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The MOTOR/VESSEL "U & I"

"A Near Disaster - A Miracle"

May 16, 1945

This is the account of a frightful night and the miraculous saving of Elnora McEachern in the Gulf of Georgia near Texada Island in the early morning hours of May 16, 1945.

Bruce and Elnora were married at the home of Ralph and Bertha Muth in Dewdney, B. C. on June 4, 1944. The best man was Milton McEachern and the bridesmaid was Millie Sandberg.

Bruce was from a fishing family with father Dan and brothers Jack, Elmer, Howard, Milton, Arthur, Glenn and Ronald all owning fish boats and plying the waters of B.C. in search of salmon, herring, and groundfish. They started their careers on the Fraser River - Port Kells Slough and quickly moved to "outside" waters.

Elnora was a Muth and spent her high school years living on Barnston Island. She rowed across the Port Kells Slough to attend high school in Surrey and met Bruce in those days when he was fishing his first boat on the Fraser River. The Muth family subsequently moved to Dewdney, B.C. and eventually in 1944 to Albion, B.C. where they purchased the 16 acre Johnson farm with one cow, 400 chickens, 2 houses, a pigery, barns, chicken sheds, etc. for \$7,500.00.

Both the Muths and McEacherns were "transplanted" Saskatchewan farming families who moved to B.C. after the draught and depression of the 1930's. The McEacherns came from Maxim, Saskatchewan and the Muths from Ebenezer - Springside, Saskatchewan. Bruce's mother and father were Daniel and Maryetta who were both born on Prince Edward Island. They had nine sons and two daughters. (Elsie, George, Jack, Elmer, Bruce, Arthur, Howard, Milton, Glenn, Donnetta, and Ronald). Elnora's father and mother were Ralph and Bertha. Ralph was born in Poland and Bertha in Saskatchewan. They had 3 sons and 1 daughter. (Fred, Ernest {who died at 6 yrs from Diphtheria}, Elnora and Walter).

Bruce bought a 30 foot wooden gillnetter from the Canadian Government in March 1944. It was a boat that had been taken away from the Japanese after Pearl Harbour. Bruce and Elnora renamed it the "U & I". The U & I was about 10 years old and was powered by a two cylinder 15 hp Easthope gasoline engine.

Bruce had been fishing for a few years before he married Elnora. He had gone to Rivers Inlet and the Central Coast on his own and with his brothers. The first summer after they were married Bruce and Elnora made the trip to the Central Coast together.

In 1945 Bruce and Elnora decided to go to Rivers Inlet three weeks before the sockeye salmon season to do contract net work in Nelson Brothers net loft which was located above Edna Matthews Island in Rivers Inlet. (Bruce had worked during the winter of 1944-45 as a net man in Nelsons' St. Mungo Cannery). It was usual in those days for the small gillnet fishing boats to be towed one behind the other to the fishing grounds to save them the long run of about 300 miles to Rivers Inlet. This was a carry over from the days when the sail and oar powered Columbia River style open skiffs were towed to and from the grounds by packers.

On May 15, 1945 (which incidentally was Bruce's 25th birthday) the Nelson Brothers entourage left the St. Mungo's Cannery on the Fraser River for Rivers Inlet. A diagram of how the packer Audrey B, the fish camp Samson V and the 20 fishing boats were towed in 2 lines of 10 each is shown below.

The Audrey B was a wooden war surplus vessel about 100 feet long purchased from the United States. It was converted to a large tender or packer. Many boats of this design and class were purchased by Nelson Brothers and other fishing companies during that era. Similar vessels were the Kimsquit, the Hesquit, the Shumogait, the Norqueen, and the Norking.

The Samson V was a floating fish camp. It was about 150 feet long and 40 feet wide and built on a large wooden barge. It contained a store, office, machine shop, lifting crane, fuel tanks, storage and living quarters. The main building on the Samson V was two stories and it had living quarters and staterooms.

The skipper of the Audrey B was Oscar Roman, and it had a crew of 3 or 4 men. The Samson V had a crew of 8, including the bookkeeper Doug Robins and his wife, and each of the 20 gillnetters being towed had 1 or 2 people aboard. Bruce and Elnora McEachern were aboard the U & I which was the first fishboat tethered behind the Samson V on the port tow hausser. In all, the flotilla would consist of the Audrey B, the Samson V, 20 gillnet boats, and about 40 people.

The Audrey B and her flotilla sailed across the Gulf of Georgia the afternoon and evening of May 15, 1945 without incident at a speed

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of about 5 or 6 knots. The Gulf was "sloppy" that night with enough southeasterly wind blowing to make the travelling a little miserable for the small gillnetters being towed. It was a cloudy black night.

