

The Chautauqua Lake Fizzle

By Margaret K. Look

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Chautauqua Lake was the site of the most bizarre sporting event of the late 19th century. It was the sculling race between Charles Courtney, the leading professional single sculler in the United States, and Edward Hanlan, his Canadian counterpart. It was scheduled for October 16, 1879, but never took place, because Courtney's boat was sawed in two the night before the contest. The culprit was never found, and the aborted race remains a highlight in rowing history.

In the late 1870s, rowing was rapidly becoming the national sport in America. The prizes for professionals were often large, and the races attracted many gamblers. The promoters were businesses, wealthy individuals, railroads and steamship companies which transported people to the race sites.

Courtney had learned to row on Cayuga Lake, New York near his hometown of Union Springs where he and a brother had a carpentry business. Hanlan, a native of Toronto, had learned to row while living on an island in Toronto Bay where his father had a saloon.

By the summer of 1876 Courtney, who had rowed 88 races as an amateur single sculler and never lost one, also won the international amateur championship at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. Hanlan, who had been rowing very successfully as a professional, won the professional prize at that Exhibition. Later that year, Courtney became a professional sculler.

After 1876, both men won many races as professionals, but hadn't rowed against each other until they met on October 3, 1878 at Lachine on the St. Lawrence River near Montreal. Debris, drifting buoys and other boats obstructed the racecourse so much that, although Hanlan was decreed the winner, the outcome was challenged by the race promoters, the public, and the newspapers. They demanded a rematch.

Chautauqua Lake race was chosen as the place for the contest, because neither man had rowed there, the weather would probably be good, it was a popular resort area with good accommodations at hotels, and it was within easy railroad distance from large cities like Buffalo and Pittsburgh.

The racecourse was to be five miles with turn, starting at Mayville and turning at Fair Point, now Chautauqua Institution. It was to be rowed under the rules of the National Association of Amateur Oarsmen, between three and six in the afternoon on smooth water. The referee was William Blaikie, a celebrated Harvard oarsman and New York City attorney, who was empowered to postpone the race to the next day or to the first favorable day. Also, he could order the men to row again on the first favorable day if any outside interference affected the result of the race. This point of the agreement was a touchy issue on the final outcome.

The race was originally scheduled for October 8, but soon after Hanlan arrived on September 23, he said he was not feeling well and asked for a postponement until October 16. Courtney protested, but to no avail. The prize was \$6,000, put up by Asa T. Soule, president of the Hop Bitters Company of Rochester, New York.

Hanlan brought several trainers and three shells, including his racing shell named *Louise* for one of Queen Victoria's daughters. After staying briefly at two hotels, he finally settled at the Chautauqua House in Mayville. Known internationally for his rowing prowess, Hanlan was Canada's first athletic hero. By 1879, he had rowed thirty-one races professionally and won twenty-eight. Newspapers described him as "the little giant" with well-developed muscles from his neck to his heels. Crowds gathered to watch him practice in Toronto Bay. By 1879 he had a wife and small daughter in Toronto, and said he rowed professionally to support them.

Courtney arrived on September 24 on a special railway car from Rochester with his trainer, Frenchy Johnson, some other associates, and two shells, including his racing shell called "*Hop Bitters*," in honor of Soule's company. He stayed at the John W. Cornell residence, about a mile and a half from Mayville, toward Fair Point. The house is still there, as of 2006. Newspapers wrote of Courtney, "His bronzed complexion and muscles like bundles of steel show that the Canadian has one hard race ahead of him."

Newspapers such as *The Daily Graphic*, *Harper's Weekly* and the *Canadian Illustrated* joined the local papers from Jamestown, Auburn, Buffalo and Rochester in covering every detail of the contestants' lives. For example, Hanlan ate "good food, but no pastry. He takes a bottle of Bass Pale Ale with his meals." Another paper said Hanlan never took stimulants, "but makes regular ten-mile walks and did two pulls in a scull." As

for Courtney, a paper reported that he “is satisfied with the fare except for the water which is impalatable. He never partakes of wine, spirits or malt liquor. He takes long walks every day and an occasional spirited run and two vigorous pulls in his boat. He does not row on Sundays” Spectators came by boat and on foot to watch the men practice. Steamboats had regular trips to watch the men practice.

By October 15, the day before the race, carpenters had erected a 2,000-foot grandstand that faced the start and finish near Mayville. On its three sides, high board fences made an enclosure for refreshment booths. A spur of the railroad had been built from Mayville to Fair Point, and all seats on the observations cars had been sold. Steamboats, smaller steamers and every kind of craft on the lake were being prepared to carry spectators. A telegraph line had been installed between the grandstand and the Western Union office.

