio in 1857 for service on the Great Lakes.



After the Continental Navy was disbanded and before the United States Navy was organized, the relatively new federal government realized that the country needed a military presence in its maritime areas. In 1790 Alexander Hamilton, Secretary of the Treasury Department, led the organization of the United States Revenue Cutter Service.

The politicians of the time debated methods for collecting revenue for the relatively new federal government. As the name implies, one of the main duties of the Revenue Cutter Service was the collection of import duties. Additionally, there was a need for law enforcement to fight the occurrences of piracy and other illegal activities on the waters of the new country. The need also existed for assistance to mariners in distress and the establishment and maintenance of aids to navigation. (*In 1915 the US Revenue Cutter Service, the US Lighthouse Service, the US Steamboat Inspection Service, and the US Lifesaving Service were combined to form the United States Coast Guard.*)

Jump ahead to the mid 1800's and we find an increased presence of the US Revenue Cutter Service and the US Navy upon the waters of the East, West, and Gulf coasts of the US. Although our relations with Canada have always been friendly and there were not a lot of imports entering the US from Canada to be taxed, there was still a need in the Great Lakes for increased aid to mariners and navigational systems.

So, in 1856 congress appropriated funds for the building of six Revenue Cutters to be stationed throughout the Great Lakes. The six cutters were built in the shipyard of Merry and Gay in Milan,

Ohio. The Revenue Cutter Service provided the shipyard with plans for the construction, based on “Campbell Class” cutters. (The Campbell Class cutters were about 120 foot long schooners.)

Shipbuilding, at that time, was mostly done from memory and mental planning using the various methods of the time. Plans and drawings were seldom used during construction and were mostly nonexistent. However, lines were taken from one of the Campbell Class cutters, as authorized by the government. Merry and Gay were told to modify these plans to construct the six cutters to a length of about 60 feet with a shallower draft and outfitted with centerboards.

After the launch of these cutters, litigation delayed their assignment to their various stations until 1859. Bayfield became a Port of Entry in 1858 and the US Revenue Cutter *John B. Floyd* was assigned duty on Lake Superior with Bayfield as its first station port.

In October of 1861, after all six of the cutters were laid-up for the winter, an order came that they should be recommissioned immediately and towed to the East Coast for duty during the Civil War. As the Cutter Floyd was at such a remote and more northerly location, it was not included in the move. As a result, Cutter Floyd continued service on Lake Superior until 1864. It was variously stationed at Bayfield, Wisconsin and Marquette, Michigan. In 1864 the Federal Government ordered the vessel to Detroit, MI and decommissioned. It was sold at public auction and sailed out of Detroit and Chicago under civilian ownership.

Sometime around 1867, the ex. Cutter *John B. Floyd* was purchased by Frank Boutin in Chicago, renamed the *Alice Craig*, and used in the fishing and cargo industry, sailing out of Two Rivers, WI. In 1870, the Boutin family, along with other fishing families (about 100 people altogether), the *Alice Craig*, and various other fishing vessels, moved to Bayfield. Thus was the return of the retired cutter to its old home port and the establishment of the Boutin family fishing business in Bayfield, where it continues in business to this day.

There are several accounts of distressing situations for the *Alice Craig* during its Boutin years. One of the most significant occurred beginning November 12, 1872. Having left Bayfield a day earlier with a load of shingles from the R.D. Pike sawmill, Schooner *Alice Craig* was running fast for the Duluth outer breakwater harbor. Its haste was further emphasized by a growing storm, blowing an Easterly. The *Craig* made it into the harbor, but this storm proved too much, even for the breakwaters. This was one of the most severe of the Lake Superior storms with waves washing over Park Point!

As the storm continued to strengthen, several of the vessels in the harbor found themselves in a dangerous situation. A couple of vessels got under weigh in order to try to make it into the inner harbor through the as yet uncompleted shipping canal. One boat made it and one did not.

As the breakwaters began to disintegrate, the waves hit the remaining vessels mercilessly. Some were washed ashore. Some were impaled on the rocks and smashed to pieces. The *Alice Craig* was at anchor, not able to secure a mooring at the bulkhead. When her ground tackle parted, she drifted into the Francis Palm, a Great Lakes cargo schooner, which had already been pushed ashore. The *Craig* pounded on the rocks on the bottom, lost her sail rig, and sank right there.

Several years later, a couple of Duluth businessmen had the raised *Alice Craig* rebuilt and used it as a yacht. As this became more of a burden for them, the schooner reverted back to the ownership of the Boutin Fisheries. In the interim, Mr. Boutin had bought a steam tug of great strength and notoriety. However, the *Craig* was put back to work, serving well in its aging condition.

Then came the day, November 18, 1887 when the *Alice Craig* encountered that Lake Superior gale. With the likelihood of the grounding of the vessel, the schooner drifted to the South Shore of Lake Superior, somewhere between Bayfield and Herbster, Wisconsin.

The gale included a blinding snowstorm, as the temperature dropped, and continued to worsen. Captain Thomas Henry Bunker and the four crewmen remained on the schooner until daylight. They launched the ship's boat and landed on the shore, a short distance away. They began making their way back to Bayfield through the dense woods, but in the heavy snowstorm became exhausted and lost. The old Captain resolved to not be a burden to his crew and urged them on without him. As they parted, Captain Bunker lay down to die.

The crew managed to make it back to Bayfield. A search party was formed and Captain Bunker was found, his legs already becoming frozen. All of the crew were spared their lives, but the old schooner met its demise. A few days later, several vessels left from Bayfield to salvage what they could of the old schooner. The vessel was then abandoned and slowly went to pieces at the relentless action of the Lake Superior wind, waves, and ice.

Afterword: Greg LaSchum is a boat carpenter from Cornucopia, WI and sincerely hopes to be part of the building of a replica of a historic Lake Superior Tall Ship, perhaps the Alice Craig.