

FROM BOATS To BOARD FEET

PREFACE

*The only reason there is something here to find is . . .
[that] someone else left something behind.
—Bruce Lieep*

This book is a historical description of my family—the Wilson family—who established business enterprises along America’s Pacific Coast in the 1800s and early 1900s. I have chronicled the lives of a group of five siblings who immigrated to the United States from Sweden in the 1860s and 1870s, renamed themselves Wilsons, and founded and expanded the family’s shipping and lumbering enterprises in Aberdeen, Washington; Portland, Oregon; and San Francisco, California. The book portrays these family enterprises from their modest beginning as a towboating business along the Columbia River to their fruition as a thriving lumber and shipping concern that stretched halfway around the world. The description of these business enterprises spans three-quarters of a century—from the 1870s to the 1940s.

This story—the Wilson story—is the saga of my father’s family. It is the story of his ancestors, particularly his paternal grandfather, who was among the adventurous group of Wilson siblings who emigrated from Sweden nearly one and one-half centuries ago.

I have researched and recorded this story in the hope that you will enjoy the lure of the maritime sagas and pioneer history in which the Pacific Coast Wilsons took part.

In the introduction to the book, I tell how, as a child, I became intrigued by my family’s role in Pacific Northwest history and began collecting bits of information and stacks of photos—whatever anyone would give to me. I describe how my hobby grew into a project, and how the project became a journey. Central to that

journey was a desire to find the connection between my American relatives and their long-lost relatives in Sweden. I explain how, after years of thwarted research efforts, I finally rediscovered the American Wilsons’ Swedish relatives (whose surnames are not Wilson) and reestablished the connection between the two branches of the family. I describe how coming “home” to Sweden and to my newfound relatives in 1991 gave me the impetus to go forward with this book.

Chapter 1 sets the scene of the family’s beginnings in the historical province of Bohuslän, on the west coast of Sweden. It describes the Wilson family’s ancestry from the earliest known records of the family (in 1450) to the death of my father’s great-grandfather, Johan Henrik (Olofsson) Olsson, a ship captain from Bohuslän, after the shipwreck of his vessel in 1854.

Chapter 2 continues with the story of the immigration of five of the captain’s children—four brothers and one sister—from Sweden to America’s Pacific Coast in the 1860s and 1870s. As they enter adulthood, these siblings find that they must make their own way in the world when their mother, my great-great grandmother, Christina Elisabeth Andreasdotter, remarries and starts a new family.

The chapter presents the life of Fred Wilson, the first sibling to depart from Swedish shores permanently, who sails from England to America in 1861. The chapter expands on Fred’s life as he masters boating along the Pacific Northwest’s Columbia River, returns to Sweden to bring his brother John August Wilson and his sister Bertha Wilson to America, and calls for

his seafaring brothers, Charles R. Wilson and Henry Wilson, to join him in his towboating business in Portland, Oregon. It chronicles Fred's story to the end of his life, describing his family life with his wife and daughter and his succession of varied and interesting pursuits.

Chapter 3 (1871-1886) details the family and business pursuits of Fred's younger sister Bertha and his younger brothers, Charles R. Wilson and Henry Wilson. The brothers assume Fred's towboating business along the Columbia River and then leave boating to enter a new line of work: cutting timber into board feet. Charles and Henry join their widowed sister Bertha in running a sawmill and lumber business in the timber-laden area of Rainier, Oregon, and in setting up a lumberyard in Portland. The family company, Wilson Bros., is born. A disaster ends the entrepreneurial dream, sending its promise up in a cloud of smoke.

Chapter 3 also shows how the hardships and disappointments of the era are softened by the blossoming of the siblings' family life. Charles and Henry marry strong and stalwart women, and the younger generation of Wilsons grows. Bertha also finds a capable new husband and expands her family. John August Wilson voyages from San Francisco to rejoin his siblings in Rainier. Half-siblings Carl Johan Olausson and Johanna Maria Olausdotter (Mary Wilson) immigrate to the Pacific Northwest from Sweden, and all of the Wilson siblings joyously reunite with their mother, Christina Elisabeth Andreasdotter, who travels to Oregon from Bohuslän, Sweden, for a visit.

