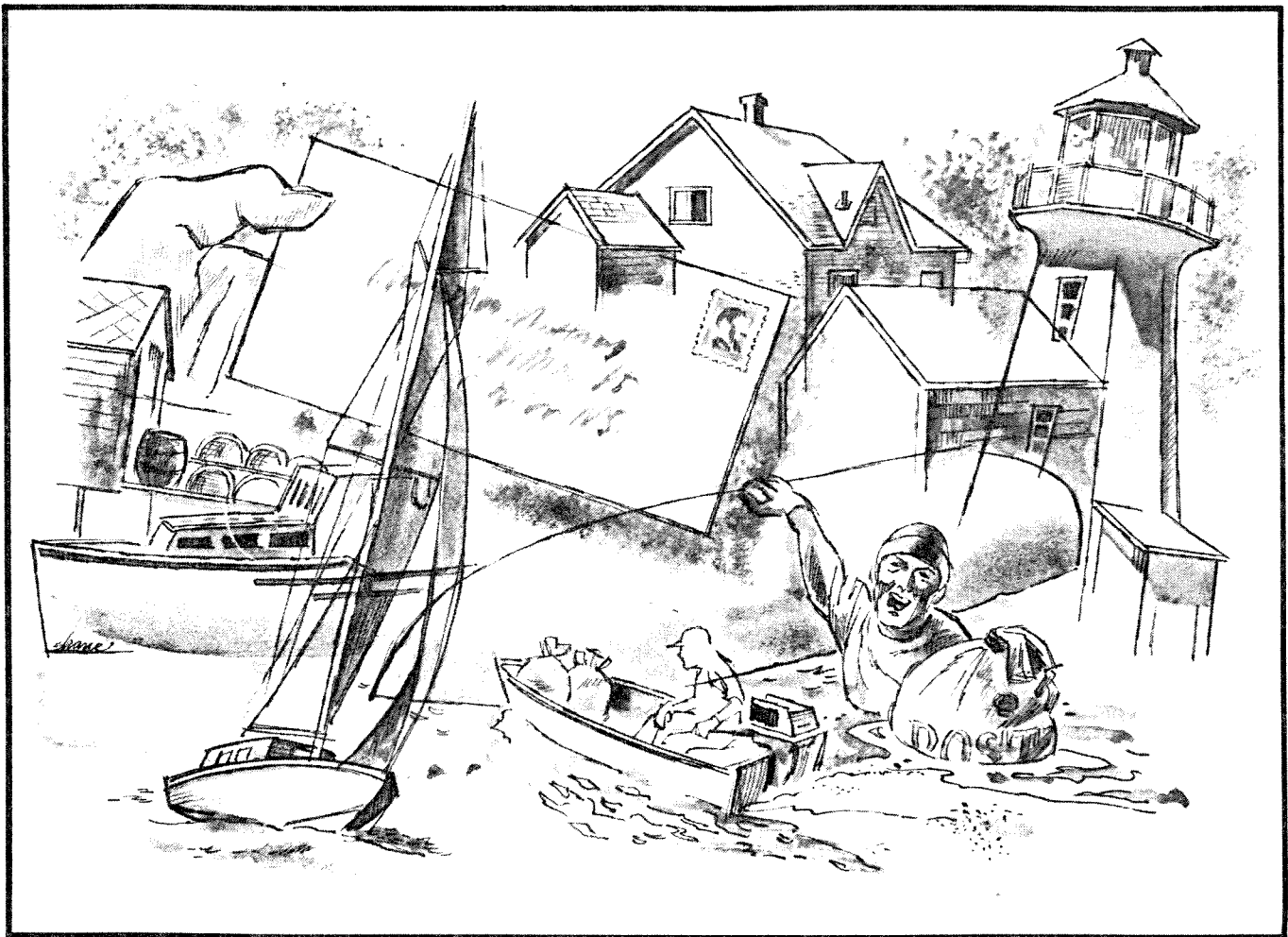


The Salt Water Mail Men

By Grenfell Zwicker



PORT HOOD ISLAND, three miles long by two miles wide, rests like the shadow of a bear rug, twenty miles north of the Strait of Canso, N.S. For ages it was connected to the west coast of Cape Breton Island by a 4,800-foot sand bar. The mighty tides of the Northumberland Strait resented this barrier and succeeded in engulfing it. But, despite assaults from all points of the compass

and the battering for weeks at a time by heavy ice-floes, the Island maintains its stoic immobility. It is now separated from the town of Port Hood on the mainland by seven furlongs of salt water.

The Micmac Indians spent unrecorded moons here but broke camp to settle by the sheltered waters of Bras d'Or Lake. Portuguese sailors spread their fish to dry for many

decades, then spread their sails to carry them to homes in a warmer clime. The French arrived and dug in. Captain Samuel Holland, an engineer in the British Army who took part in the capture of Louisbourg in 1758, reported: "Here are the remains of a French settlement, where ships were built, and workers quarried stone, which became part of the fortress of Louisbourg." Finally the French

downed their tools, some to settle in Cape Breton, others to return to the Kingdom of Louis XV.