In anticipation of the race, communities along Chautauqua Lake were humming with activity, especially Mayville. Hotels had been booked full several weeks ahead of time, and private homeowners were taking the overflow. The Mayville dock had been converted into a beer garden where vendors were selling lager and sandwiches as well as pictures of the two men, ties with their colors and every imaginable gimmick to promote the men.

Betting reached a fever pitch. “Every game of chance and skill, from that which is played ‘on the square’ to the most base are in full blast,” one newsman noted. The main pool box, a booth where bets were sold, was opened by Quimby and Forse, well-known New York pool operators. Odds were 50 to 35 in favor of Hanlan.

Ever since the arrival of the two oarsmen, their boathouses had attracted a great deal of attention. Hanlan’s was surrounded by a high board fence to keep away the curious crowds. As race day approached, Courtney hired several men to take turns staying at his boathouse as sentinels.

October 16th dawned clear, cool and partly sunny after an early morning fog lifted. But the village of Mayville was in an uproar. The word had spread early that Courtney’s boats had been sawed in two. Speculation was rampant. Who sawed the boats? Would the race be rowed? What of the bets that had been made?

Courtney told two newsmen, "Boys, they sawed my boats in two." Then he explained that he was awakened at 5:30 that morning by Bob Larmon and Burt Brown, amateur oarsmen who had been hired to guard his boats. The men told Courtney that they left the boathouse at six in the evening before to go to Mayville for supper and on an errand. They returned to the boathouse at 8:30 and found the door at the east end open. Upon entering they discovered both boats had been cut.

Larmon and Brown did not tell Courtney, but went to Frenchy, his trainer, who told them not to disturb Courtney until morning, because the oarsmen needed his rest. When they broke the news to Courtney the next morning, he went immediately to look at the damage. He wept like a baby.

The racing shell was sawed nearly through and in a diagonal direction twelve feet, ten inches from the bow. The practice shell was sawed six feet, four inches from the stern, about three-fourths of the way through. The rear door of the boathouse and hooks inside the boathouse had been tampered with. A band saw was found in the eighteen inches of water beneath the boats.

Courtney had spent the evening before visiting with Mrs. Cornell and her daughter. They heard something hit the house. Looking outside they saw a man disappear in the darkness. Rumors flew around town that Courtney had sawed his own boats or had had Frenchy do it, that the saw belonged to Frenchy, that the boathouse had been left unguarded on purpose. Later it was discovered that the saw belonged to a confectioner from Rochester who brought it to use in building his booth near the grandstand.

Referee Blaikie asked Courtney to row in another boat, either Frenchy's or one of Hanlan's, but Courtney said he could not do himself justice in another boat and asked for a ten-day postponement to give him time to get another boat from E. Waters and Sons of Troy, New York, where he bought all his boats. Despite all Blaikie's attempts to get Courtney to row in a borrowed boat, the American oarsman said he could not row until he could get a new one. Then, he said, he would be happy to race Hanlan.

In response to those who said that Courtney had paid some of his men to cut his boats, or that he had done it himself so he would not have to face Hanlan, Courtney said he would stake his life on the fact that none of his men did it. And he repeated that he would race Hanlan as soon as he had a new boat.

As four o'clock approached, the word was that only Hanlan would row. The crowds, diminished only slightly, lined the shore and filled the observation railroad cars, the grandstand and the steamers to see the famous Canadian oarsman go over the course alone.

Hanlan received the check, written by Blaikie, for the purse of \$6,000 which had been deposited in Blaikie's name in a Rochester bank, but when Hanlan took it to the bank, the cashier said he could not get the money because the certificate of deposit, which Soule had, had to accompany the check and be signed by Blaikie. Soule refused to give up the certificate of deposit on the ground that the conditions demanded that both men row. Hanlan did not get the \$6,000.

Although Hanlan rowed the course, Quimby and Forse declared all bets and pools off unless they have been made with the stipulation of "play or pay." Blaikie was criticized for violating the agreement by letting Hanlan row alone and by not postponing the race. The agreement said that in case of outside interference, the referee should order the men to row over again on the first favorable day under the original conditions. One newspaper said, "Refusal of Courtney's courteous request for postponement came with poor grace from Hanlan who had forced the postponement."

The week before, Courtney had told Blaikie about offers he had received since coming to Chautauqua Lake to fix the race. One of the many offers was a note in pencil on the back of a telegram form and called for Courtney to receive half the prize money and half the money in the main pool box if he let Hanlan win. Courtney refused to sign the scribbled note. Also, he said his life had been threatened, and therefore he had been carrying a gun for the last few days.

