

## An Amazing Fishing Story

Life along the St. Clair River for children growing up near her shores is filled with swimming, boating and fishing. It is a ritual, a rite of passage. Certainly everyone has memories and stories to tell about the fish they caught or the one that got away.

Shane Hussey is well known as one of the best fisherman in the Sombra area. It is part of his DNA. He loves it. It is his passion. As a youngster, if you wanted to find Shane, the Sombra Ferry dock and causeway was his personal utopia fishing ground. If Shane was not fishing, he was diving for lost lures that inexperienced fishermen had lost.

One summer day in the mid 80's while Shane was diving on the north side of the causeway that leads down to the ferry island, he was excited to find a whole school of lures caught on some underwater object. As he collected the lures he realized that this object was more than a hunk of wood but a large hunk of metal that appeared to be a prop.

Shane bicycled home and got his brother Scott and a rope to bring the prop to the surface. It would be a great souvenir for his father, Chris, who had sailed the Great Lakes and was an avid shipping historian.

Frustratingly, the Hussey boys couldn't even budge the propeller. Fortunately, Bill McKeegan, a fellow Sombrarian was nearby with his Pitman crane. He came down to the causeway and after Shane had attached the lifting cables, reeled in Shane's prize catch. When it broke the surface Shane and Scott were in awe. It was a prop with two blades and two blades missing. It was at least 4 feet wide. What a fish story he now had!

What does one do with a prize catch like this? McKeegan delivered the prop to Shane's Dad's house where it has been on display near the shoreline ever since.

The mystery was; how did it get there and what vessel was it from?

There have been many disasters along the St. Clair River that resulted in lost life and shipwrecked vessels. The story of the tug Frank Moffatt is one of the most tragic.

Built and launched in 1869 at a cost of \$25 000, by Fitzgerald and Leighton of Port Huron, the Frank Moffatt was a steam powered tug that was 101 feet long, a beam of 21 feet and she drew 11 ½ feet. Her net tonnage was 69 tons. She was a regular up and down the St. Clair with scows or schooners in tow.

She first made the news in July of 1883. Down bound in the river, she was about to pass the mouth of the Black River. Suddenly and without warning the passenger ferry Grace Dormer appeared from behind a large lumber pile on the north side of the river mouth. A collision was unavoidable. The super

strong bow of the Moffatt collided and crushed the port side of the Dormer. They were able to separate and the Grace Dormer limped back to the Black River where she sunk in 13 feet of water. Luckily there was no loss of life.

Despite this notoriety, the Frank Moffatt was important for her nose to the grindstone work from Lake Huron to Lake Erie. On November 1, 1885, she was down bound from Saginaw Michigan with four barges in tow, bound for Buffalo, New York. Coming down the St. Clair, Captain Thomas Currie decided to tie up at the Sombra Dock because of the thick fog that covered the river. As the mate was stepping ashore to secure the tug to the dock, the Captain was trying to gently take stress off the line that was being tied. Without warning the Moffatt suddenly exploded, obliterating the upper works and decking. The boiler blew to the bow and the Moffatt sank almost immediately. It was later believed that the boiler exploded.

Debris from the tug was strewn in all directions from the Moffatt. Tragically 5 of the crew of 12 were killed in the blast. The cook, Maud Bentley, was asleep at the time of the explosion and was rescued at Fawn Island as she clung to a plank from the Moffatt.

The village of Sombra was rocked by the shock waves of the explosion. Some debris was hurled onto the shore. The waterfront dock of Andrew Smith was badly damaged. Local residents hurried to the dock to provide assistance. It was felt that all crew members would have perished if the bow had not at least been secured at the time of the explosion. The injured men were kept in local homes under the care of a physician from Port Huron who was brought to Sombra to provide personal medical service to the survivors.

The Moffatt was deemed a total loss. Valued at \$7000, she was insured for \$5000. A month after the explosion the engine was retrieved from the hulk that remained of the Moffatt. In 1888 what was left of the wreck was removed from the bottom by the Canadian Government.

The Hussey family has donated the prop from the Frank Moffatt to the Sombra Museum where it will be on permanent display. The donation is a wonderful gesture on behalf of the Hussey family. It is hoped that at some time, while fishing in the area, Shane will find the two missing blades from the prop to complete his masterpiece.