A Boilermaker's Story: Percy W. Wilson

Percy Wilson started his career in Victoria, B.C., at the age of 15 in 1900. In his own words he tells us about working at his trade from Prince Rupert, BC, to San Francisco, CA. His adventures as a Boilermaker apprentice, journeymen, supervisor and union leader took him through two world wars, the great depression and industrial development on the west coast of North America.

A Boilermakers Story; Percy W. Wilson.

1900 - 1954

Chapter 1

The Apprenticeship.

I, Percy W. Wilson, was born October 5th 1886 at 7:30 AM in London England. My Mother & Father were Caroline and Henry Wilson. They moved the whole family half way across the world when I was just a toddler to Victoria, British Columbia, after father sold his chainless bicycle patent to the Raleigh Bicycle Company for 100 British pounds in 1889.

In 1900, at the age of 15, my father asked if I wanted to start work. I said yes, as lot of boys at that age were working. My first job was at the Victoria Machinery Depot Company (VMD) Boilershop from, 7 AM to 6 PM; ten long hours for a 15-year-old, fresh from playing all day to the Boilershop floor. As an apprentice, I received five cents per hour. Most apprentices who worked for the other companies in Victoria worked for free for the first six months.

To help at home, I was allowed to keep 10% of my wages, giving me 60 cents to spend every two weeks; if there was any overtime, father would let me keep all of my overtime pay. In 1900 Victoria, you get six loaves of bread for 25 cents. Boilermakers at that time were making $3.50 a day, while most other tradesmen were making $3.00 a day, for pick-and-shovel work at $1.00 per day. After six months of working at VMD, the employer was satisfied with my abilities. They raised my wage to 75 cents per day, something no other apprentice ever received before one year's time.

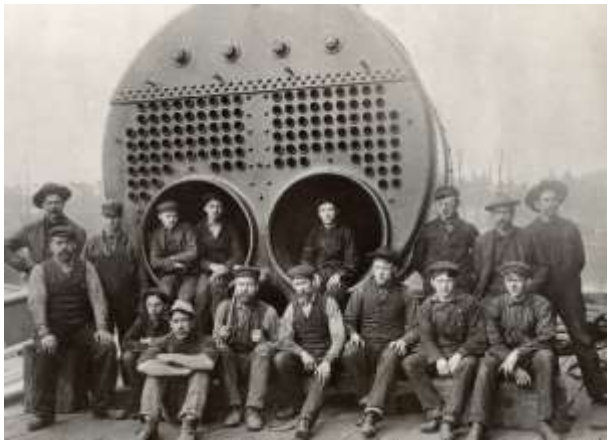

Figure 1 - Proud Boilermakers with a finish product. Note the young people, photo taken at the same time Percy Wilson started his apprenticeship in 1900.

There was a waiting list of boys who wanted to learn the trade, about 125 when I started work. A lot would work a week or month then quit. When the company was busy, they would hire lots of boys and expect them to do men's work, to get cheap labour. After some years, the union brought in a rule that there was to be one apprentice for every 5 mechanics; this would allow the apprentice to learn the trade and help to develop a pool of skilled workers.

Figure 2 Mechanics using air guns, very loud work with a lot of vibration. Caused Boilermaking hearing and white knuckle disease.

When the air guns and drills came in, a compressor was installed in a corner of the shop by the foreman's office and tool room. The compressor had to be kept cool by water from the harbour under the shop floor. Of course, a lot of water was spilled onto the floor at the entrance of the boss's office. When the big, heavy dynamo's brushes got dirty, the air pipe would carry a light shock to the values on the far side of the shop.

By placing a crowbar from the value to the steel plates on the floor, a mild electric shock was carried back to the office door. With everything being wet, a nice shock was given to anyone going in or out of the office.

The only thing our foreman was afraid of was electricity. When the bar was placed against the air pipe, the connection was made. When the boss came out of his office, he would receive a nice shock, let out a yell and cuss, then storm up to the main office to phone for an electrician, who was met by one of the mechanics who put him wise to what was going on. He would take a look at the dynamo brushes and tell the boss it was dirty brushes.

This same old compressor had a lot to do with me quitting before my five years were up.

I was told to work with a certain mechanic who had the most violent temper of any man I knew. While working one day, he hit his hand with his ball-peen hammer. After a few choice words, he heaved his hammer right across the shop and then he told me to go get it. A shop steward came forward and said "you do not have to go get it kid, he threw it so he can go get it." The mechanic walked over to get his hammer rubbing his hands

and calmed down after a few minutes. One would not know anything had happened.

There was another time when there was no room or place to hang our coats, only nails in the shop posts. There were no changing rooms in those days. This certain mechanic got to work one day, looked around for a place to hang his coat and found no free nails. So he just took one of the apprentices' coats off a nail and dropped it on the floor. Then he hung up his coat on that nail. The apprentice got a nail and nailed the mechanic's coat to the post properly. When the whistle blew for the end of the day, the mechanic grab his coat off the post but it would not come down. He yanked and pulled until his coat was in ribbons and never wore it again, going home in his shirt sleeves.

In 1902 a reduction in working hours was obtained from 10 to 9 hours per day, which was a godsend. So a Boilermaker was now earing $3.50 per day for 9 hours. A number of mechanics could not add up their time, especially if they had some overtime. It was, "hey kid, add up my time" or trust the company to pay them correctly.

An apprentice in his first six months had to heat rivets when the work called for riveting. A boy always went along with the gang on any outside work to do any minor job that was required, like hold the lights. I know of only one boat that had electric light, so we had to use candles, smudge pots, lanterns and keep our eyes open to see how the work was done to learn. I do not know of any boy who was ever told how to do things. If one was doing something wrong, it was "you darn fool, don't you know better, try to get things right."

The smudge pots used for lights on some boats caused a good many strikes and arguments. When three or four pots were used in a small space, issuing their black smoke, they made everyone black inside and out. It was no wonder, when the whistle blew, the nearest saloon was visited to try to wash away the inside of the person.