Chapter 4 (1887-1903) features the extended Wilson family as they set a new course for the shores of Grays Harbor in the southwest coast of the Washington Territory. The chapter chronicles the founding, operation, and expansion of the family's lumber business in the pioneer town of Aberdeen, Washington, under Charles R. Wilson's direction. The family's lumberyard in Portland, Oregon, continues under the management of Henry Wilson. A.B. Johnson, the brother of Henry's new wife, joins the family business as a partner, and Wilson Bros. becomes Wilson Bros. & Co. The lumber enterprise in Aberdeen continues to grow, while A.B. Johnson and Henry Wilson move the lumberyard from Portland to a new location—the thriving Pacific Coast city of San Francisco, California. All the while, the American economy struggles through nationwide financial panics.

As the nation's railroad system expands and influences the growth of the West, the city of Aberdeen, with the help of Wilson Bros. & Co., brings this essential mode of transportation to its shores. Again the Wilson family business meets with an ill-timed disaster when the Aberdeen sawmill burns to the ground.

Chapter 5 (1904-1908) describes how, defying all predictions, the Wilsons' business recovers quickly to reinvent itself along the shores of Grays Harbor. However, Charles R. Wilson, Henry Wilson, and A.B. Johnson endure trials and tribulations while expanding and managing their successful lumber and shipping venture from two sites separated by more than 600 miles. The structure of their business is challenged by a volatile lumber market, legal battles, employee unrest, competitive business practices, and the illness and death of Charles R. Wilson.

Chapter 6 (1909-1954) finds Charles R. Wilson's son, Jonathan Wilson, stepping up to lead the business through future expansions and tumultuous times. Wilson Bros. & Co. widens its scope as it acquires a lumber camp and expands its maritime fleet. Yet the company is buffeted by changing needs for lumber regionally, nationally, and worldwide, and is confronted with competition from much larger lumber enterprises.

The company splits into separate California and Washington enterprises. In California, A.B. Johnson leaves Wilson Bros. & Co. to build his own lumber networks, and Henry Wilson turns his portion of the business over to his two sons. In Aberdeen, Charles R. Wilson's son Jonathan continues to run the sawmill and nearby lumber camp, assisted by two of his brothers. In the years leading up to World War II, Wilson Bros. & Co. declines and eventually disenfranchises, unable to compete in a changing world market.

Chapter 7 concludes the Wilson story by summarizing the stories of the original Wilson siblings and half-siblings and portraying the lives of their children and grandchildren. These family sketches, which bring the story forward to the present day, also reveal the interconnections among extended family members throughout the decades. Some material from earlier chapters is intentionally repeated so that the chapter can be used separately, if desired.

The epilogue at the end of the book characterizes the Wilson family's ancestral homeland—Bohuslän, Sweden—in current times. It also describes each location of the Wilson Bros. & Co.—Portland, Rainier, Beaver

Valley, Aberdeen, and San Francisco—as it appears today.

The Genealogical Family Charts section includes two types of charts: ancestral lineage charts and family group sheets. The ancestral lineage charts show how our family tree branches back in time. Many of these charts cover multiple generations and include individuals' names; they often show dates and places of birth, marriage, and death. The family group sheets focus directly on the family unit and, where known, include the names of a couple and their children, along with birth, marriage, and death data for each individual.

When I had sufficient information, I included the family histories of the spouses of the five original Wilson siblings in separate appendices at the end of the book. I also added several appendices that give historical information on other close Wilson relatives and business associates. Although important to the Wilson family story, these histories were too extensive to include in the main text. Also included among the appendices are collections of letters and documents from the Wilson business and personal letters written by family members. Additional appendices contain historical background integral to the Wilson story but too detailed to include in the text.

