

A Wolfe Island Christmas Story

Written by [Brian Johnson](#) posted on July 12, 2009 22:39

*“No one panicked while they were floundering in the water and scrambling for firm ice. Mothers held their children aloft while passengers and crew from the *Salvage Prince* raced on to the ice with ropes, life preservers and gang planks to drag the victims on board.”*

“Christmas Day Near Tragedy”

Kingston Whig Standard, December 27, 1955

From a distance, the holiday scene was a perfect setting for a *Courier and Ives* painting. A full sleigh pulled by a single horse and framed by a low, setting sun with a sweeping snow blowing across an ice covered bay was as close to a country Christmas from a bygone era as you could get. On board, everyone sat close together, several of the ladies seated on butter boxes padded with blankets facing backwards. On the higher seats, facing forward, children were holding toys on the laps of parents, covered tightly by blankets. Those facing forward watched and listened as the boat approached the edge of the ice, breaking the outer floes. Sparky, the chestnut brown gelding pulling the sleigh in a steady trot over the slippery surface, perked his ears forward at the noise but never missed a beat as he drew his precious cargo ever closer toward the edge of the ice. Had he known, Sparky probably would have turned quickly around, back to the village and solid ground. Sparky had less than a minute to live.



L to R: Kaye Fawcett and Gary LaRush, the rope in Gary Larush's hand is used to pull the horse up and out of the water in case he breaks through. Photo courtesy Brian P. Johnson

The year 1955 saw record breaking temperatures throughout eastern Ontario. The week before Christmas thermometers continued to drop until bottoming out at minus 25 degrees Celsius. For Wolfe Islanders, this meant that the navigation season was drawing to a close and ferry service to Kingston would soon be over. Back then, the ferry *Wolfe Islander* would push her way into Barrett Bay of Wolfe Island until the ice got so thick she could only get in about half way.

Stopped and held fast in the ice, the crew would then drop her ramp onto the ice, reducing the angle with several planks for the waiting sleighs and vehicles. This would continue until the entire river would freeze, forcing the ferry to tie up. Islanders would then be on their own to walk, sleigh or drive across the three miles of ice to get to the mainland. Every year it was hoped the ferry would run at least until after Christmas. It usually did, but this year was the exception.



The ice road to Kingston

Freezing temperatures contributed to a mechanical breakdown three days before Christmas. Backing around the dock at Marysville, the *Wolfe Islander* ran into heavy ice, bending her rudder shaft into her propeller. Helpless, Captain Ross Carnegie had to wait for the Pyke Salvage tugs *Newfie Queen* and *Salvage Prince* to tow her to Kingston. Out of commission until spring, vehicle ferry service to Wolfe Island was now over. Barrett Bay on Wolfe Island quickly froze over as did Kingston harbour but the main channel was still open water. Islander 'Buck' Mullin started ferrying people across in his ice-boat the *Saucy Sally*, a small plywood vessel equipped with steel runners powered by a high mounted six cylinder Studebaker engine with an airplane propeller in back. Wolfe Island reeve John Keyes also pressed into service the

tug *Salvage Prince* which would make two trips a day until freeze up.

Christmas Day dawned bright, clear and exceptionally cold. Down at the Kingston waterfront at the foot of Brock street, people huddled close together watching the tug *Salvage Prince*, black smoke pouring out of her funnel, framed by 'sea-smoke' and bright sunlight, as she cut her way into Kingston harbour through heavier than usual chunks of broken ice. As the tug came alongside the end of the pier, Lieut. Darell Small, his wife Fern and their four children climbed carefully aboard. This would be an adventure, riding over to Wolfe Island in a tugboat, instead of the ferry. Fern's family was from Wolfe Island.