There were no radiophones or radars in use on the fishing boats in those days and there was no direct contact among any of the vessels being towed or with the Audrey B. There was no way to contact any rescue services, anyone on shore, or anyone else who could help if a problem occurred. The lighting on the vessels, especially the small gillnetters, was minimal.

When the flotilla finally got into Sabine Channel between Texada and Lasqueti Islands, they were finally out of the choppy outside waters. It was about 2:00 AM on May 16, 1945 and they should have enjoyed a calmer journey up along the west side of Texada Island, past Comox and then Campbell River and on through the Seymour Narrows, up Johnstone Straits, across Queen Charlotte Sound and eventually to Rivers Inlet in another 30 to 48 hours.

Unfortunately the night turned out to be anything but peaceful because all of a sudden the port line of 10 gillnetters started to surge sideways and towards the starboard line of boats - and back and forth again. The surging quickly got worse and worse. The small gillnetters were tethered for and aft to the main tow line, and so the surging caused the gillnet boats to come close to swamping, and in fact the U & I which was the first boat behind the Samson V started to take on water, and was rolling so badly that capsizing was imminent.

The surging was probably caused by a harmonic motion resulting from just the right (or more correctly "wrong") combination of wind, wave, speed, and distance. A wave builds and builds until a catastrophe occurs, in this case a boat capsizing. Other examples of the damage a harmonic wave can do is running down a gangplank and the destruction of the Tacoma Bay bridge by a 15 mile an hour wind.

Bruce and Elnora were awake and very worried at 2:00 AM when their boat was surging and almost rolling over. Just before their boat capsized they decided to jump onto the boat alongside them in the starboard line of boats as the tow lines surged towards each other. They held hands and jumped. Bruce made it, but Elnora's foot caught on the gunnel of the boat they were jumping to which was probably a small fish packer called the "Mike O". Bruce lost his grip on Elnora's hand and she fell into the ocean between the line of boats. The U & I capsized and the net drum was torn out. Of course the flotilla was carrying on at 5 knots and would be completely past Elnora in a few minutes. Elnora couldn't swim, and even if she could the survival time in the Gulf of Georgia at 2:00 AM in May was only minutes.

The only people who knew Elnora was in the water were Bruce and the skipper of the Mike O. They hollered to the boats down the line but there was no response at first. There was no way to stop the flotilla, and the situation was truly very desperate.

Eventually some of the closer boats in the line realized what had happened and they managed to untie from the tow line to run up alongside the row of boats, past the Samson V, alongside the Audrey B to get it to stop towing the flotilla. This took about half an hour because the little gillnetters were not much faster than the Audrey B and its' tow. One or more boats cut loose from the tow line and started to desperately backtrack on their course to look for Elnora who would by then be miles astern of the flotilla in the dark cold ocean.

Meanwhile Elnora went under the water after slipping from the boat she tried to jump to. The first time she came up she remembers the net drum from the U & I going floating by. Under again! The next time she came up a bumper tire was beside her, she tried to grab it but she couldn't hang on. (It would be going past her at about 5 or 6 knots)

Under again!

The third time she came up there was a line nearby and she grabbed it and held on for dear life. The line was also moving at 5 or 6 knots so she slid down the line until it finally stopped in her hands. Now the water was rushing past her as she was being towed through the water.

She screamed and hollered as loud as she could to try to get someone's attention, and she did, it was Ole Olson, who heard her. Elnora had come up for the third time just before the last boat on the starboard line went past her. The last boat on the starboard side was Ole Olson's boat.

Ole went up to the bow of the boat to see what the hollering was all about and there was Elnora hanging on to the main tow line where his boat was tied to it. He told her to hang on, he reached way down to the water and pulled her up onto the bow of his boat by her hair. She was freezing cold, scared stiff, and probably in shock. As Ole hauled her aboard Elnora remembers seeing the name of Ole's boat written on the bow, it was the "Noel".

Ole got Elnora down the side of his boat into his cabin. He insisted she put on some dry clothes. (all he had was heavy fishing clothes suitable for a hardy old sea salt from Sweden but they were dry and warm, if a little prickly) He said not to worry, he wouldn't look while she changed, but modesty was the farthest thing from Elnora's mind. She was just very thankful to be out of the water and safe. Ole gave her something warm to drink and got her to lay down in his bunk covered up in blankets. Ole tried to holler to the other boats up the line that Elnora had been rescued and was on his boat, but only the closest boats could hear him. The word didn't make it back up to Bruce who was at the front of the tow line. He believed Elnora was very likely gone. In fact Bruce didn't know that Elnora had been rescued until the flotilla came to a stop about a half an hour later.

Much to everyone's surprise and relief, Elnora was aboard the Noel. She and Bruce were reunited and placed aboard the Samson V. Elnora was given more strong hot beverages.