But in 1786 when Captain David Smith, a native of Cape Cod, Massachusetts, dropped anchor and went ashore with his wife, Rebecca, and five sons, they came to stay. Three years later, in February, tragedy struck. David and two of his sons were hunting seals off the northwest coast of the island when the ice parted and separated them from shore. David attempted to swim the open water to secure a boat, only to drown while his sons looked helplessly on. Rebecca and her family must have been endowed with a generous measure of resolution to cause them to cling to their newly-found island home, where their descendants live to this day.

People who value the tradition believe that the first mail was carried free from the mainland as a public service by Joshua Smith, a grandson of David. Postal archives show that John Smith was appointed contractor to provide mail service from Port Hood to Port Hood Island on July 1, 1867, at a cost to the new Dominion of Canada of thirty dollars per annum. This was the beginning of adventures manifold and deeds of daring which have never been told. The mail of Queen Victoria was carried by Joshua, R. and J. Smith. J. Smith carried it through the reign of Edward VII. Guy and Everett Smith, with Daniel and Sinclair Cameron, delivered the mail during the sovereignty of George V.

When fall gales were sweeping the coast in October, 1930, Warren W. Tobey was awarded the contract to carry the mail for \$350 a year. His wife, Grace Smith, was a descendant of David and Rebecca. Out of this union came Walter, Fred, Everette, Arnold, Leslie, Lindsay, and daughters Beulah, Marjorie and Anna, all of whom were involved with carrying the mail over the next forty-seven years.

The tender called for six deliveries a week, which meant twelve crossings. The carrier was obliged to supply his own boat and fuel.

Warren Tobey, the father, stood just five-feet-four but little that moved on the horizon escaped his cool green eyes. He flung every ounce of his 130 pounds into the wide range of tasks he undertook.

Every fall, winter, and especially during the spring break-up, these salt water mail men exposed their lives to danger far more times than would the captain of the Queen Mary in years of crossing the Atlantic. They carried the mail bags on foot, in row boats, in sail boats, by dory and motor boats. They trusted their weight to planks on the "skim ice", placing them

laboriously ahead of them time and time again. They trekked on snowshoes, and skimmed over on ice-boat. They rolled across by motor car and truck. They jogged along on horse and sleigh. And, in recent years, they roar across in snowmobiles.

Even carrying the mail did not offer sufficient challenge to Warren Tobey's adventurous spirit. He would take jobs that less hardy souls would decline. After the sand bar was swept away, efforts were made at government expense to build a causeway to connect the island to the mainland. This involved blasting, to quarry rock on the Island. Tobey undertook to transport 4,200 pounds of dynamite over the ice. The day came, with his sleigh piled high with 1,000 pounds of TNT, when he shouted to Fred, his horse, "Giddap!" The horse started out at a brisk trot, not knowing what power lay so close to his rump. The RCMP, who were supposed to supervise this operation, were not blessed with such blissful ignorance. When they saw Tobey's auburn hair waving wildly in the breeze, and the horse's mane spread horizontally in the wind — and when they saw the sled skidding against lumps of ice with a menacing thud, they fell well into the rear. When Tobey looked back, all he could see of them was two beaver hats. After four crossings, man and horse had piled the boxes of dynamite on the lower shoreline. Some days later the ice began to heave and break. Cautious neighbors becoming alarmed, cranked their wall phones and asked, "Isn't there danger of an explosion?" Tobey reassured them. "Don't worry, there's no danger; I placed the boxes facing the mainland."

I am eternally grateful to Warren Tobey for one particular deed of valor. On August 3, 1937, I set out to take a group of boys to camp on the island. I left them on the wharf at Port Hood, while I went back for some camping gear. When I returned, wild yells — "Hadley is drowning!" — quickened my pace. Before reaching the desperate group, I saw Tobey, who was waiting with his boat to transport us to the Island, jump off the wharf fully clothed and haul the boy to safety.

Arnold Tobey, of open freckled face, who served the Canadian Navy during the Second World War, carried the mail from 1936 to 1940. He and his cousin Harold Smith (who was drowned while on naval duty in 1940) faced many rough crossings in the *Seldom In*. This fine craft, twenty-four feet, six inches long, built by the Embrees of Port Hawkesbury, was powered by a four h.p. Atlantic Marine engine.

"When delivering the mail," he wrote, "we took many passengers

back and forth. We never sought money from them, but when it was offered, we did not always refuse. When the channel was filled with floating ice-cakes, we would haul our skiff over them, and down into the water between. On some trips, it took us two hours to go that one mile."

