

Wahl, Ryan. 2008. *Legacy in Wood: The Wahl Family Boat Builders*. Madeira Park, British Columbia: Harbour Publishing. 222 pages. Black and white illustrations. ISBN: 9781550174335.

Written by Ryan Wahl, one of the great-grandsons of Norwegian immigrant and famed west coast shipwright Ed Wahl, this book could all too easily have wallowed in the trough of over-sentimentalization. That it (unlike its foreward) does not is only one of its many strengths. Others include a selection of informative insets on Wahl fishboats and related topics; an abundance of black and white photographs spanning decades and illustrating almost every opening of the book; a number of original historical documents like letters, newspaper and magazine articles, and oral reports from employees, family members and friends; clear and concise explanations of both technical and biographical material pertinent to the Wahl family and their business activities; and discussion of those activities not only within the local contexts of west coast settlement and boat building more generally, but also the wider contexts of the Great Depression and World War II. Even the occasional hint that the author has romanticized his family's business just a little is hardly out of place among lovers of wooden boats. Without such powerful emotional attachments to wooden vessels, classics like the Wahl boats would not still grace our shores and harbours, and Ryan Wahl is clear about his intentions: "the contribution my great-grandfather and his descendants made to a craft that helped shape modern boat building is something I am very proud of and I wanted to share it with more than just the family" (xvii). This he does admirably.

Legacy in Wood opens with a brief introduction that establishes both the sources and limitations of the book, as well as outlining the importance of B.C.'s commercial fishing industry and the role within it of boat builders like the Wahls, who through three generations may have produced as many as thirteen hundred boats—an astounding number by any standard. In Chapter One we learn more about this remarkable family, beginning with the adventurous spirit of Øystein (Edward) Wahl, who in 1915 at the age of nineteen left Norway bound for North America with \$25.00 in his pocket—just the sort of true story that lies at the heart of many immigrant families whose hard-work and determination gave birth to communities all along the B.C. coast. Using both the skills he brought with him and new ones he acquired, Ed fished and logged before turning to boat building, and in a long line of firsts, became "the first fisherman to use a gas-powered boat" to fish the Skeena River (7), a development that brought the era of sail-powered

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fishing to a hasty close. The winter of 1923/24 saw the construction at Port Essington of the first Wahl boat, built “by eye” via “half model” by Ed himself (10), with only the help of his young wife Hildur, who by 1924 when the 32-foot double-ended gillnetter *Nornan* was launched had already produced two of the couple’s six sons. The historian in me would like to have seen more dates—even approximate dates if need be—in the chapter’s genealogical chart, and for the photographs here and elsewhere in the book. Occasionally I would also have appreciated a more critical eye toward some of the material, like the glaring errors in the newspaper article on p.178 which make it impossible for the reader to determine, for instance, whether the *Ingibjorg K* really was built entirely of imported hardwoods as the article suggests, instead of the local woods the Wahls used almost exclusively.

Particularly interesting in Chapter One is Ed’s initial practice of building a boat in the winter, fishing it the following summer, then selling it at the end of the season, only to build another the next winter and repeat the process. This allowed him to test his own hulls for “stability, seaworthiness, sea-kindliness and speed” (28), finding and correcting weaknesses each year, moving with the trends of both fishing and construction to develop what have become the trademarks of Wahl fishboats—“water-shedding flares at the bow, a handsomely crafted wheelhouse, graceful sheer lines ending in a sturdy, super buoyant stern” (8). Encouraged by his boat-building success, Ed sought a home and shop better suited to his aspirations, and soon moved, along with his brother’s family, to the largely Norwegian fishing village at Dodge Cove on Digby Island. Chapter Two chronicles the years of the Great Depression in Dodge Cove when, as Ed’s second son Iver (the author’s grandfather and primary source) tells it, the family was “what you might call wealthy. We had lots of clothes because our mother was a wonderful seamstress. We always had food” (18), and it seems there was even money for tools, equipment and materials to keep the boatshop running and expand it for larger vessels. Ed’s main helpers were his six sons, all of whom were brought into the shop to do small jobs at a young age, then carefully trained as traditional shipwrights, learning the properties and uses of different woods, and the technique of accurately cutting by eye without excessive waste. It was hard work—“Dad was always busy, busy, busy. Us kids used to work all the time” (21)—but fondly remembered all the same. “Dad, he wasn’t a slave driver. We wanted to be with him anyhow” (24). Two boats were being built and sold each year, gas-powered tools were bought and developed, and all seemed promising in 1939 when the death of Hildur, Ed’s wife of nineteen years, upset the balance.