There was a lot of opposition to the air guns when they came into the shop. The men thought that they would do them out of work They would pour emery dust into the gun and in no time it would not work. Then they'd tell the boss the gun was not good, who, wanting the job done, would tell them to go on by hand, which they wanted to do.

Some jobs were very dirty for us apprentices. One of the jobs was to renew the top of a tug smoke stack, with the fire not long out and the fine dust and soot still coming up. I was placed in a boatswain's chair, hoisted up in the air and lowered down inside the stack to put the bolts in about four feet down. Perspiration rolling out of me and wiping my face with my dirty hands, I soon was very black and shone like mahogany when the job was done, so they let me go home. On the way, I saw my father going to town, and knowing I was very black, I let him pass me. At the supper table, I was properly cleaned up. I asked my father, "Don't you speak to your own son when you pass him?" He said he did not pass me, but remembered passing a coloured boy. When I told him that it was me he could hardly believe it, I was so black.

Working on an old-design boiler is against the law now. But I had to go inside and down the bottom of one as apprentice. Being so slight, I was one of the few who was able to shove myself in the bottom of the boiler. At twelve o'clock I was told to come out. The other men left for their lunch, but I could not get out. After about twenty minutes, one of the mechanics came back, said he had not seen me go for lunch and wanted see what the matter was. Perspiration pouring out of me and getting worked up, he told me to go to the bottom of the boiler again to cool off and relax. He told me that my body had swollen up, staying there and talking to me all the time. After when he said "try again," which I did with a lot of struggling, I managed to get out just as the one o'clock whistles were blowing. I later went into the boiler after my lunch to finish the job.

Working close to a big boiler — it was about 20ft long by 6ft in diameter — which some of the men were working to turn around, it suddenly jumped the rollers and rolled towards me. All I could do was back up. Fortunately for me, there was a 12" x 12" upright in the shop which the boiler hit with a crash, saving me from being crushed. The men, unable to see me at first, thought I was finished, and when the boiler bounced back, they were greatly relieved to see I was unhurt.

When it was hot, a good many of the apprentices would go swimming at noon time. We would run and dive off the wharf, swim out to the whaling schooners, climb up the rigging and dive in again. When the one o'clock whistle blew we would swim back to work, and our clothes would dry on us.

Because it was salt water, no one ever got a cold. With all the tricks that were played at work there was an overall good feeling — we seldom saw an argument.

In the off-hours the boys played basketball and lacrosse, even winning city championships. The community started to build clubhouses, which people would use for sports, dances and other community events. Everything was going well in the shop work. Father arranged a course for me — the International Correspondence School for Mechanical Drawing — that paid off a great deal in the years to come. Working, playing lacrosse and studying the mechanical drawing program at the same time filled my days, but I was able to get through it.

Figure 3 - The whaling fleet tied up at the VMD 1912. Credit; BC Provincial Archives.

Once, going out of the shop to work on the slip, another man and I were looking a job over. Some shipwrights were moving a 6 x 6 upright nearby, which got away from them and fell on my head. I was wearing a plug hat at the time, which saved me, as the hat was driven down tightly upon my head. The air inside saved me from a bad smash, it being so tight that it took two men to pull it off.

The novelty of the riveting and chipping guns had worn off with new and much better ones that had not yet been tried out on the side of a ship. As it always had been the custom for two men to work by hand, the foreman (being afraid to ask a mechanic to use a riveting gun) directed us apprentices to do it. Being the senior apprentice, I had the job and became the first man in Victoria to drive rivets on the side of a ship by gun.

I joined the Boilermakers and the Iron Ship Builders Union, of which I was a member for 50 years, gradually being sent out to jobs classified as a mechanic. The company paid me $2.00 per day and charged $10.00 to $12.00 per day, depending on the job, for my services.

My father, who was working as an engineer on a boat and had to sign the bill after my employer was done work on it, asked me what I was worth. Not knowing much about it I said “they paid me 5 cents per hour and

mechanics get $3.50 a day." He told me "my employer had been charged that afternoon for work done. Your employer charged $5.00 per day for you, plus $10.00 per day for mechanics."

At my first union meeting there were three fistfights and two chairs broken. There had been trouble at Esquimalt, certain accusations were made, and from there the fun started. Six months later I was elected Inner Guard — some job for a young fellow. When some members having a drink too many before the meeting started trouble, the Local Lodge President would say, "Brother Inner Guard, put the Brother out," and that was that — never any trouble.

Going out of the shop on boiler-repair jobs provided good experience on the job, as no book could tell how to handle all types of repair work. The spring of 1906 was another turning point of my life. Having to make a boiler with a higher steam pressure, the foremen told me not to drive any rivets unless the air pressure gauge showed 125 lbs. Our old compressor (previously mentioned) was on its last legs. We were only able to drive a rivet when the air pressure would go down. It would take half an hour to build up again; at this rate we would be lucky to drive 10 or 12 rivets in the morning against about 200 under normal conditions.

The manager, walking through the shop, saw me sitting still and stormed into the boss's office to give him an earful about the men sitting still. The boss, followed by the manager, came over to me and tried to give me an earful, loud enough for the manager to hear him. I pointed to the gauge, which was way down, as he kept cussing me. I lifted my leg over the handrail, jumped to the ground, grabbed my coat and ran home.

In the afternoon VMD sent a man to the house saying that the boss wanted me to come back. I refused, and the next day he sent notice that he wanted me to meet him at his house after 5 o'clock. I did so and we wrangled all over again. He very nearly apologized to me, saying, "What could I do, with the manager at my back?" I said I would not come back unless I received full mechanic's money. Then he got mad, telling me I would never get a job in Victoria and that I would have to get down on my knees and beg him for a job. I told him I would never do that and left him.