Fred Tobey, now living in Toronto, recounts another adventure. "One winter day I drove some pupils to the school at Port Hood. On the return trip a blizzard closed in and the ice began to crack. I gave the rein to our grey horse to follow the spruce trees which were set in the ice to guide us at such a time. Instead, the horse, which had always been obedient, changed direction and galloped a different route to the shore. This saved our lives. When the storm subsided, there was open water where the trees had been."

The mail was freighted to Port Hood on a branch line of the CNR. The mail men waited for it to be stored at the little post office. Here the atmosphere varied a great deal from the sea breezes which swept the channel. The big event of the day was waiting for the evening mail. Men and women, boys and maidens, stood shoulder to shoulder and thigh to thigh, while David Smith did the sorting. Smith, a handsome and friendly man, was postmaster from 1931 to 1956. And if he read some of the tidbits on the cards from the "Boston States" who could say that it wasn't his business? When there was a lull in the local gossip, phrases drifted out from the sorting area. There was a big clan of "Macs", and each member expected to find his mail in the proper box. There were many Archie MacDonalds. "That's for Archie, the Monkey", Dave would direct. Because there were also many Angus MacDonalds, each had a nickname. "This one must be for Mary Charlie Big Angus". John Alec MacDonald was another favorite, so "This card is for John the Big Fiddler" was noted.

Walter Tobey, the red-haired eldest of the Tobey brothers, featured in the rescue of the Royal Canadian Corvette, HMCS *Sorel* — K 153. This ship survived the Battle of the North Atlantic during the Second World War. She met her doom in a storm at 3 a.m., December 13, 1945, when she ran aground on Henry Island, three miles off Port Hood Island. The crew members made their way to the lighthouse on Henry Island. As the lighthouse keeper's cupboard was nearly bare, an appeal for help was radioed to Port Hood Island. Although the blizzard was still raging, with visibility less than a quarter of a mile, Rufus Embree, Bruce MacPherson, Lloyd Smith and Walter Tobey launched

a boat and brought twelve of the crew to the warm hospitality of the island homes.

In 1950, the tender for carrying the mail was awarded to Leslie A. Tobey, now Captain Tobey, at \$720 a year. He stood two inches taller than his father, weighed twenty pounds more, and scanned the sea and sky with the same cool green eyes. Two boats foundered with him on board.

Leslie held on to the wreckage with one arm and grasped the mail bags tightly with the other, until four men came to his rescue. Islanders received their mail as usual that day, though it was a bit damp.

The *Postmark*, the official organ of the post office department, in the April, 1962, issue, printed a brief account of his first escape. "About one mile off the West Cape Breton Island coast from Port Hood, N.S., Leslie Tobey was rescued after his boat *Getaway III* was swamped. The launch struck a submerged breakwater after its engine stopped. Pounding seas smashed the craft and it filled with water. Leslie held on to the wreckage with one arm and grasped the mail bags tightly with the other, until four men came to his rescue in a dory. The Port Hood islanders received their mail as usual that day, though it was a bit damp." His \$10,000 boat, not covered by insurance, was a total loss. The *Postmark* for December, 1962, pictures Captain Tobey receiving a reward of \$100 from officials of the Post Office.

On Thanksgiving Day, 1974, when most families were feasting in the comfort of their homes, his boat the *Cheryl Lynn* was caught in a gale and sank. He grabbed a life-jacket and drifted ashore, and thanked God that he was alive.

Later he ferried the mail in his launch the *Chala*. The name was suggested by the first initials of his children. This motor launch, forty feet long by fifteen feet wide, is equipped with sounder, loran, radar, and ship-to-shore radio.

In 1975, after a quarter of a century of service which can hardly be equalled anywhere, Leslie Tobey made his last crossing for HM Post Office. But the Tobey family is still involved in

carrying the mail, as Marjorie, daughter of Warren, is the wife of Kenneth A. Sangster, who has the contract until 1980. In all kinds of weather he sets out in his 28-foot boat *Super*, cutting a wake propelled by a ninety h.p. Ford Motor.

Vivian, wife of Leslie Tobey, expressed to me the feelings of the brave women who scanned the troubled waters for many hours. She wrote in November, 1976: "For a wife, all these past experiences in carrying the mail make one shudder to see another winter season begin".

When I had the privilege of serving as Pastor of these fisher folk by the shores of Nova Scotia, my age was the same as that of our Master when he preached by the Sea of Galilee. For four years my wife, Norah, and I shared the joys and sorrows of these sturdy people. Our elder son, Barrie, then a small boy, used to lean out of his bedroom window in the parsonage to watch the fishing boats set out at dawn. He wrote his first lessons in Port Hood Academy.

Although my wife and I crossed the threshold of every family many times, not one man, woman or child ever told us of the courageous deeds of their relatives, a few of which become known for the first time in these pages. What greater tribute could be made to the modesty of any group of people?