

Chapter 1 Saint John's early sporting history

Rowing

It was this same spirit of wide open fun found in horse racing that led to the popularity of boat racing in the harbour. During the early development of the city, the harbour and waterfront areas were the focal point of the city's trade, commerce, travel, and livelihood. In the early 1800's, the fur trade, which had once been the area's largest export business, was replaced by a burgeoning lumber industry. This, to a large part, was the result of the preferential treatment colonial lumber received in English markets. In Europe, timber was in great demand for the housing industry. This demand gave a great impetus to the shipbuilding industry because sailing vessels were used to deliver the lumber across the Atlantic. It was not long before shipyards began to spring up along the Saint John waterfront and surrounding areas. In Courtenay Bay, Marsh Creek, and further along the Fundy coast, in Tynemouth Creek and St. Martins, shipbuilding began to flourish.¹ Life became prosperous and jobs plentiful, for any man who wanted to work could do so for a decent wage. The harbour area was a beehive of activity. Big, strong lumbermen moved their rafts of logs down the St. John River for ready sale and export. They worked hard, drank hard, and played hard in and around the waterfront area. Along the shores, caulkers, fitters, riggers, sailmakers, and other workers plied their crafts in the bustling shipbuilding industry.

In the harbour, brawny fishermen worked the sea like their fathers and grandfathers had before them. They rowed their dories about the harbour, dragging and filling their nets with fish on the incoming tide. The fishing was good. Schools of salmon, gasperaux, and shad abounded in the harbour. Alongside the fishermen were the pilots who rowed about the harbour directing traffic. They would go out and meet the large sailing vessels that came to call on the port and load the awaiting shipments of lumber. Custom officials, ferry operators, and just about everybody used skiffs, wherries, whaleboats, punts - boats of all kinds to transact their business about the harbour. These were the days before the steam engine, outboard motor, and other mechanical devices. It was a day when the sail, paddle, and the oar were King of the Waterways. It was under these bustling conditions that the sport of rowing evolved.

It was in the early 1800's in North America that the sport of rowing began in the ports of Boston, New York, Saint John, and Halifax. The sporting aspect of the game came from England where the early competitions between the watermen proved to be tremendously popular. The sport immediately caught on in the North American harbours where the boats also played an integral part of everyday life. In Saint John, boat racing became a popular feature with the lumbermen, harbour pilots, fishermen, boat builders, clerks,

1. George W. Schuyler, *SAINT JOHN: Two Hundred Years Proud* (Burlington, Ontario, Windsor Publications (Canada) Ltd., 1984), p.57.

mechanics, and practically anybody who was strong of arm and back and worked along the waterfront. The racing began innocently enough among the local fishermen who would race each other home from their nets. It was not long before the harbour pilots engaged in this friendly competition. From there, the racing of boats moved from a friendly brush on the water to organized racing. One of the earliest boat races recorded in the local newspaper occurred August 18, 1819:

On Wednesday, last, we were highly delighted in witnessing a boat race, performed by three of the pilots' skiffs, from Reed's Point around Partridge Island and back. It was for a purse of \$25 for the first boat in and \$10 for the second. The winning boat, Mr. Lewitt's, was rowed by four men and two boys with six oars; the third, by six men and six oars. The first half of the distance was warmly contested, but the latter part was done by the leading boat with ease. When it is considered that the distance is a full six miles, and that it was performed within 41 minutes, we think the greatest credit is due to all rowers (active citizens), as well as the builders of the skiffs, and we much doubt whether any boat floats can be propelled with oars at the same speed.²

The next boat race of any significance occurred some eleven years later, as Peter Clinch recalled: It "...was a scull race about 1830 for the championship of the St. John Harbour between Charles Lawton and Hilton Belyea's grandfather or great-grandfather. It was rowed in lapstreak boats about twenty feet long and thirty-two inches wide, with short outriggers. It was said to be a great race and was won by Belyea..."³

Mr. Clinch was a popular sportsman at the turn of the nineteenth century. He was a good friend of the late Sheriff James A. Harding, of Saint John. Mr. Harding was one of the most prominent men in Saint John's sporting community during the mid to late part of the 1800's. His career in public life brought him in contact with many of the great sporting events of the era. One of his main interests was the sport of rowing. Previous to his death, Mr. Harding penned an article on the history of rowing in the nineteenth century. The article was left to Mr. Clinch where it was put in his scrapbook. Fortunately, from his account, taken from various sources, an accurate history of rowing can be attained.⁴ Much of what follows owes to the early work of Mr. Clinch and Mr. Harding.