The foreman from another shop, having heard I had quit, sent for me and asked what I was going to do. I told him I was going away. He asked if I

had any money in my pocket, and I told him no. He said he had about two weeks' work if I cared to work for him at full money. I was one of a very few boys who received full money in their home town. Every apprentice had to leave town and get experience to be recognized as a mechanic.

After this job was completed, I was walking with a friend up Johnston Street in Victoria when I told him I was going to San Francisco to look for work. My friend then told me I couldn't go there because there had been an earthquake. So the following week I went to Seattle, about the middle of April 1906.

Chapter 2

Facing the World

Things were cheap in Seattle at the time, a twenty-one meal ticket went for $5.00. It was a good substantial meal — soup, meat, potatoes and pie. Seattle was all working-class. Room rent was not demanded in advance; a good room went for $3.00 per week. As there was lot of work, no one needed to beat his room rent bill. A year later this all changed with the panic in 1907.

The first shop I went to in the morning after arriving in Seattle hired me right away. I obtained a furnished room on Pipe Street, where I stayed until I left for Tacoma in September, after Labour Day.

There were quite a number of Victoria boys over there. We used to eat in a nice restaurant at the corner of 1st and Pike Street where we'd gather to meet girls. House parties were going strong, just as in Victoria. I escorted a young lady to a house party one evening and saw her home safely, which was the other side of the lake. The 2 a.m. streetcar which we caught was the last one to go around the lake that night, a fact I did not know. I asked the operator when the next car would be along, and he said the next one was the milk train, which would come along about 3:30 a.m. or so. I had plenty of time to take the young lady home and catch the milk train back to Seattle, getting home at 4 or 4:30 a.m.. We were all having a good time; there was something doing every night.

Seattle was not as well organized as Victoria in regard to union shops. When the shop steward asked me whether I belonged, I handed him my union card. He was very pleased to know that I had one. He introduced me to a number of mechanics who became good and friendly. About three quarters of the shop were union men. A couple of us mechanics were sent out of town to central Washington State for a two-week job. One morning, while I was washing myself outside the bunk house, I suggested to the man next to me that it was "a bit nippy this morning." He said yes it was — two below zero. This was the first time in my life I had experienced weather below zero, and the only place to wash up was outside.

Working at a shipyard with another man, we were riveting up a renewed plate on the side of a big freighter at the water line. We were on a raft, using electric lights hanging from overhead as low down as possible. About 9:30 p.m., a big swell from the Princess Victoria hit the side of the freighter and pitched us into the Seattle Harbour, right in the middle of diving a rivet. Both of us had to swim back to the raft, salvaging as many tools as possible. We got straightened out and finished the job in our wet clothes, without ever showing a hint of a cold.

I was sent out on another job with about a dozen mechanics and helpers, working days and nights. One night, a week before the job was finished, the boss came to me and said the he was leaving, having obtained the head boss job in another large shop. He told me I was to look after this job. I told him that I was just out of my time and that some the men were old enough to be my father. He said I was the only one he did not have to check and correct, as he did with some of the other men's work (some of the mechanics could not read a drawing). This is where my studying the mechanical drawing program helped me.

I took the time to study each mechanic's book, a total of 24. If I did not know their names I would ask. I gave each mechanic and his helper their books casually, asking how things were going. If they'd had any doubts that the work was not correct, I would tell them how it was done and leave them alone. I never had any trouble with any of the men. So I was a boss of a gang in Seattle when I was only 19 years old.

About a week or so later, seeing that the job was nearly finished, I asked the chief engineer if there was any chance of joining the crew going to

Japan and China as a Boilermaker, as I wanted to travel. The Engineer said yes. After finishing up the job I went back to the shop. I tried to quit and draw my money — about $155.00, which at $21.00 per week was nearly two months' pay. The company refused to give me my money because I had not given them long enough notice. With proper notice, I'd be paid on a date which would have been about five days after the boat left, so that trip was blocked to me.

Working in a shipyard on an American battleship for a while, the foreman came to me and said that, tomorrow, I'd have to work on another boat. I asked him what was the matter, wondering if my work was not satisfactory. He asked me if I was from Canada; I said yes. He told me no one except Americans could work on a battleship after it was three-quarters completed. This same thing happened to me at San Francisco later on.

At a union meeting about this time we were discussing working conditions. I mentioned that Victoria had better work rules. Some bright bird said, "Let's get a committee to go into the office and see if anything can be done." The union rules called for five on a committee when going into the office. The Local Lodge President named the committee, with me being the last one, as I was able to speak of better conditions in Victoria.

We went in to see the manager and after hearing us for a little while, he flew into a rage. His face got red as a beet, and he threatened to get the militia out after us and a trainload of goons to take our places. We were all finished, he said.

Going to the union meeting that night to report on our reception, we were informed that we were now marked men. We were advised to get out of town for a few months. At the conclusion of the meeting, two Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) men came to me and told me that they would see me home, which they did. They told me if I wanted a drink not to go into any of three saloons they mentioned — I would either be slugged or drugged and would wake up in the gutter with my pockets turned inside out.

The next morning I went to get my money. By carefully watching and following the advice I'd been given, I received my money, as no notice was needed because the manager had kicked us out. I cashed my cheque up town, packed up my gear and left for Tacoma by boat. Things had certainly changed for me in a few days.

For the six months I stayed in Seattle, I made lots of friends and gathered lots of clothes. I even bought a beautiful solid leather suitcase for almost $40.00, so one way or another I had blown my hard-earned money, but at least had something to show for it.

Hearing that the Northern Pacific Railway shop in southern Tacoma was looking for men, I made my way there. I was hired immediately. Most of the nearby hotels were full, but I did find one. The best restaurant in town was at another hotel and I picked up a twenty-one meal ticket to eat there.

Some parts of the trade are very dirty. On repair work, the fine soot would find its way through all our clothes to the skin, making it necessary to have a nightly bath to keep clean. With only one bath on each floor of the hotel, and with so many other men, by the time I got into the bathroom the water was cold. I ended up joining the Tacoma YMCA where I could have a nightly bath and a swim. The YMCA gave me the opportunity to meet with people, through sport and theatre.