The resources that I used to create this book are many and varied. In my early teen years, I began gathering information on the Wilson family through randomly collected bits of oral family lore. My plan was to make a collection. I saved these bits of information and accompanying photos in a treasured box and placed the random family relics on a shelf to admire. To me the family history was a fascination, a passion.

As my collection and I moved through the decades, I developed a more systematic approach to recording the family history, and the Wilson story began to take a more formal outline. As I gathered more documentation, my collection of related materials and photos also expanded. I had now accumulated a collection of books on a variety of topics, from Swedish emigration to pioneering in the Northwest to West Coast lumber and maritime practices. I also took an interest in identifying all of the people portrayed in my acquired photo collections, figuring out why or for what occasion these photos were taken.

For further historical clues, I searched the Washington State University photo archives for images from the Charles R. Pratsch Collection (1888–1913) to document the early years of the

Grays Harbor towns of Aberdeen and Hoquiam, Washington. My collection began to evolve into an academic mystery deserving a solution.

Two discoveries along my research journey strengthened my resolve to relate the Wilson story in a published volume. I noted that the original Wilson siblings successfully made their way in the shipping and lumber industry in California and the Pacific Northwest many years before large numbers of Swedes arrived in these areas. Fred Wilson, the first of the Wilsons to settle in the Pacific Northwest, may have been one of fewer than 100 Swedish immigrants in Oregon when he arrived in early 1862. The lives of later Swedish immigrants have been well-documented, but little has been written about the early Northwest Swedish-Americans. I resolved to fill this historical gap with the Wilson story.

My second discovery was that Wilson Bros. & Co., a major Grays Harbor enterprise from the late 1880s to the early 1900s, was sparsely documented in the many published volumes on the lumber and shipping industries in the Aberdeen area. I felt compelled to correct this oversight in the chronicles of Northwest history and to give the Wilsons, their extended families, and their close business associates their rightful place in the history of their era.

I am very fortunate to have had a treasure trove of original materials for compiling this volume. Most families have only a fraction of the materials that I have unearthed and accumulated. Beyond the oral and written tales I gathered from relatives, I also collected scrapbooks, postcards and letters, diaries, memoirs, newspaper articles, pamphlets, books, and government documents.

I collected hundreds of high-quality family photographs, some more than 150 years old, to document and enhance the Wilson family story. Once I revealed my intent to write this book, these beautiful photographs began to emerge from all branches of the family. One stroke of good fortune was the fact that my grandfather, William Cleveland Wilson, son of Charles R. Wilson (one of the original immigrant siblings), was a professional-quality photographer whose “official” family function was to document all family events with his artful photography.

Among the original materials that I collected, I found the papers of the Wilson Bros. & Co. business operation particularly intriguing. While not complete, the journal of cargo orders, disbursement journal, business letters, deeds, and other correspondence shed light

upon daily business operations of the Wilson enterprise and the relationships among the partners. They also describe many facets of lumber and maritime operations and practices of the time, including myriad challenges and opportunities.

Another treasure that I resourced was a scrapbook compiled by Bertha Elizabeth Ring Hansen (daughter of Bertha Wilson Ring Gilbreath, one of the five immigrant siblings). The collection includes favorite poems; family photos; birth notices; obituaries; programs from high school graduations; and write-ups for local newspapers about marriages, piano recitals, and other local events. It is largely because Bertha Hansen was such a dedicated record keeper that much of the family history of succeeding generations can now be shared here.

Beyond questioning and requestioning relatives still alive, I searched every family link that I could find: birth, death, immigration, census, and social security records; marriage certificates; and professional licenses. I also searched the internet for clues and traces of past and present-day family. I read scores of books and articles on Northwest history; the Pacific Coast timber, lumber, shipping, and maritime industry; and the history of Scandinavia, Sweden, the Bohuslän area, and Swedish emigration.

Somewhere the idea of genealogy entered the picture as I began to search for connections among the fragmented lists of individuals' names and family groupings. I reached down every line of the family tree that I could explore. Besides traveling to Sweden, I traveled the East Coast and the West Coast of the United States in search of genealogical clues and further details that would enliven and enrich the Wilson saga. I searched the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., and I scoured newspapers coast to coast. I queried many historical, lumber, and maritime foundations; museums; societies; and educational institutions for additional bits of information.