It was during the 1830's that the first double scull race took place. The race came about when the young James Harding got into a discussion with a couple of British officers who were stationed in the city as "aides-de-camp to Governor Gordon." The young officers were interested in the sport of rowing and in particular the gunwale style practiced by the men in the harbour. They both had graduated from Oxford University and considered themselves experts on all facets of the sport. They felt that the design of the local boats was not up to scratch with their ideas. The Oxford men proposed that they be allowed to construct a boat in accordance with the designs they deemed were correct. Once done, they pro-

2. *Saint John Globe*, October 29, 1904.

3. «The Clerk and Maritime Salesman,» August 5, 1921. This article is found in the CB Sports File, Rowing, at the New Brunswick Museum.

4. «Rowing in N.B. 1982,» this pamphlet was put together by the New Brunswick Rowing Association. The early history of rowing (p. 5-11) in this publication was put together by Dr. J.G. Thompson. The author has used this source along with information taken from early 19th century editions of Saint John's *The Morning News* to write this section.

proposed to engage two local men in a race. The challenge was accepted, and Richard Dalton was hired to build their scull. Two local rowers, sons of William Brittain of West Saint John, were selected to uphold the city's honour. The race caused no end of excitement about the city, and a good deal of money was bet on the outcome. The race was held over a two mile course; and, to the delight of the locals, the Brittain brothers easily outdistanced their opponents. So much for the Oxford lads' ideas on how to row a boat. The local men were quickly becoming experts in the rowing game.

The first organized regatta was held in the harbour in 1836. There were races for four-oared pilot gigs, skiff doubles, single sculls, sailboats, and canoes. For the occasion, Charles Lawton built a four-oared racing boat called the *Nonparietal*. The boat, rowed by an amateur crew of clerks and mechanics, defeated the gigs and pilot boats. The victory of Lawton's new boat gave a great impetus to boat building in Saint John. The sport of rowing began to grow in popularity. A strong rivalry developed between the men of several sections of the city. The central one was the claim by both Carleton and Indiantown to having the best oarsmen. Time and time again crews representing these two sections of the city met to contest their claim. During the late thirties and forties the Carleton men boated in the famous *Hazard* and *Pert* defeated their arch rivals. The Incliantown men claimed that Carleton's boats, built by William Olive, were better and not the men pulling the oars. Many people agreed with this claim for the Incliantown *Wasp* was more a gig than a racer. Regardless, the Carleton men won year after year at the local regattas.



Early Boating Scene (Source: New Brunswick Museum)

Ah yes, the Regatta. Perhaps no other institution did more for the promotion of aquatic sport during the early nineteenth century than the REGATTA. During the days leading up to the grand event, nothing was talked about except boats, canoes, sails, oars, paddles, and all other equipment used in the aquatic celebration. People of all walks of life waited with a great anticipation for the grand event. Fat mamas, as well as little misses, entered into the spirit of the occasion, and it became almost as common to hear the ladies

talk about “ties,” “stays,” and “ear rings,” as for the rougher sex to discourse eloquently on the “main-sheets” and “bobstays.” However, all the anxiety manifested itself in awaiting the approach of the great day. On the morning of the regatta, lots of papas were observed busily engaged in collecting together their little loved ones while mamas looked on, smiling complacently, enjoying the hustle and bustle along the waterfront. Young ladies from sweet seventeen - all hearts, affection and amiability - to staid and sober thirty were dressed in their Sunday finery.

The steamers, such as the *Columbia* and *Victoria*, were chartered by the social elite to watch the scheduled races. Dinner and dances were held on the decks of these vessels for the passengers. On board, local bands enlivened the air with plenty of entertainment. All over the harbour, craft of every size and description docked in advantageous locations to witness the events. The landlovers crowded the wharves and shoreline of the harbour.