Therewas a big foundry halfway between Tacoma and South Tacoma where a friend worked. The boarding house where he lived had two other Victoria boys staying there. The landlady was very nice, and since I knew three of her boarders I was welcomed to come over. She even invited me over for the America thanksgiving dinner. She was a good cook.

There was a small church or community hall used for socials and such. One night there was a supper and an evening of entertainment with a mixed group. I was having a nice time when I noticed a friend of mine go outside with another fellow. A couple minutes later someone came up to me to say my friend was in trouble. I went outside and I saw him in a fist fight. Suddenly, the fellow who told me about the trouble took a swing at me. Before we knew it my friend and I were back to back, fighting five other people. As we were both much stronger than the others we knocked down 3 of them pretty fast. The man running the concert came out, wanting to know what was going on. One of the others said my friend had stolen his girl and gone off. It turned out he was wrong: it was another boy from Victoria who took off with his girl.

I stayed in touch with another apprentice at Victoria. We used to write to one another, about once a month. I told him I was intending to quit and make my way back to Victoria, as I did not like the railroad Boilershop work.

He wrote back, advising me not to come back to Victoria — there was a big strike going on which lasted more than a year. The company brought six Boilermakers from Scotland to break the strike. I wrote him back to say I would be home for Christmas and away again after the New Year.

One thing about the company holding back 21 days' pay at the start of employment, was that after you quit with proper notice it was like getting almost two months' pay.

Getting home to Victoria for Christmas, I was able to enjoy the family and friends I had not seen for a while. After a wonderful and filling Christmas dinner I was laying down on the lounge when my sister and her friends wanted to play; I did not want to. They grabbed my arms and dragged me off the lounge. The contents of my pockets rolled out — $125 dollars' worth of gold coins, in denominations of $20, $10 and $5. The Americans paid in gold, not trusting their banks (dollars were not backed by the government back then). A $20 bill was looked upon with suspicion down there because there were so many counterfeit bills. My mother advised me to put that money in the bank in Victoria before I left again.

The day after New Year's in 1907 I left Victoria for Seattle. I found work immediately there. There were so many Victoria Boilermakers on the job — due to the strike — that it was like old times. This job was at Eagle Harbour across from Seattle at the dock there, and lasted to about the end of January. After that job my friend Al and I decided to make our way to the Port of Portland Dry Dock, for a repair job on a freighter taking six weeks to complete, as it was all done by hand — no air or gun tools. Such a job would be done in 10 days or less today.

Things were pretty tough for unskilled labour with the panic of 1907, but there was work for skilled labour. On every block from Jester Way to Pike Street in Seattle there were two men on each side of the street, four men to a block — begging. Mechanics were lucky: because the boats and plants were tied up and closed, the owners took advantage of the down-time and had their boats and plants overhauled, which kept us skilled workers working.

The hotels were filled up, so we had to stay at a boarding house and eat there — the only time I ever took meals in a rooming house (I always ate in restaurants). The boarding house was about a mile and a half from the

docks and railroad tracks. There were trees with dense bush along a trail to work, so for safety's sake we would travel in a gang. There were reports of men being robbed when walking by themselves or in couples. Remember that people did not trust banks, and most of us were moving job to job, so we carried our money with us. There would be seven of us, each carrying a one-foot lead pipe in his pocket for protection. We made sure that anyone coming along knew we were ready for anything.

After the end of the job at St. John I traveled into Portland to work on a gas holder — it was all field work. The company wanted the crew to go to Los Angles to put up another one there. Some of the crew did, but I decided to go to Vancouver, B.C., not wishing to stay in Seattle.

After arriving in Vancouver, I was able to get a job in a union shop — Vancouver Iron Works. I met some lacrosse players I had played against as a junior back in Victoria. They paid me seven dollars a week to play for their team; this was on top of what I was making at work. In the month of June 1907 it rained for 15 days out of 18. We could not practice, so every night after work we ended up leaning against a store front till 9:00 p.m. I was so disgusted I quit my job and the team to go back to Victoria. On July 1 of that year I returned to Vancouver with a lacrosse team from Victoria and played against them — for nothing.

Getting a job at Esquimalt starting in September was good — it made Mother very happy. A fellow who played with me wanted me to take over a job for him on my twenty-first birthday. After that job I went to work at Esquimalt for about six weeks. Soon after the New Year of 1908 I was off to Portland again.

I was sent on a job out to Longview, Washington to repair a boiler at a logging outfit. There was a good-sized yard, a large supply of logs, bunk houses, a cook shack with proper plates, etc. After finishing this job up, I headed back home for my sister Ethel, who was getting married on June 3, 1908.

The boat dropped me off in Vancouver. I ran into a fellow who had been an apprentice with me back in Victoria. He said the big boss was hiring at his shop — it turned out this was the same fellow who told me I was going to have to get on my knees and beg for a job. I decided to go to Victoria, got a job at Esquimalt for a while, and waited for the wedding. VMD burnt

down. It was rebuilt, and new modern machinery was installed. After Labour Day I went back to Portland for a couple of months of work, where I got sick and lost my voice for 10 days. I decided to go back to Victoria and recover. I did not leave again until I went to San Francisco in 1909.

Chapter 3

Working and Playing in California

In the spring of 1907, I travelled to San Francisco after receiving a letter from some friends who asked me to play lacrosse for them. When the ship, SS Queen, landed at the dock in San Francisco I was greeted by three lacrosse players. One was from West Vic and the other two were from James Bay. I was taken to the Olympic Club to meet the manager of the lacrosse team. He took the time show me around the city for a few days, before he gave me a letter to an employer, who turned out to be with the Imperial Tobacco Company. He offered me a job but not much of a weekly wage. I told him I was a mechanic and he told me where to go, as they were in need of men. He told me that if I did not find a job, to come back to work for him and not to walk the streets.

