

# SS DUNELM: Triumph & Tragedy

by R. C. Mazur

She was born in the shipyards of the Sunderland Shipbuilding Company, England, in 1907, and named DUNELM. A small, steam driven, bulk cargo, canal boat designed to travel the European lakes, narrow canals and rivers of inland waterways. Yet, for some unknown reason, she was sent across the Atlantic Ocean, totally unsuited as she was for ocean voyages. A terse logbook entry sums up the journey: *"Difficult voyage to Canada lasting 10/11 to 13/12/07."*

The crew was normally about 20 men, large by today's standard, for such a small boat. Steamers had to carry tons of coal, to feed their steam boiler fires, and this required 3 Firemen (also called Stokers, Boilermen, or Donkeymen) and 3 Engineers (Chief, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>). Nearly one-third of the crew was needed just to move the ship from point A to B! Sailing on the Great Lakes, a canal

boat's job was to load various cargoes, from the upper Lakes ports, and travel down to Montreal, to offload their cargoes onto the much larger ocean going vessels (Salties).

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, navigation was done by using paper charts, sextants, chronometers, visual bearings, navigational aids, speed logs, and the experience of the sailing master. Buoys, lighthouses, and shipping lanes were marked on nautical charts, to further assist the mariner. Weather forecasts were available, albeit localized, but there was no way to alert mariners of any changes, at a distance from shore or another ship. Lighthouses with foghorns and lights, placed in strategic locations, were manned by keepers who ensured that the lights and horns were working, and who could provide assistance, as required. Before the advent of wireless (radio) telegraphy, ships could only send short-range signals by using whistles, rockets, signal lamps or flags. Many freighters foundered, and then vanished, under the waves, because no one could see or hear their attempts to attract attention.



Turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, steam driven, bulk cargo canal boat, unloading at Port Arthur. Wheelhouse is forward, the engine room is aft. This boat has a wooden hull, and the DUNELM's was steel.

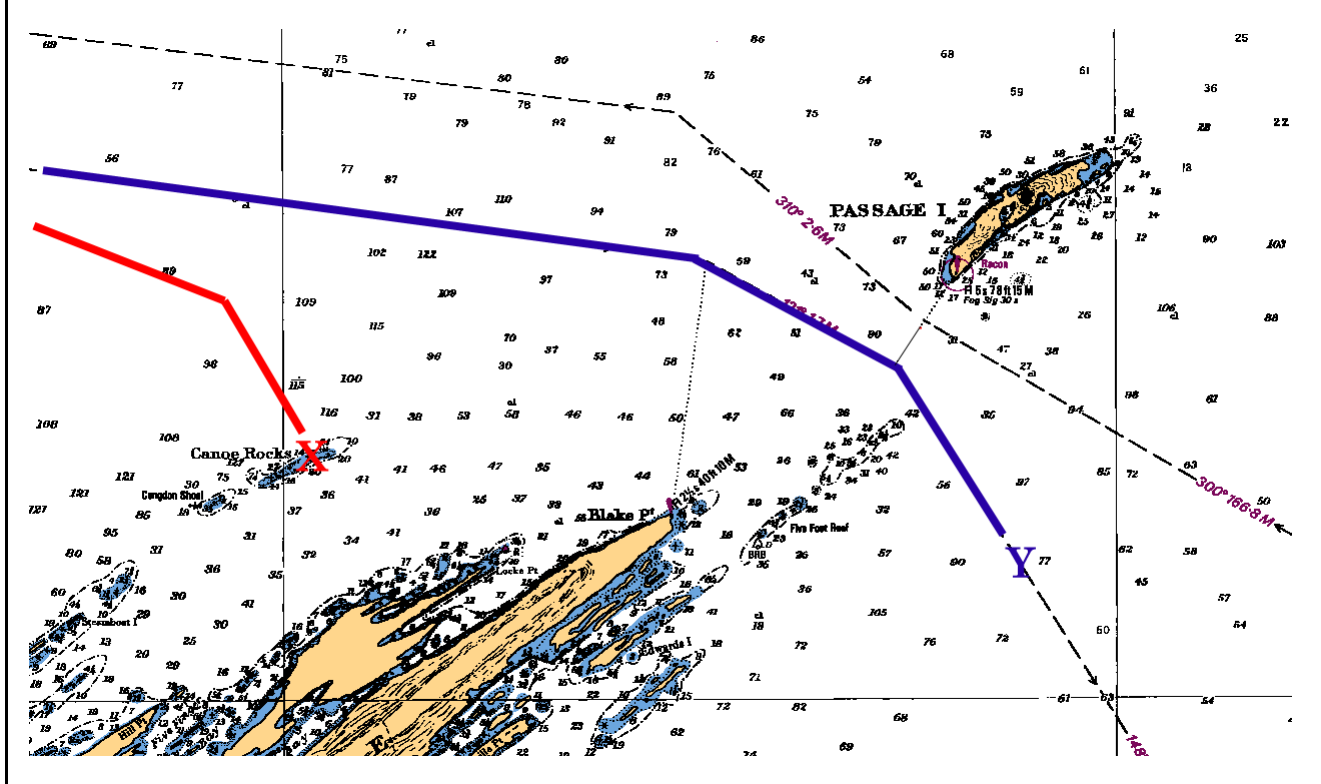
File 983.86.152, courtesy Thunder Bay Historical Museum, <http://www.thunderbaymuseum.com/>.