Reed’s Point in Lower Cove was always in a state of wild confusion on regatta days. It was by far the best vantage point because the start and finish area of the races was here. For that very reason, it was a prevalent area for betting, fighting, and rum slinging.

A local dignitary fired the gun at noon to commence the regatta. The regatta programme consisted of several different boat races. There were races for sailboats, four- and six-oared racing shells, punts, canoes, whaleboats, wherries, and tub boats. On regatta day, the whole harbour was jammed with numerous craft of different shapes and sizes ready to race. However, it was the rowing races that most of the crowds came out to see, for it was the rivalry between the Carleton and Indiantown men that proved to be most exciting. The Carleton men seemed to be invincible on the water, for the Indiantown men boated in their *Wasp*, had tried on numerous occasions to topple their rivals, but had not succeeded. There were other boats that tried to defeat the famous Carleton oarsmen as well: *Venture* (Sand Point), *Harlequin* (Strait Shore), and the *Undaunted* (Lower Cove), but none of them succeeded in their task. The *Undaunted* came the closest, and in fact almost did in the year 1846.

The *Undaunted* was led by James Murphy, an Irishman who had come from across the ocean but a few years before that memorable clash of ’46.⁵ In fact, his whole crew was from the land of the Shamrock. Three of the crew members had grown up together in the Parish of Carlingford, County of Lough. They had fished and rowed together in the old country. They emigrated to Canada, landed in Saint John, and settled in Lower Cove. There they joined up with a compatriot to form a four-oared racing crew. For a living, they all fished in the harbour; and, as well, a couple of the crew members also operated a fish market on Duke Street. One day, Murphy’s crew approached a boat builder in Lower Cove, an Irishman by the name of Stirling, and commissioned him to build them a boat. The four-oared craft was completed and named the *Undaunted*. The four Irishmen then set out to make a name for themselves. That was no easy task for, in those days, as John O’Neill recalled:

St. John was a veritable bee-hive for rowing. Crews from all parts of the city would compete weekly in races either from Reed’s Point, around Partridge Island and back, or from North Wharf out to the Beacon Light and back. These old-

5. The section on the *Undaunted* Crew was pieced together by information attained from Peter Murphy, a local historian and relation, and *The Morning News* during the 1840’s.

timers rowed on the gunwale there being no outriggers then ... Most of the crews were composed of hardy fishermen, big raw-boned strapping fellows who earned their living from the nets and rowing great rafts of logs down the river ... These races would be for \$ 1 0 per oar and with three to four crews competing and all three reaching the turn at once - well, there was a devil of a time then.⁶

Murphy's crew proved to be very fast, and it was not long before they were knocking off the Indiantown and Sand Cove boys. They raced the Carleton men not once, but twice, in late July of 1864. The first race was scheduled and started, but was stopped on account of the fog in the harbour. Both crews had to stop rowing because the visibility was poor. The rematch was held a few days later on July 24, and it created unprecedented excitement. The race was held over the usual harbour course: Reed's Point (where the *Three Lamps* are located at the foot of Prince William Street) out around Partridge Island and return. A 100 pounds was staked by each crew, while thousands were bet by the crowds on the outcome. Both crews lined up for the start of the encounter and awaited the starting gun. At the gun, the *Undaunted* jumped into an early lead and held this position to the Island. However, the Carleton men, boated in their trusty *Pert* were right on the stern of their opponents. On the far side of Partridge Island, the Carleton men passed the *Undaunted* crew when they "bent to their oars with a vigorous determination." Valiantly the Irish crew tried to hold off the powerful Carleton men, but alas, it was not to be. The *Pert* cruised home to victory, yet another for the legendary Carleton Boat Club.