I was able to find a job in Oakland for about a month; then it was back to San Francisco. I went to work for the Union Iron Works. The average employment was 7500 people and when work was slack, about 5000. I worked first in the shipyard for piecework; later I was transferred to the Boilershop.

While playing lacrosse every week at Golden Gate Park, I did not receive any money because the league had broken up. But in lieu of pay, I was given tickets to all the boxing matches and American football games at Stanford or anything I wanted to see — all first-class seats. The club manager told me, “With ten thousand people at our games, there will be free tickets for players from other clubs watching your games. “This was all in very fine spirit.

The Los Angeles lacrosse team came up for two games during a ten-day stay. Later, the Olympic club was taken to Los Angeles for two games over ten days. It was 97 degrees during those two games, and I spent the rest of the time at the beach. The lacrosse season ended October 1st that year,

so I took up football (soccer) as a goalie. At one practice I had this gentlemen talking to me about who I was, were I worked etc., but thought nothing of it, as everyone spoke to everyone else on the practice field.

Working piecework in the shipyard, I ran into an old friend. He told me the wages were $3.50 per 9-hour day, and that pieceworkers could make $4.50 per day and work from 7 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. and from 1 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. He went on to say that I would not be allowed to make $4.50 per day as I was a new man in the yard. No new man was allowed to make the limit — most everyone made between $4.00 and $4.25. The employer would cut the price per foot if you did work hard and earned the top figure. I stayed at this until I was transferred to the Boilershop.

I worked till I decided to return back home for Christmas. I ran into the 30-day notice regarding my pay, as I was planning on working up until the boat left for Victoria. I decided to go to the office to see what could be done. I asked to see Mr. Birdsall, and when I was invited to go into his office, I recognized him as the man I had been talking to on the field while playing goal. I told him I wanted to go home for Christmas but my pay was being held back due to the lack of 30 days' notice. It turned out he was the manager of football affairs at the Olympic Club. He then pressed a button and told the girl to have my pay ready for the 19th (I would be leaving on the 20th). He asked me when I was coming back and I told him I was thinking about returning early in the New Year. He told me my job would be waiting for me.

My stay in San Francisco for most of the year 1909 was very happy and I had a good time, with lacrosse and football. I was not lonely and could always go to the club for a shower or swim, or write letters in the writing room.

I returned home on the same boat, SS Queen, arriving in Victoria about three days before Christmas. Just before New Year's 1910, I was waiting on a friend when around the corner came my old boss. He put out his hand and asked where I had been. I told him I'd just come home, and he told me he was back at the old shop as the strike was now over. The shop had been cleared of the scabs. He asked me to come back, saying he had invited some of the other old boys back as well.

I told him I was off to Seattle after the New Year. I had bought property at Granite Falls, but a new law had been passed that allowed only Americans to own property in Washington State. He made me promise to come back and work for him — a far cry from the time he'd told me I would have to beg for my job back. There was a certain young lady who helped me to make up my mind about coming back.

Starting work about the second week of January, we soon became very busy. The Princess Adelaide, just out from the old country, had developed boiler trouble, so a fine good Scottish fellow and I were sent over to do some caulking on the ship's boiler. When we arrived, we found steam all over. Crawling into the back end of the boiler with our gauntlet gloves and goggles on, we started to caulk leaking rivets. Soon the fellow let out a yell — "Percy, I am afraid." I told him to hold the big coal shovel in front of my hand. I touched the rivet head with my caulking tool, and saw the rivet head move — steam everywhere. I told him to get out as fast as he could: seeing the rivet move meant a broken rivet, and the boiler could blow out at any moment.

I reported what we found back to the Chief Engineer. He asked if we'd got the tools and material, and told us to travel with them on the 4:30 p.m. triangular run — Victoria, Seattle and Vancouver. I told him what we needed, and he got busy on the phone, calling around for what we needed before we left.

Steam was let out of the boiler and all manways were opened to cool it off. Going into the inside of the boiler to size up the extent of the trouble, I knocked off 17 broken heads of rivets with a scaling hammer. As I climbed out of the boiler a second engineer was there, and I told him what had happened. He accused me of trying to make this a big job. I was not going to take any guff from him, and I told him to go in to see for himself. He did so and knocked a couple more rivets out. As a sort of apology he said, "If I didn't see that myself, I would not have believed it."

Realizing this would be a big job after all, I went up to the chief's room and told him that the Marine Boiler Inspector would demand that all three boilers be inspected and all bad rivets replaced. This was the start of travelling on the triangle run for about six weeks; each gang would make the round trip — 24 hours on, 24 hours off.

We were very busy for three or four years, turning out new boilers fast. There were a lot of whalers to overhaul each spring, and general work on the slip. The whole country was busy. There was a real-estate and building boom in 1912 Victoria. Also, my girlfriend kept me busy in the evenings and weekends.

After that there was a rush job on the Union Steamship Company boat. We were told we'd have to work overtime for three days and nights. We were paid double time, even through meal times and all. We were taken to the restaurant, as they were scared to let us go home for our meals, for we might not come back. On another job that year, on the Princess Victoria, we changed the coal burner to an oil burner. I was now an established outside foreman when the work needed one. I was very happy, having got the job over a number of older mechanics.

I, along with a helper, was sent to a nice job at Rivers Inlet Cannery. The boiler inspector had been there and ordered one rivet renewed. We were able to travel first class. We did the job in half an hour, tested the boiler and returned home — it was a week's worth of travel. Looking over the cannery I saw young Indian girls dressed up in the height of fashion, wearing beautiful fur coats, the best that Eaton's could supply. As there was no way to show them off but at the cannery, these woman would be in their finest, working hard at trying to outdo each other — right there at work, with fish scales all over themselves.