This was the acceptable cost of doing business, and several Lake boats, their cargoes and crews would be lost, each shipping season, on the Great Lakes. Captains were rarely held to blame, when disaster struck. It was the way that it was, and the losses of ships and crews, prior to invention of wireless, are staggering. Once DUNELM lost sight of land, she was sailing into the unknown—alone. The shipping route between Thunder Bay and Sault Ste Marie was as direct as possible (time is money) but not always the safest. It passes between Passage Island, off the northern tip of Isle Royale (Blake Point) and the shoal extending northeastward. There are light stations on Passage Island and Blake Point, to help mariners judge when to make the up or down bound turn, to safely clear the narrow gap (1/2 nautical mile wide). In poor visibility and bad weather, it was difficult and dangerous, and wrecks were common around that area of Isle Royale.

On 7 December 1910, at 1530 hours, DUNELM departed Port Arthur, loaded with grain and flour. It was the last trip of the shipping season, before winter layup, and the master, Captain Alvinston, set out in a blinding snow storm. Unable to use any visual references, dead reckoning and simple time/distance calculations were used to plot the course, and when to make the downbound turn by Passage Island. However, at no time was he able to see the light, or hear the horn at Passage Island or Blake Point. At 1900 hours, totally lost in the darkness and storm, she hit the Canoe Rocks, and was badly holed. The strong wind and waves were pounding and smashing her back and forth on the jagged rocks.

Nautical chart sectional showing shipping lanes, in the Passage Island/Blake Point area. Note the “funneling” of the north and south approaches to Passage Island. Only 500 cables wide (1/2 nautical mile) this is the most direct shipping route between Thunder Bay and Sault Ste Marie.

The blue “Y” line shows the course that the DUNELM should have steered, the red “X” line is the course she probably steered, to wreck on the Canoe Rocks (approximate position).



Ice cold water now poured into the little boat, and she was slowly sinking by her head. The single-screw propeller blades were bent, and now useless, and her boiler fire would soon be extinguished. The only thing that was saving the cargo and crew was a thin plate-steel hull. A wooden one would have been smashed to pieces, as happened to the SS MONARCH, <http://tinyurl.com/2bbuod9>, (Graveyard of the Lakes, Mark L. Thompson, Chapter 1, Beached Whales: Groundings, page 42). In 1910, wireless operators and equipment was not a mandatory carriage requirement, as it was an extra cost that many small shipping companies couldn't or wouldn't afford. Captain Alvinston's only option was to blow the ship's whistle, and launch distress rockets. A passing freighter (name unknown, but wireless equipped) saw the rockets, and transmitted a call for help to the newly constructed Marconi radio station (callsign MUG) at Port Arthur, Ontario. This was the first use, of wireless, by a Canadian Great Lakes marine radio station, to effect a rescue. The tug JAMES WHALEN and lighter (barge) EMPIRE were dispatched and those two brave crews headed out to the big Lake, despite the adverse weather conditions.

DECEMBER 8, 1910

## TUG WHALEN ARRIVES WITH CREW OF THE DUNELM

**Steamer Was Lost in Snow Storm Yesterday Morning--Not in Bad Position But The  
Seas are Running Heavy**

Late this afternoon the tug Whalen arrived from the scene of the stranding of the steamer Dunelm at Blake's Point, Isle Royale, with the 21 members of the steamer's crew, none of whom were in any way affected physically by the experience.

The cause of the accident was the steamer getting lost in a snow storm yesterday morning and being unable to pick up the light or whistle at Passage Island. She struck the rocks at 7 o'clock.

The Dunelm is not in a very serious position, but today the seas are running heavy and making it impossible to work on her. The lighter Empire is, however, standing by ready to start the work of taking off her cargo just as soon as possible.

The Dunelm has a big hole in her

bow, and water is pouring in to the false bottom, without, however, damaging the cargo. She has sunk considerably forward.

"All the time we were in danger," said one of the crew to *The Daily News*, "either of the ship slipping off into deep water or of the heavy seas dashing her to pieces. Had she slipped into deep water she was in danger of scuttling, owing to the hole made in her hull at the bow. It was rumored on board last night that the Whalen had arrived to rescue us, but we did not see her until this morning. The barge Empire is equipped with wireless and is working with the Marconi station in Port Arthur. The captain told me she could send messages, but could not receive them, but I am not stating this as a fact, only what I heard."