My investigation did not stop at America's borders. I supplemented my search by enlisting the help of international genealogical researchers. I contacted maritime researchers in England to document the death of my great-great-grandfather, Johan Henrik (Olofsson) Olsson. I also obtained much valuable information from an extremely knowledgeable Swedish genealogical researcher, Sonia Holz of Nykvarn, Sweden, chairperson of the Stockholm States Genealogical Society, Sweden.

As I progressed with the writing of this book, I

was confronted with difficult decisions, and with each decision there was a deviation to consider. I followed genealogical principles only loosely. When I introduced new family members in the book, I did not footnote each and every descendant line to which they belonged. Instead, I relied on family group sheets to show the family members' connections with one another. I abandoned the standard genealogical principle that living members of the family remain unnamed. In Chapter 7 I did name living descendants, with their permission, at the request of my family.

I carefully considered the methodology to be used in compiling the genealogical information for this book. I chose to use the software program Family Tree Maker 2005 to record much of the raw data that I had collected. This computer program and information from the Web site <http://www.ancestry.com> enabled me to record, display, and print genealogical information in standard formats.

In developing genealogical charts to record my ancestral information. I tried to stay as close as possible to acceptable genealogical formats for displaying ancestral lines and family groups. Overall, I accumulated records on more than 3,000 people to whom we are related in one way or another. For inclusion in this book, I selected the ancestral lineage charts and family group sheets that best complement the Wilson story.

This enduring project presented me with the ever-present dilemmas of recording history accurately. The academic and methodological decisions that I was forced to make during the production of this book were far beyond what I had originally thought would be expected. I found that records, both public and private, are not always accurate or complete. Sometimes all traces of individuals or family lines that I sought seemed to have just disappeared into thin air.

Initially, I relied upon the records of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (the Mormon Church) for genealogical information on my Swedish ancestors, but as I progressed in my research, I found that these records were not as accurate as the Swedish government microfiche containing parish, church, grave, and archived family data.

Along the same vein, I discovered that census recorders throughout the decades often transcribed names as they heard them, and not as they were actually spelled. Additionally, I found that published obituaries were often incorrect. The write-ups were

no doubt written and submitted to the media when the family was under the strain of the death, and the person who knew the facts best may have been the deceased! These numerous sources of inaccuracies are an ever-present test for an author.

As accurate as I have aimed to be in checking, citing, and incorporating information from original records, using historical writings, and referencing all possible sources, I may have inadvertently made errors or omissions. Should inaccuracies or oversights have crept into the book, I apologize and accept full responsibility.

Although *From Boats to Board Feet: The Wilson Family of the Pacific Coast* weaves the history of the era into the story of the Wilsons, this book is not intended to be either a comprehensive genealogical account or a history book; nor is it meant to document the entire Pacific Coast lumber or maritime industry during the timeframe of the book. What this volume does offer is a view of the life of the Wilson siblings who immigrated to America, the extended Wilson family over several generations, the family's main business

associates, and the Wilsons' personal lives and business pursuits—all within rich historical context.

We all have stories to tell about our lives and the lives of people we know. After many decades of gathering the Wilson family history, its bits of extraneous detail and lore, and its masses of celebrated photos, I had a revelation about this story: it was so much more expansive than just a “family tree” detailing births, marriages, and deaths. Each new fact that I added to my database opened up yet more intertwined elements and unexplored aspects needing to be chronicled. I am pleased that by setting in print this account of the Wilson family, I have “rewoven” the story of my ancestors into regional, national, and international history and have given my family a rightful place in history that had not been accorded to them previously.

I have a great feeling of accomplishment to have brought our Wilson family history to contemporary times. I certainly have found a reconnection with my past. Seeking my ancestors and finding my roots—and sharing the thrill of my discoveries with you—have been a deep source of pleasure!

