

Sailors' Suppers

Items of Interest from the Grey Roots Museum Collection

Joan Hyslop

In the nineteenth and twentieth century, there were Black marine personnel on Great Lakes ships. Often they worked as labourers, cooks, stewards, ship porters, or deck hands. As they were away so much



Charley Burns, Edward "King" Green, and Orville "Bunky" Miller, shown in their shipboard working attire, 1948. This image was kept for many years by Mrs. Beatrice Tillman of Owen Sound.

during the navigation season, and thereby not available to support their church each Sunday, annual "Sailors' Suppers" were held to help fundraise for the British Methodist Episcopal (B.M.E.) Church. Deaconess Addie Aylestock (b. 1909-d.1998), who served at the Owen Sound B.M.E. church in the 1946-1951 period, mentioned that the Owen Sound congregation was small because so many of its members were employed on the boats.¹

usually obtain elsewhere. Black women often became marine workers after they had their children. When interviewing Mrs. Leona (Scott) Molock and Mrs. Beatrice Tillman in 1995, Stephanie McMullen learned that many parents were forced economically to leave their children in the care of the oldest child or grandparents, so that they could sail on the Great Lakes, working as cooks and porters. Outside of navigation season, Black workers were also employed at local restaurants and hotels.² What better way to

Apparently in the first half of the twentieth century, ship work offered better pay and more work, albeit seasonal, than what Blacks could

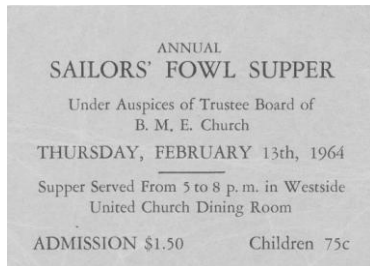
Participants of a Sailors' Supper at Owen Sound, Ontario



Participants of a Sailors' Supper at Owen Sound, Ontario

¹ Croft, Melba Morris, *Renewal of a Canadian Port (Owen Sound on Georgian Bay)*, 1993, p. 307.

² McMullen, Stephanie, her essay, *Race Relations in Owen Sound in the 1920s and 1930s: A Study of a Small Ontario Town and Its People*, 1995, p. 5. (Grey Roots Archival Collection)



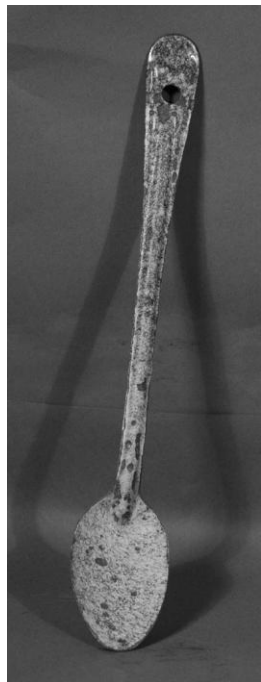
Ticket Card

Alonzo McClure donated a job-printed green ticket for a Feb. 13, 1964 "Sailors' Fowl Supper" at Owen Sound. It is 6.7 cm x 9.2 cm, and was likely printed locally. It had been kept for many years by his Mom, Eliza (Harrison) McClure Burns. Does anyone know when the Sailors' Suppers ceased? Did any other Canadian ports have such gatherings?

The Courtney, Green, Miller, McCarter, Burns,

Earl / Earls / Earlls, Johnson, White, Harrison and other families had ship workers in the 20th-century, and participated in the Sailors' Suppers. Some of the marine personnel had very long careers on the boats. David

W. Earls, who worked as a cook, was with the Mohawk Navigation Co. for 18 years, with the Dominion Transportation Co. for 20 years, and prior to that worked on the Canadian Pacific Railway boats and the Algoma Central Line.⁴



Basting spoon – a familiar object to a 20th Century cook. (2006.003.002)



Sailors' Supper Kitchen Staff, c. 1950, photograph by Edwin Fraser (Fraser's Studio, Owen Sound)
1st Row: Shirley Cooper-Courtney, Josephine Courtney, Jacklin Courtney, Helen Green, Molly Miller, Betty Miller, Thelma Taylor, Mary Bowie, Lizzie Green.
2nd Row: Edith McCarter, Ella Green, Betty Johns, Elizabeth Burns, Lena Miller, Mattie Earls, Net Earls, King Green, Mr. White, Wilmer Johnson, Maude Harrison
Back Row: Norman Green, David Earls, Thomas Earl Sr.

It sounds like the boats were unhealthy work environments. William Norman Green (known as "Bill Green") worked for 30 years as a chef on several ships. These vessels carried coal, ore and grain between ports. Apparently the ships had a lot of airborne coal dust to breathe in, especially in the kitchens,

← Although we do not know if it was ever used at any of the Sailors' Suppers, this 15-inch long grey and white-coloured graniteware basting spoon was formerly owned by Mrs. Eliza McClure, b. 1895 (Elizabeth A. Harrison), later known as Mrs. Elizabeth (Eliza) Burns. Eliza worked as a stewardess on various vessels, and her sister, Mattie Earls (Mrs. David Earls, nee Martha Harrison) was also a marine worker. Both ladies are shown in the above image, as is David Earls.

³ Croft, Melba Morris, *Renewal of a Canadian Port: Owen Sound on the Georgian Bay*, 1993, p. 80.

⁴ Obituary of David W. Earls, *The Owen Sound Sun-Times*, May 2, 1966.

where a coal-fired stove would burn twenty-four hours a day. Ventilation was poor, and Mr. Green also mentioned that there were ammonia fumes from the refrigerators. Later in his life, Mr. Green suffered terribly from pulmonary problems possibly acquired because of these working conditions.⁵ We expect that being at home port, cooking for friends and supporting one's church, would have been much more enjoyable than working in a ship's galley, or serving food during rough seas.



*Foster Bros. meat cleaver
(2008.055.001)*

← This Foster Bros. meat cleaver was passed down from William Henry Harrison of Owen Sound, to his son Sam Harrison, who worked on various vessels. Sam Harrison passed it down to his son, Ron Harrison, who donated it to the Grey Roots Collection in 2008.

⁵ Smith, Sandra, "Workers Often Suffer Alone", *The Owen Sound Sun-Times*, undated clipping, likely 1980s as it shows Mr. Green late in life, with oxygen tubes, and someone noted "Deceased Dec. 1991" on the clipping. Grey Roots Archival Collection.