Since the early 1840's, a boat race between crews from Halifax and Saint John had been a topic of discussion among local aquatic men. There were challenges and counter challenges, talk and more talk, but yet no race. Finally in 1849, the *Eclipse* and her Sand Cove crew agreed to meet the best foursome Halifax could muster.⁷ Bound for the Halifax regatta, the local men loaded their boat on the steamer and sailed for Windsor. Upon arrival, they slipped into leather harnesses and carried their boat and oars forty-one miles to Halifax. The scheduled race created tremendous excitement all through the *Bluenose* land. On the eve of this historic race, bets and more bets were laid on the outcome of the inaugural clash between the sister city oarsmen. Just about every knowledgeable sporting man backed his opinion, until some five to six thousand pounds were laid with the "bookies." On the day of the race, thousands of Haligonians flocked to the shores "to witness the manly contest." The distance for the race was between five and six miles. The course started at the Dock Yard and went "down the Eastern side of the harbour, round St. George's Island, and a boat anchored off the South West end of the Island, thence back again up the harbour in a direct line to the moorings of the Flag Ship." Both crews lined up for the start and were off at the firing of the gun. The *Eclipse* took the lead and the crew rowed "within themselves" tire whole length of the course. The Halifax men put up a determined effort, but were unable to catch the Saint John men. At the finish, it was the *Eclipse* ahead by several lengths. A thunderous cheer was given to the victorious oarsmen. Saint John had won the first great inter-city regatta.⁸

The victory over Halifax was not only a tribute to Saint John's fine oarsmen, but also to its boat building expertise. The *Eclipse* was a typical example of the superbly constructed

6. *The Willet Scrapbooks*, Volume 86, p.207

7. *The Morning News*, October 17, 1849.

8. *The Morning News*, October 17, 1849.

racing shells built in Saint John. She was thirty-four feet long, three feet wide and fourteen inches deep.⁹ The boat was made entirely of pine and fastened throughout with copper. The four-oared racing shell was also equipped with fixed seats (the sliding seats came in the late 1870's). Although outriggers came into vogue shortly thereafter, the *Eclipse* had wooden locks on the gunnels for the oars. The boat was propelled with oars "11 inches in the blade" and 4 1/2 inches wide, with the total length being twelve feet. Perhaps the most striking feature was that the boat was "put together like cabinet work," with everything fitting "neat as a fiddle." The man who built her was Chris Coyle of Sand Cove, just one of the many craftsmen around and about the city. A friendly rivalry existed between the local boat-builders. They all built fast boats, and the local oarsmen loved to race them in the harbour.

In 1855, a Saint John crew, J. Morrison, E. Walsh, J. Lambert, and E. McAuley travelled to Boston. The "Sand Cove Boys" in the young *Neptune* were signed to meet the J.D. R. Putman, with a crew from the White Hall Club, New York. Over the six mile course on the Charles River, the local boys defeated their opponents by over four minutes.¹⁰ It was Saint John's first victory in international rowing competition. Overjoyed with their victory, the happy crew returned to Saint John.

Later that year, a challenge was sent to Saint John by a Boston crew. The Saint John crew boated in the *Superior*, agreed to race the *Maid of Erin* on September 13, 1855. The stake was \$2000 a side, with the race to be held over a twelve mile course on the Charles River. If the Boston crew entertained any hopes of winning, they were quickly dashed. The Saint John men, pulling in "a scientific and admiral style," gained a whole minute over the first three miles. From then on, the *Superior* forged ahead with the greatest of ease so that by the ninth mile she had a half mile lead. The exhausted men in the *Maid of Erin* gave up the contest at this point, feeling it was useless, if not impossible, to finish the remaining three miles. The Saint John men rowed the last three miles to the resounding cheers of the spectators. At the finish they were awarded their stake of \$2000; in the crowds a reported \$ 100,000 changed hands in betting.¹¹

The Saint John men boarded the Boston boat and sailed for home. When the boat nosed into the St. John Harbour, a 21-gun salute was fired to welcome the conquering heroes. A grand parade was held in honour of the oarsmen, and later that day a reception took place in the Victoria Hotel.

It was around this time that Saint John's sporting scene began to change. The continuing success of the local oarsmen and the popularity of the horse racing sparked and increased awareness in sport. That, along with changing technology, such as the expansion of telegraph systems and increased newspaper circulation, awakened the city to the goings on in the rest of the world. The local sports fans opened up their newspaper and read of many new games being played in places like Boston, New York, London, and Paris. Their interest was aroused, and eventually the new games were introduced in Saint John. Baseball, the game that would have the greatest impact on the local sporting scene, had its beginning during this period.

9. *The Morning News*, October 17, 1849.

10. *The Morning News*, September 17, 1855.

11. *The Morning News*, September 17, 1855.