Ed and his sons coped—the boys in school were brought home; a housekeeper was hired; and Ed seems to have worked more than ever. Of course the boom of World War II had replaced the Depression, nearby Prince Rupert had become a strategic military post, and the overseas demand for non-perishable protein foods

had given the canneries a much-needed boost. The gillnet fleets needed replacing and the demand was so great that the Japanese boat builders traditionally employed by the canneries could not meet the huge demand. This allowed Ed to get his chisel in the chink, so to speak, building gillnetters for the North Pacific Cannery for a price of around \$650.00 each. The same chink opened wide in 1942 when all the Japanese boat builders on the coast were relocated to internment camps in B.C.'s interior, depriving the fishery not only of shipwrights for new boats, but also "leaving a huge void in the gillnet fleet" when over a thousand Japanese boats were "impounded and left sitting idle" (46). Unpalatable as benefitting from the mistreatment of others must necessarily be, Ryan Wahl falls into neither defense of his own family nor sympathy for the displaced Japanese, opting instead to highlight the very real contributions made by the early Japanese boat builders, and in his inset on *Laila* (44-45), acknowledging his great-grandfather's debt to the Sakamoto family in the development of the fuller, rounder sterns soon associated with Wahl boats.

"A Boat a Week" is the title of Chapter Three, and in order to achieve such an unprecedented speed in traditional construction, Ed and his sons implemented what the author calls "an assembly-line method" (41) with three stages: basic building of the hull; hull finishing, painting and launching; upper construction of deck and wheelhouse. With each taking place in different areas of the shop, movement of the boats facilitated by cradle, and haste increased by the use of moulds, several boats could be in progress at once, and incredible numbers could be produced in short periods of time. In 1944, for instance, "the shop built forty-seven boats in ten months" (47). "They weren't getting a heck of a lot for them little gillnetters," one employee remembers, "so they were tossed up pretty fast," not without consequent imperfections. But efficiency was the key to success, and these "cookie-cutter" (43) hulls were never meant to last much more than ten years, though some certainly have. Ed obviously pushed his employees to their limit, but he was far from an unpopular boss. Indeed, by Ryan Wahl's report, Ed was an honest and kind person who respected his crew and customers, and was rewarded with immense loyalty, as well as steady contracts. The inclusion of letters to and from the North Pacific Cannery—two about exempting Ed's eldest son Henry from war service to allow him to continue building boats all the more necessary because of the Japanese relocation—are a particularly interesting feature of this chapter.

Chapter Four tells of the post-war years, when the Wahl shop was finally wired for electricity and the lumber shortage that had begun during the war continued, finally driving Ed in 1946 to erect and operate his own sawmill to provide the wood used in the boatshop. One of his youngest sons soon became both foreman and bookkeeper at the mill, while his two eldest sons married and continued to work long hours as shipwrights. The focus of west coast fishermen was changing, however, and while the production of gillnetters waned in the

post-war years, troller production was on the rise. “Trolling,” the author explains, “allowed economic independence” (72): neither indentured to the canneries nor burdened with excessive start-up costs, fishermen could troll the market for the best prices. With the rise of the large troller and the revolutionary advancements in boat designs of the 1950s, Wahl boats seem to have reached their apex. Increased horsepower in diesel engines meant a decrease in constraints on boat construction; beams and sterns widened, expanding both working and living spaces; larger wheelhouses encouraged deck-level galleys and the comforts of home while aboard. “For Ed Wahl this meant that his ideas about aesthetic design could begin to mature. His straight lines became curved, his sharp corners became rounded and the Wahl boats that finally emerged in the late 1950s had all the eye-pleasing characteristics that would make them so recognizable along the entire BC coast” (81). The inset (86-88) on the 1957 troller *San Mateo*—also used to show a Wahl stave stern (84)—features both launch day and modern post-conversion photographs, and like the North Pacific Cannery’s plea of the same year for funds to commission new boats, is just the sort of feature that makes *Legacy in Wood* as enjoyable for readers who wish to skim its surface, as for those who would set their lines deeper.