My good lady-friend was staying at Lake Hill with her Aunt Dodi and Uncle Tom Preece who, by the way, weighed over 350 pounds. He was one of the biggest men in Victoria. After a very fine meal one Sunday night, Tom and I sat down in the parlour for a conversation. I told him I was a Boilermaker working at VMD. He asked me how I would fit up a three-foot pipe line with a flange. I told him how, and he said, "You will do the job." I told him I already had a job and was not looking for one. He said it did not matter, as the contract was in the hands of the contractor. I thought no more of it.

Six months later my boss asked me if I knew anyone at the City Water Works; I told him no. He told me to go to the site to see if I could learn anything. It seems they'd asked him to "send Percy Wilson up here." The job was at Government Street and Hillside Avenue. There was big ditch,

about 10 feet deep and very wide at the top. I met the foreman of the Water Works who told me that the contractor for the water main had gone broke and could not finish the job. The foreman was afraid they might get an injunction preventing the city from doing anything. He told me I could work any hours I liked, but the water needed to be flowing before Monday at 10 a.m., the time the judge would be in his office to grant an injunction if he saw fit.

There was a lot of work there: the big 3-foot valve outside measurement was about 5 feet, weighing about a ton and a half laid on the bank, plus a lot of other work to be assembled. We began work on the Friday and worked all Saturday and Sunday. We had water flowing through the main by 6 a.m. Monday morning, using another mechanic and a couple of helpers from the shop.

After that job I was walking past a store that had a sign reading “nothing over 15 cents.” I found a ring in the store, and paid the man in full. That evening I slipped the ring on my girlfriend’s finger. We were very happy for the rest of the night. We got married September 2nd 1914, on my mother’s birthday. Nellie and I went to Portland for a honeymoon and then came back to Victoria to a very nice five-room house we had just furnished. I carried her across the threshold to start a wonderful life together.

I tried to join up for the war but was turned down due to Boilermakers and Shipbuilders being badly needed locally. Such was the demand that 25 Boilermakers were bought from the old country to work in the shipyards.

After starting work at the dockyard in Esquimalt my old boss visited me. The city had asked him to select an inspector for the Old Point Ellice Bridge. I started the next day, going to the bridge where a gang of structural Iron Workers were assembled to do any repairs. I thoroughly inspected every rivet, stay and floor beam over that bridge. This job took till Christmas. At the start of 1915, I went back to VMD.

About 150 mechanics were taken up to Prince Rupert, B.C. to work on the HMS Lancaster for about six weeks in 1915. We went back again in 1916 for another ship. The crew was made up of men from both local lodges in Vancouver B.C. and Victoria.

I went to Jordan River after Prince Rupert to repair and install the penstock there, taking charge of a job that had five helpers. There were a few arguments, usually due to the men carrying their jokes too far, leaving me to act as arbitrator. The mechanics were happy with being so well paid. This job was in order to get more power to the various companies making shells for the war. The job finished up just before Christmas 1916.

At the start of 1917 the shop got ready to begin work on 20 water tube boilers for the Australian government. On March 17, 1917, Nellie and I had our first child, Lorne. About this time I was offered a job in charge of installing new boilers in the first steel boats at Wallace shipyard in North Vancouver. I'd come home from work every two weeks.

While in Vancouver I was elected as a delegate to a convention of Pacific Coast Boilermakers and Shipbuilders to be held in Portland. All unions from Prince Rupert to Southern California were represented. I was the Chairman of the Board. I had written the agreement that Victoria and Vancouver were working under, so it was natural that I'd be a delegate.

All delegates were to lay on the table the agreements under which they worked. It was the Victoria agreement that was selected as the best agreement on the whole coast. When election time came at the convention, I was elected the Secretary-Treasurer of the Pacific Coast League of Boilermakers, with over 50,000 men on the rolls.

After about three months or so it became clear that this arrangement would not work properly: both sides of the line had many problems, so the Canadian unions pulled out and I resigned.

After returning back to Victoria, I was put in charge of outfitting a boat at VMD wharf. After completing this job I was off to Coughlan's Shipyard in Vancouver to take charge of installing a boiler in their first boat. All of these jobs were for extra money.

I took another trip up to Prince Rupert where I was charge of putting seven new steel plates on the big P & O liner for the navy.

VMD had three shifts of eight hours going back in Victoria, each shift exactly the same: the men would work two weeks and change shifts, so a gang was six weeks before it was again on day shift. I took charge of outside work, ship work on the slip or at the wharf for VMD. Amongst the many jobs, there were 24 small boilers to finish up. I was told to build up a gang to work on the wharf; each work station had a 20' x 20' canvas overhead for protection from the rain.

On June 18, 1918 our second child, Roderick Arnold, was born.

When things became slack at VMD I would work at other yards. Foundation Company had a contract to build 20 wooden boats for the French Government. The only peculiar thing about them was they had a steel lattice work from bow to stern on the inside. The two centre sections were to be taken out to install the boilers and engines.

Figure 4 - Example of the work at VMD at the time.

I was not in charge of this project; I was on the tools. I worked on a raised platform about 20 feet high, to get hold of the steel girders and then guide them into place as they were lowered down. One day, holding my hands up in the air, the load suddenly shot past me and smashed the platform planks to pieces. The rigging chain had broken, throwing my helper and myself into the air. How I was able to wrap my arms around a broken plank I do not know. Landing on the bottom safely with my arms full of splinters, I saw that my helper too had landed safely.

A couple of days later, on the same job, the rigging chain broke in another place, smashing the staging to pieces again, sending us flying and rolling to the slip side. There was a large lattice girder which we both grabbed hold of and climbed down safety. Another worker saw it all happen and said, “The Lord climbed down with you that time.”

Seeing the broken ends of the chain links were badly crystallized, I refused to do any more work until we had new chain, which we did get. Shortly after the boats were launched, I went out as foreman to outfit a boat at Ogden Point docks.

Around this time the influenza epidemic struck Victoria. All types of meetings, sporting events, gatherings on street corners, etc. were forbidden. Men were dropping like flies. A lot of men, after being off work a few days, returned too soon, saying they were alright. I had no authority to send them home again. Some would work a day and be dead the next. How did I escape the flu? I cannot answer, except to say I had my pipe in my mouth all day long. Maybe the flu bug did not like the smell of tobacco.