For several days, the tug and barge worked hard to bring the 21-man crew back to Port Arthur, and save the DUNELM and her cargo. Using the newly installed wireless equipment the Marconi station at Port Arthur (MUG), and onboard the WHALEN and EMPIRE, 2-way contact was maintained, and status and weather reports were passed back and forth. This enabled them to work, for as long as possible, and then find shelter, when reports of approaching bad weather were received. Without wireless, this story could have had a different outcome. The success of this rescue and salvage operation was one reason for the construction of Canadian marine wireless stations, down to Port Burwell, Ontario. The JAMES WHALEN (built Toronto, 1905) is now proudly docked and displayed at the Kam River Heritage Park, <http://tinyurl.com/27lqyjo>.

The Port Arthur Daily News, page 1, December 8, 1910, courtesy Brodie Research Library, Thunder Bay, Ontario.

SS DUNELM was safely towed to the newly constructed dry-docks at Port Arthur, repaired, and continued sailing the Great Lakes until early in World War One. The total salvage and repair bill was \$2,000,000—in 2010 dollars!

By 1915, DUNELM was owned and operated by Canada Steamship Lines (CSL). England was now fighting a bloody World War, and supplies from her overseas Empire were now desperately needed. She was “requisitioned for off lakes use” and leased to Manchester Steel Products, Sydney, Nova Scotia. On this, just her second ocean crossing, the little boat was loaded with heavy steel products. She was never designed for this type of job, but the war effort required it, despite all the risks and odds against. As they didn’t travel in convoys, in 1915, the merchant vessels faced prowling German U-Boats and surface raiders, on their own. However, after the sinking of the RMS LUSITANIA (May 1915) and the U.S. and world outrage, the U-Boats had been removed from the north Atlantic.

She departed Sydney harbour, 15 October 1915 (without wireless equipment, as it still wasn’t a mandatory carriage requirement for a boat of her tonnage) and was last seen passing Cape Race, on 17 October, sailing into oblivion. On 16 January 1916, she was officially declared missing. The German Imperial Navy’s documents have no record of DUNELM being sighted, engaged, or sunk. Existing forecasts show good weather for the crossing, and no known iceberg activity along her route. The possibility remains that she was not properly trimmed, her cargo may have shifted and she rolled and sank beneath the waves, without any warning. We will never really know, but that 1907 log entry, on the first crossing to Canada, speaks volumes about her unsuitability, as an ocean-going cargo vessel.

Mr. Ed (Edgar) Barbour, a descendant (first cousin, twice removed) of the last master of the DUNELM, graciously provided me additional information about her, and the last voyage to England. May she, and her valiant crew, rest in eternal peace.

**SS DUNELM Crew (October 1915) Lost at Sea**

Woddenburg	Canadian Merchant Navy	Fireman
Turnbull	Canadian Merchant Navy	Mate
Selton, Mose	Canadian Merchant Navy	Trimmer
Quirk, Noel	Canadian Merchant Navy	Fireman
Quinlan	Canadian Merchant Navy	Able Seaman
Noseworthy, Nathan	Canadian Merchant Navy	Second Mate
Northcote, Abram	Canadian Merchant Navy	Able Seaman
Newell	Canadian Merchant Navy	Chief Engineer
Miller, John	Canadian Merchant Navy	Donkeyman
Larsen	Canadian Merchant Navy	Second Cook
Lapage, Edward	Canadian Merchant Navy	Second Engineer
Keating, James	Canadian Merchant Navy	Able Seaman
Kean, Job	Canadian Merchant Navy	Able Seaman
Gilles	Canadian Merchant Navy	Trimmer
Durrell, Gordon	Canadian Merchant Navy	Cook
Cooper, Charles	Canadian Merchant Navy	Third Engineer
Christonson, William	Canadian Merchant Navy	Fireman
Bherchill	Canadian Merchant Navy	Able Seaman
Beckman	Canadian Merchant Navy	Able Seaman
Barbour, Baxter	Canadian Merchant Navy	Master

Reference: <http://www.wwii.ca/memorial/world-war-i/47132/master-baxter-barbour/>



DUNELM, Port Arthur Shipyards (Spring 1911) file 1984.0072.0216, courtesy Marine Museum of the Great Lakes at Kitchener, Ontario, <http://www.marmuseum.ca/>.

**Name:** DUNELM

**Owners:** 1907-12 Dunelm Ltd. (R.O. & A.B. Mackay), Sunderland, England  
1912-14 Inland Lines Ltd. (CSL) Hamilton, Ontario  
1915 Manchester Steel Products (leased from CSL) Sydney, Nova Scotia

**Crew:** 20

**Built:** 1907, Sunderland Shipbuilding Company Ltd., England

**Hull Number:** 1468

**Hull:** Steel

**Superstructure:** Steel, wheelhouse forward

**Dimensions:** 250' x 43' x 26.5' (76.2m x 13.11m x 8.1m)

**Engine Type:** SR (T. E.) by Northeastern Marine Engineering Works, Sunderland, England

**Cylinders:** 3 (19.5 X 33 X 54) stroke 36

**Boilers:** 2

**Type:** Cylinders SE (F. D.) 2 furnaces each WP 180

**Size:** 12.5 x 11.5

**Gross Tonnage:** 2319

**Net Tonnage:** 1480

**Canadian Official Number:** 123950 (also listed as 132069 & 123069)

**Status:** Lost at sea, with all crew, October 1915