With the trademarks of Wahl fishboats established, the author turns at the beginning of Chapter Five to the shipwrights and shipyards that operated alongside the Wahls, a topic in the background of the book until now. Each had its specialties, but the one local demand unmet by all—that for regular boat repairs and maintenance—naturally engaged Ed’s attention, and this time the result was a completely new boatyard in Prince Rupert which opened in 1959. Once again, innovations were part of the picture, in particular the introduction of a multi-boat split-cradle designed to selectively move and position up to six boats at once and thus facilitate an efficient combination of new construction and repairs. With the Prince Rupert shop operational, Ed turned its management over to his eldest son Henry, who was assisted by two of his brothers, and retired (as much as a man who has made a life of work ever can) with plans of building smaller boats for recreation, taking long holidays with his third wife, and fishing for pleasure. “He had never been sick in his life,” claimed one of his sons (106), but fittingly perhaps for a man who had never done anything slowly, he was diagnosed with cancer at 65 and died the same month (March of 1961), leaving the Wahl shop floors “empty” by the report of their longest-serving employee, Melvin Closter (106).

But the Wahl boatyards were far from empty: Ed had trained his six sons well, and his customers continued to create a demand for Wahl boats in what came to be “the ‘golden age’ of trollers” (133). Chapters Six and Seven discuss the unique strengths of each of Ed’s sons as shipwrights, and the roles they played in keeping the two boatshops running smoothly in the years following their father’s death. We hear of Henry’s penchant for nautical engineering challenges—notably the striking feat of lengthening the 72-foot herring seiner

Sunnfjord by eleven feet which the author discusses in some detail—and management of the new Prince Rupert boatyard like a “well-oiled machine ... constantly in overdrive” (131) to pay off the bank loan taken out to construct it. We also learn of Iver’s expert “by eye” plank cutting and love for being at the heart of the shop floor; about Ernest’s design and finishing talents, Bobby’s wheelhouses and business sense, Roald’s management of the sawmill, and Reidar’s interest in mechanical and electrical matters. And we are told about how the sons fished, for both extra income and the holiday it provided from shop business, and, more personal still, about how Ernest crashed the speed boat he had so carefully rebuilt, and Reidar earned the honour of shop jokester. The company workboats are also discussed, with the meaning of the name *WB* borne by more than one of them speculated upon—“Work Boat,” “Wahl Boat” or “Wahl Brothers”?—but left appropriately mysterious. And we learn too of the fire that broke out in the boiler room and ripped through the Prince Rupert Boatyard in 1967—the only major disaster ever to hit the Wahl shops.

It was not fire, however, that brought the Wahl family business to an end, but a number of factors discussed in Chapters Eight and Nine. New and “better” materials that required less maintenance like fibreglass, aluminum and steel were being used more and more, and while the Wahl brothers dabbled particularly in the first, even finishing in wood pre-made “Pelagic” fibreglass hulls for a while, they were traditionalists and felt most comfortable with the wood they had so expertly handled for decades. When both Henry and Bobby died prematurely within a year of each other (both from complications associated with diabetes) the Dodge Cove shop was shut down, and a couple of years later (1976) the Prince Rupert yard had been sold, bringing an era in both the Wahl family and west coast boat building to a close. Not that Ed’s sons stopped building boats: both they and in some cases their sons worked (and still work) on vessels of various kinds, continuing the legacy in smaller ways. But fishing on the west coast has declined, as the author points out in Chapter Ten, and “wood is no longer viable in today’s boat-building industry” (195)—at least not in the way it was used by the Wahls—and no doubt the *Legacy* built in the traditional manner by Iver and other members of the Wahl family in 1990 will be the last of the Wahl fishing boats. Yet there is a distinct note of optimism in the author’s inclusion in the Epilogue of an excellent series of in-progress photographs documenting the stages in the *Legacy*’s construction—excellent for those who may be interested in replicating the process themselves one day. That, however, will be the privilege of a select few familiar with the ways of boats and wood, while Ryan Wahl’s book is for everyone who would know more or simply reminisce about twentieth-century wooden boat building and fishing on the B.C. Coast.

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