Salvage Prince cutting her way into Kingston harbour

With a clanging of bells, the crew threw off the mooring lines as the captain rang for 'Full Ahead' and the open water. Shortly after, slowing down, the *Salvage Prince* entered the ice of Barrett Bay until finally coming to a stop. "We debarked on the ice via a 'Sinbad the Sailor' plank," remembered Darell Small. "We walked, slithered and crawled over rippled ice with a stiff breeze at our backs. Baby Leslie, four months old, was on a box sled." Loaded with passengers returning to Kingston, Captain George Bates backed his tug out into the open channel and headed for town.

Sometime in the late afternoon, mainlanders started looking at their watches. Dinner over, the afternoon sun was casting long shadows over snow covered fields. "After the Christmas festivities, we were faced with returning over the ice with our gifts and

full stomachs,” said Darell Small. “Fortunately, Gary LaRush was on hand with a horse and sleigh so we gladly paid for a ride, rather than struggle against the wind.”

From every direction, families arrived in the village and headed down to the shoreline beside Antoine “Tiner” LaRush’s house. Walking down onto the ice, the children became excited at seeing the horse and sleigh, the big seats with folded blankets waiting for them. One blanket in particular was fur lined which was good because it was starting to get bitter cold, as the sun got lower.

“What a beautiful horse,” said one of the children. “What’s his name,

mister?”

“Sparky,” said Gary LaRush, “want to pet him?”

“Sure. Gee, I wish I had some sugar.”

Climbing into the sleigh, Jim and Mrs Murphy with their three girls, Donna, four, Arlie, three and Eldeen, two, were near the front. Next, Darell and Fern Small in the left front corner with their three children, Carol, ten, and Holly, two who sat at the rear and baby Leslie who was four months old in her mother’s arms. Darell jr. decided to stay with Grandma Fawcett on the island. Next in was Mrs. Mae Pyke, Fern’s aunt, who, at 71 was a veteran of many ice crossings over the years. Louis and Ella Kane climbed in next beside Mrs. Herman and Wilhelmena Van Strien. Last in were George and Mrs. Spafford. Climbing onto the back and standing on the runners was young Bobby Macdonald who was on his way to Napanee to see his girlfriend Doris.

Climbing aboard, Gary LaRush braced his feet and picked up the reins. “Gi’dapp there,” he said, with a slight slap of the reins. Sparky shouldered the load with a slight jerk and then settled into a steady trot out onto the ice covered bay.

One by one, those left on shore started back home walking up the road to their cars. Two men, Kaye Fawcett and Clifton Fargo standing by the dock, were catching up on local news as they watched the sleigh as it gathered speed out onto the bay. Turning to go up the road, Kaye glanced out once more at the loaded sleigh off in the distance. “Oh my God...,” he said.

Clifton turned around. “What is it?”

“I can only see the boat, Cliff. The sleigh’s gone!” Both men started running out onto the ice.

Ringling the telegraph to ‘Slow Ahead’ Captain George Bates felt the *Salvage Prince* enter the ice floes of Barrett Bay. Slowing down he rang for ‘Stop’ as he came into more solid ice. Glancing out the pilothouse window he watched the approaching sleigh just off the port bow. He then noticed a dangerous lead starting to ‘wet up’ directly ahead of the sleigh. Down below in the cabin, Islander John O’Shea looked out a porthole as the sleigh was pulling up. “Put your coat on, Joan,” he said to his wife, “the sleigh is here.” Glancing out again, eye level with the porthole, he saw nothing. The sleigh was gone.



The Wolfe Island Ferry



Mrs. May Pike, 71, of 214 Yonge street, feels quite chipper after her harrowing experience of being thrown into the icy waters near Wolfe Island on Christmas Day. Mrs. Pike was high in her praise of Capt. George Bates of the Tug Salvage Prince for the calm, orderly way in which he directed the rescue operations.

Mrs. May Pike.
Newspaper clipping

Pulling up to the tug, Gary LaRush felt a sickening lurch on the right side of the sleigh as the runner broke through. Standing up, Gary slapped the reins hard down, and pulled to the right, "HI'YAH, GIT UP THERE..., HEE'YAH," he yelled. Sparky, ears back and eyes wide with fright, started leaping ahead, pulling the sleigh free. Aboard the sleigh, children started crying with the violent jerks as the sleigh lifted up, and then broke clean through, sinking fast by the stern. Jumping clear, LaRush raced ahead to the frightened horse to release him, but it was too late. Feeling Sparky's front hooves scrape his chest, LaRush could only stare as horse and sleigh went quickly to the bottom.