After the war and the 20 boats were finished, there was not much work around anywhere. Twenty-five Boilermakers had been sent back to the old country and only about half a dozen men were at VMD. It was the same at Yarrows — only intermittent work.

In the fall of 1920 I was elected by the union to go to the convention at Kansas City, Kansas. The members said I had earned it — all of them. They all knew I jumped around from job to job. No one else was nominated for the position as delegate.

Chapter 4

Convention at Kansas City 1920

On the train to Kansas City I won about $53.00 playing poker with a bunch of Seattle Boilermakers. We were paid $13.50 every day we were away from home, I made about $600.00 in American money.

At the convention I was offered the position of Western Canadian Vice-President of the Boilermakers & Ship Builders. I knew and worked with many of the delegates from New York, Delaware and Newport, Massachusetts, and on the Pacific Coast. They all promised me their votes, enough to put me in the position. But my territory would take me to Port Arthur, Ontario. That meant a lot of time away from home and my young family, so I refused the offer.

That Christmas I received about 70 Christmas cards from various delegates all over the United States and Canada.

The Mayor of Kansas, Kansas extended greetings to the 750 assembled delegates and gave us the freedom of the city. They had an ordinance at the time that no one was allowed on the streets after 1:00 a.m., due to crime. One night it was so hot, no one from the pacific coast could sleep. We all were walking around the streets trying to cool off when a group of motorcycle policeman stopped us and asked what we were up to. We explained that we had the freedom of the city as given to us by the mayor. The police never bothered us again. When the rain finally came, it cooled things right down, and everyone was able to sleep soundly.

After I left the convention I visited my sister and her family, who were living in St. Louis at the time. I received a telegram that required me to get home as soon as possible — Lorne was sick. Upon arriving home, Nellie said we had to move because the doctor had told her it was too foggy and that it could be a problem for him to get to our house in time. We moved. I had made big money before that time, but I didn't have much now. While I'd seldom been out of work since 1910 — maybe a day or two when changing jobs — the work situation now looked poor.

I bought a one-ton truck to get into the transfer business, but I could not get established so I sold that and picked up the best Ford in town. I bought it for $739.00 in 1920 — open sides and no hard top. I used it to start a jitney

service, picking up people along a route and letting them out where they wanted. I made $10 – $15 on weekdays and $20 – $25 on a Saturday. The city ended up outlawing the jitney services when bus lines were inaugurated.

The family increased on July 21, 1921 when Walter arrived. With Lorne's sickness, we needed 3 nurses at $5.00 each per day for some time, and there were the doctor's bills to boot. On January 24, 1924, Alan's birth rounded out the family.

I was working at the old Dry Dock. I developed a lot of pain in my stomach, and was put in the hospital. It was appendicitis, and times were tough. I could not pay my doctor bills. I was not supposed to go back to work for six weeks, nor lift anything.

Needing the money — and I did not want to lose my outside foreman position — I returned to work after only two weeks. I should not have done so. After just a few days I got run down and just lay down on the wharf with perspiration rolling out of me. I became very feverish, so I went home. It was a miracle I did not develop pneumonia.

Rod developed scarlet fever, and I had to take him to the isolation hospital. They had to wait for their money. Altogether it was a pretty tough year for finances.

The following year was better. The new Dry Dock was being built and I worked on the Dry Dock gates. I was able to get myself out of the financial hole. A six-week job came up at the old Dry Dock, and I was given charge of a portion of the work. There were 1,000 men looking for work at the time and all that were needed were 250. After that I went back to VMD and they sent me to the Smith Hill reservoir. The job was to replace valves and penstock.

One big valve was about 25 feet long, weighing between 1500 and 2000 pounds. We rigged the load through a five-foot tunnel with a 90-degree turn at the end. The city engineer was impressed with what we did, so he ordered up 12 more of these to be done in six weeks.

The engineer wanted to know how we would get these parts into place, but we wouldn't tell him, nor let him watch us. VMD sent for me, and I told the city manager I was wanted back at the shop. He said he would like me to

join the city as a mechanic. Was that just pick and shovel work?, I asked. He said there was none of that.

As my hearing was pretty bad, I needed to get away from the noise at VMD. I said I would try the mechanic's job for six months. I told VMD I would be away for that time and joined the City Water Department in 1927.

My job was to look after all valves, hydrants, etc., and general blacksmithing. There was practically no noise, which suited me. As available work at the trade was very poor, I stayed with the water works. In 1929 soup kitchens started to appear in the U.S. As the depression continued on, they'd also started up in Victoria by 1931. There were hundreds on relief, and many soup kitchens.

To get people working, there were make-work projects for the water department. The dominion government paid the bulk of the money, with the provincial government providing a share; the rest was from the city. The wages were paid at $3.00 a day — $4.50 for mechanics. There was to be no machinery: everything was to be done by hand labour if possible. Men would work a week and then get laid off the next week. One wonders how they existed on $15.00 over two weeks.

There were about five gangs around the city at times. A crew were working on Gorge Road, cleaning and making gutters on the side of the road. One pay day, as the paymaster's car came, everyone dropped their tools immediately after being paid and took off. The foreman was left to pick up the tools.

Another time the crew was taking the tools into the shed at the end of the day, when they noticed the foremen was in the shed. They closed the door and locked it with a padlock. It was some time before the foreman could attract someone's attention to let him out!

MacDonald Park was a fine example of how costs went up. The project cost $10,000.00 to begin with, and the good Lord only knows how much after that. Someone put a pick through a water pipe, and I was sent to shut off the valve. I watched how hard they worked for their $3.00 per day.

There were about half a dozen men with wheelbarrows. They rarely filled these to more than a half-load, using two men to load each barrow. They would wheel the load over to another place and another man would rake

the dirt. Then they would roll a smoke and push the wheelbarrow back again. This made the job last a long time.