By this time all the boats had untied from the tow lines and the decision was made to abandon being towed one behind the other on the hausser. They would need to make it to Rivers Inlet on their own power. As it was later learned this near disaster was the end of towing boats in a line in the B.C. fishing industry entirely.

The camaraderie, and improvisation of the fishermen and packer crews then came into play. A decision was made to put Bruce and Elnora into the stateroom of the Samson V, as after all, their U & I was full of water, and their clothes, food, and supplies were completely soaked. The crew stabilized and refloated the U & I and tied it to the Samson V. Eventually a few hours later, around daylight the journey to Rivers Inlet resumed. Of course no one at home or anywhere else knew anything about all this.

Nelson Brothers Fishing Co. was excellent in their helping of Bruce and Elnora. They fixed up the U & I completely, new drum and net, overhauled the motor, etc. so that by the time the sockeye run started 3 weeks later, Bruce and Elnora could once again move aboard the U & I and their life as fishermen returned to normal, more or less. The manager of the Samson V was Mike Olson and he was known to be good to his fishermen. He knew all the McEachern brothers well as they all started their fishing careers with him at Nelson Brothers. The "McEachern boys" were good producers for Nelson Bros.

The bookkeeper on the Samson V on this trip was Doug Robins. He and his wife gave up their stateroom for Bruce and Elnora's use on the Samson V after the accident. Doug Robins has now passed away but Bruce and Elnora recently visited his wife who still remembers the incident well.

Elnora wrote letters home for Ole Olson all that summer and read his mail for him, because he couldn't read or write English. Elnora probably wrote home and told the folks a "mild" version of what had happened.

For many years Bruce and Elnora didn't talk much about the awful night of May 15, 1945 and Elnora never again felt safe on the water. Many people in the fishing industry eventually learned by the "grapevine" various versions of Elnora's near drowning but they didn't talk about it much either because it was just too awful.

Despite her fear of the water Elnora went "up north" with Bruce again for the summer of 1946. In February of 1947 their first child Darrel was born, so she did not make the trip north in their small gillnetter in June as Darrel was only 4 months old. Instead Elnora brought Darrel with her and came up to Namu on the steamer in July. Bruce was fishing out of Port John at that time, and picked her up there. She and Darrel fished with Bruce for the rest of the north trip and then made the trip back south - with Darrel riding on the pilot house shelf for much of the way.

In all these years the trip up north was only part of the fishing season. The fishermen would return south to fish the Fraser River sockeye runs in August, then go fall fishing in September through November on the South Coast and Fraser River.

1947 was the last trip up north for Bruce and Elnora because they built a general store in Albion called Bruce's Market during the winter of 1947 and opened it on April 2, 1948.

Life carried on for Bruce and Elnora and it was an exceptionally good life. They had three children, Darrel, Glenna and Angus who eventually were married to Kathleen Blaikie, John Murray and Marjorie Kofoed. It could be that after the near disaster of May 16, 1945 they valued the privilege of life and each other more than most people - after all they very nearly lost it! - but for a miracle!

But good fishermen always return to the sea. Bruce started fishing part time again with Peter Jenewein and Les Baker on the Fraser River in about 1954. Eventually Bruce and Elnora and their children and their spouses built and fished a fleet of 12 Salmon gillnetters, 4 Herring skiffs and 2 packing boats. More employees were added and Bruce and Elnora were blessed with grandchildren. A wholesale and retail fish business, and a processing facility and smokehouse were added to Bruce's Market.

Salmon became a feature at Bruce's Market, and business went well. A new Bruce's Country Market replaced the old store and was opened on April 2, 1996.

Many thousands of friends and customers have passed through the doors of Bruce's Market since 1948. Bruce and Elnora's children and grandchildren have taken over management of the business. Fishing remains a big part of the family tradition, and livelihood. Bruce and Elnora continue to work in the store when they're not on holidays or busy with their friends, grandchildren or other relatives.

Bruce's Country Market has earned a reputation for quality product and friendly "country" service, much to the credit of Bruce and Elnora.

But none of that would have happened had Elnora not been able to hang onto the tow line of the "Noel", the last boat in the line as it went surging by at 2:00 A.M. May 16, 1945.

A wonderful miracle!! We think so and we're grateful for it!

Darrel and Kathleen McEachern
 Tammy, Jeff and Megan Radom
 Ryan and Leona McEachern
 Sarah McEachern and Corey Brown
 Becky McEachern

Glenna and John Murray Angus and Marjorie McEachern
 Brad Murray Krista McEachern

Jennifer and Aubrey Moore Devin McEachern
 Aaron Murray Chad McEachern
 Greg Murray

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