Captain George Bates threw open the pilothouse door of the tug and was on the main deck almost instantly. "EVERYONE...SIT STILL..." he commanded. "DON'T ANYONE PANIC!"

Crew members leapt into action, including young Eddy Bates, 14, who was first over the side, helping his dad and the crew pull out a large gangway across the ice. In the ice cold water now, people struggled to stay up, holding floes of ice and lifejackets which were quickly thrown. "Fern and Baby were clinging to the folded edge of a lifejacket," said Darrel Small. "I was swimming amongst the chopped ice. Soon I had two baby girls floating in ample snowsuits, one in each hand. I'm not an expert swimmer, so I did the best I could and treaded water until someone took them off my hands." Crew members with Gary LaRush and Bobby Macdonald lay across the ice pulling people to safety. "Aunt Mae was heroic," remembered Fern Small. "She grabbed Mrs. VanStrien by the scruff and hauled her to safety." In the confusion of staying afloat, mother and baby became separated. "I thought she was gone," Fern said.

"Young Eddy Bates spotted the baby floating on the fur lined blanket," remembered John O'Shea. Grabbing a long pike pole, Bates hauled baby Leslie, gurgling happily, on to firm ice.

"Give me the baby, quickly," yelled engineer Pat Casey. Taking Leslie down below into the tug's engine room, Casey laid the four month old on the rocker arms of the engine while he undressed her, tearing open his own shirt and laying her against his own skin. Outside, still struggling in the water, Fern and Darell Small were the last to be rescued. "I'm tired, I'm done," remembered Darell as he went down, under the surface. "As I did, I can still see Fern's hand as she reached down, grabbed my crew-cut and lifted me."

As Fern was pulled from the water, the men struggled to get Darell out. They couldn't get a grip and he went down again. Throwing a rope, Darell came up spitting water near the ice edge. Pulling carefully, six men hauled him out onto the ice, finding his legs hopelessly tangled in one of the blankets. "Once clear of the blanket, I got to my feet and made a quick move through the engine room of the tug to the far rail," he said. "Here I made one quick wrench and divested myself of all the Christmas Cheer and mince pie."

With record-breaking speed, Captain Bates raced for Kingston where waiting ambulances took Mrs. Small, Mrs. Murphy, Mrs. Van Stern and Mrs Herman along with the children to Kingston General Hospital. Only the baby remained but was home a few hours later, joining her family. On her experience, Mae Pyke remarked, "Well, I've been swimming on Christmas Day, at last."

Later, after recovering his coat, Lieut. Darell Small recovered his 8mm Movie camera. Relating his experience to his boss back at his base, he remembers Major Hall's firm 'reprimand': "Darell! You mean you had a movie camera, with all that excitement and ***you didn't take any pictures?!***"



Brian Paul Johnson is one of five captains of the Wolfe Island car ferry Wolfe Islander III. He has worked for the Ontario Ministry of Transportation for 28 years, recently celebrating 20 years as captain. Today, Brian combines his marine career with writing. Fascinated by stories and legends of the 1000 Islands area he has written for the Kingston Whig Standard, Telescope magazine and the Great Lakes Boatnerd Website: Seaway News. Brian co-edited Growing up on Wolfe Island, a compilation of interviews and stories with Sarah Sorensen. He is also the founding and current president of the Wolfe Island Historical Society and former president of the Wolfe Island Scene of the Crime mystery writer's festival held on the island every August.

This article was first published on December 24, 2005, as "Open sleigh-thin ice" in the Kingston Whig-Standard. Captain Johnson is currently putting the finishing touches on his first book: Ferry Tales from Wolfe Island.