Soon after that we were given a project to run a 22-inch water main from Gorge Road to Oak Bay. We had to lay and fit up the pipe and valves using a crew of five Boilermakers and one electric welder, changing each week. There was a crew digging up the ditch for the pipe and another crew following up, covering up the water line.

All foremen were told not to get into any arguments with anyone. If someone was not working out on the job, all we could do was give him his employment ticket and tell him to go back to the hiring hall.

One afternoon, a march was set for the unemployed. I told the men to put their tools away and let them go to the march. There was a big showing but it went off very peacefully.

One of the mild troubles I had was with citizens who came to watch our work and make sure we were not breaking any of the rules of the Dominion Government agreement that all work be done by hand.

A lot of important work occurred all at once, so I asked for 10 mechanics and named some. I was told I could not have some of the named hires because it was not yet their time to go to work. I was sent other people, but I sent them back. The hiring manager visited me on the job to find out what was going on, because these guys were all mechanics. I told him, “Any man will tell you he is a mechanic, just so they can get the $4.50 a day instead of just $3.00 a day.”

I asked this manager, “Whose responsibility is it for this to be a good job?” He said it was mine, so I told him, “You can send out proper men or there will be no work done.” Eventually suitable men were sent to me.

There were two incidents during my time at the city water works department that could have been fatal to the operator of the crane and to me. Twice the boom hit power lines while we were setting the water lines in place and I was holding on one end of the pipe. We even shut down the streetcar system after hitting a power line once.

Chapter 5

2nd World War

The morning of Labour Day 1939, when World War II was declared, Walter left home at 8:30 a.m. to sign up for military training, leaving school at the age of 17. I knew I would be going back to the trade as a Boilermaker or a Ship Builder.

VMD was given a contract to build eight corvettes for the navy. It took some time for all the ships' plans and materials to be ready. It was summer 1940 before I left city employment. The city had started superannuation a couple of years before, so I was able to withdrawal $1,000 and deposit it into bonds. My VMD salary was about three times what the city was paying me, so I was quite happy.

I was put in charge of the Boilershop and Shipyard as the night shift superintendent for two years. The gangs would change shift every two weeks, but not me.

Lorne also signed up to serve and was sent to the navy yard in Vancouver.

I always parked my car by the office, so the manager gave me the job of handing out the pay cheques each pay day. I never had a problem with anyone after that. After the boats were launched, we had to keep our eyes out for sabotage. One day I reported a guy on the deck of one ship for having a cutting torch in his hand when he had no reason for being up there. He received some jail time and was kept in stir till the end of the war.

After we launched eight boats and the Boilershop was cleared out, I was sentto the new VMD plant at Dallas Road where the company had the first order of twenty 10,000-ton freighters to build. I also received a raise in pay.

The owner of the shop, Mr. Spratt, had passed away. Mrs. Spratt was not sure about what to do with the yard, when the British Government Representative in Canada visited her. He told her she had half an hour to sign over the yard or it would be taken away from her. The manager and Mrs. Spratt were not allowed back in the yard till after the war.

Work went on steadily and our first freighter was launched. There was lot of work and there were some changes to comply with Lloyd's insurance

regulations. Once the first ship was finished up, with a couple of small corrections after her trial run, it was accepted by the government. It was then sent directly to the wharf and loaded up. Going down the straits, it was torpedoed by a Japanese submarine that also shot out the lights on a lighthouse.

The boat was badly damaged and beached at Mud Bay on the American side. Divers boarded the hole up and it was towed back to the VMD slip. There was a hole in the side that two buses side-by-side could drive through! She was so badly damaged that the authorities would not let her be put in the dry dock because repairs would take too long. The insurance company would not let her go to Seattle to be repaired, which would cost $389,800.00, as the US was not at war at this time.

After the third boat's trial trip, it came back 100% at Lloyd's requirements and went straight to Ogden Point for loading. The manager congratulated me, said I worked pretty hard, and asked me if I would like a few days off. So Mother and I went to Vancouver to visited Lorne.

It was settled that as each boat was launched and hit the water, she was called *my* boat, until the trial trip. I also received another raise in wages.

After the first contract of twenty freighters was finished, a further order for more came in. This order was never finished, as the war came to an end. We had put eight boats — at 100% of Lloyd's regulations — out to their sea trials.

On March 6th 1944, our son Rod was lost on the Valley Field, a ship that was torpedoed in the Atlantic. He was just twenty-six, in the prime of his life, when we lost him.

Figure 5: Boilermakers at John Hart Electric Plant riveting up a seam.

At the end of the war in 1945, the ship yards went back to a five-days-a-week schedule, this having been agreed to at the start of the war. While at the VMD Boilershop, thinking about retiring, I was called by Yarrows. The foremen wanted me to start on a new job — the scroll casing at the John Hart Electric Plant up in Campbell River. It was a job using 1 ¼" thick plate and was classified as a heavy construction job. This was the type of work I used to like because we could use strong cranes to move the objects.

The load was four tons when completed and a special truck was made to be able to go up Island.

I also worked on the Canadian National Steamer building, laying out the engine room. I formed keel plates for small boats for the French government. The foreman tried hard to get me to go into the yard but I would not, so I quit when the job was done.

Once, while walking around thinking of retiring, the foreman at the Dry Dock called and asked me to come down for a talk. He said he had three months of special work and no one to take charge of it. I was hired on as a charge hand and stayed on for 5 ½ years. I finally retired in May 1954.

Upon retiring I was offered two good-paying jobs, but I turned them both down. I determined I was going to make this stick. During my working life I made investments in real estate and we were able to live on the accumulated returns. After 54 years of working and at the age of 70 I started to draw O.A.P — about $46.00 per month, so everything was fine and dandy.

Percy W. Wilson passed away in the mid 1970's after a full life as a Family Man, Union Man and as a Boilermaker.

Figure 6 Percy and Nellie Wilson.