A rematch between Courtney and Hanlan was held on the Potomac River in Washington, D.C. the following May. Courtney was suffering from a heat stroke and could not complete the race. Hanlan received the \$6,000 prize money.

What had been billed as the "race of the century" became known as "The Chautauqua Lake Fizzle." It led to the end of rowing as a national sport. The public became tired of the "crookedness" of the promoters, gamblers, and those who "fixed" the races. Courtney was always entirely willing to stand by his statement the he had had nothing to do with the damaging of his boats.

Courtney continued to row professionally for a few years, then in 1885 started coaching at Cornell University. For three decades his crews were the champion collegiate oarsmen. He died in 1920. Hanlan went on to rowing competitions in England and won world sculling championships. He was given a state funeral in Canada when he died in 1908.

Dispute about the race surfaced again in a letter which was written to Courtney on May 8, 1900, twenty-one years after the race, but was not unearthed until 1983 in the Cornell University rowing department files. The letter contained a statement from Edwin Irwin, Jr. of Chautauqua who, on May 8, 1900 told A. Wilson Dods of Fredonia, that his (Irwin's) father had been in the boathouse next to Courtney's when some of Hanlan's backers talked to Courtney the day before the race, offering to buy him off. Courtney refused. The statement also said that the father saw one of Courtney's backers come to the boathouse and enter it the night before the race, while Courtney's brother and another man had gone to Mayville to get a shave. The elder Irwin heard some sawing, then saw the backer come out with a saw, which he threw into the lake as far as he could.

Because the intruder is identified only as "Courtney's backer," there is no way of knowing which Courtney supporter it may have been. The statement does not agree with the earlier accounts that Courtney said Larmon and Brown had been hired to guard his boats. Nor does the statement refer to the saw belonging to the Rochester confectioner.

Dods, who took the statement from the younger Irwin, said the only explanation he had for the concealment of these facts was that the elder Irwin let Courtney's backer know he was caught and was bought off to keep his mouth shut, and that his son Ed Irwin would not speak during his father's lifetime.

Courtney's reaction to this statement and the letter is unknown. There is no record of any comment in his papers at the Cornell University Archives. Courtney's character and integrity were not questioned by those who knew him well at the time of the Chautauqua Lake episode, nor by any who knew him afterward. At the time and down through the years, the general opinion of rowing historians has been that Courtney himself was not involved in damaging his boats. In 1879 Courtney was a relatively unsophisticated young man, an athletic celebrity who was used by others. Whether the

culprits came from his camp, or from Hanlan's camp, or from some other group, remains a mystery.

In his book, *Courtney and Cornell Rowing*, C. V. P. Young says: "Whenever in the course of his long and busy life, the matter was broached with some heat now and again by one of his friends he always waved him aside, with 'Never mind, my boy; it will all come out right in the end.'"

Courtney became famous nationwide as a rowing coach. He is remembered at Cornell for his modest, quiet demeanor and his special interest in the men on his crews. He was the first coach to insist that the oarsmen keep up their scholastic work if they wanted to row. He also felt that rowing was the ideal exercise, suitable for everyone. He set up intramural rowing for men and women and helped blind students to participate. For his crews he insisted on integrity, devotion to the task at hand and fairness, the same characteristics he showed in his own life..

FOOTNOTE

The bloom was off professional sculling after the Chautauqua Lake race and the subsequent encounter between Courtney and Hanlan on the Potomac River in May 1880. A disgusted public gave sculling races less and less attention. But stories of that era prevailed for many years, and even today make "good copy," as newsmen say.

One such tale comes from Chautauqua County, the scene of the aborted race and the infamous dealings of the gamblers. The following account was sent to the author by the late Robert Wright, an attorney in Jamestown, New York.

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Not only did the regatta attract the boating and betting fraternity, but it also drew a periphery of petty thieves and pickpockets who plied their nefarious trade among the gala crowds. The late Marion H. Fisher, prominent Jamestown attorney, delighted in telling this story about his father, Chautauqua County Judge Jerome B. Fisher.

As Judge Fisher strolled about Mayville on the day before the scheduled race, enjoying the holiday atmosphere and greeting friends, he suddenly became aware that his gold watch and chain were missing. He sought out the sheriff, who suggested that they meet at a certain hotel in an hour.

When Judge Fisher arrived, there was a message for him to come to one of the rooms. A knock at the door brought admittance. There stood the sheriff with two of the shady characters, and there on the bed, more than 50 watches were laid out. Judge Fisher quickly spotted his timepiece and returned it to his vest pocket. As he was leaving the room, he overheard the sheriff admonishing the culprits to be more careful in selecting future victims.