



DOORS, SASH, HARDWOOD FLOORING, & ARCHITECTURE— The Journey Of The Wilson Brothers

H. David Vuckson

Another major woodworking industry in old Collingwood was the planing mill of the Wilson Brothers, John (1863-1952) and his older brother Daniel (1861-1909). They established their business in 1887 when they leased the Hughes Planing Mill at 158-166 Hurontario St. Two years later they bought it. Based on the numbering system of buildings on the main street, its location could have been just south of the corner of 3rd St. on the west side. Speaking of this mill, David Williams states in the *Huron Institute Records & Papers Vol. III*:

Planing mill built in 1881 by William Hughes, Hurontario Street. Bought from B. Callary and sold to Wilson Brothers in 1889. Later taken down to make way for brick stores.

The 1894 Board of Trade Report, authored by Fred T. Hodgson states,

There are several planing mills and sash factories in town, where all kinds of carpenter and jointers' work can be obtained at the very lowest prices. Some of the work turned out of these places will compare favorably with work produced anywhere on the continent; in fact we have several workmen in town who are equal in mechanical skill and artistic ability to any workmen in existence.

One of the oldest, largest and best equipped factories in Ontario is the one owned by the Wilson Bros. This factory is situated on Hurontario St. near to the business centre of the town, and is one of the most extensive of the kind in this part of the country. The firm make a specialty of all kinds of builders' supplies, refrigerators [wooden ice boxes], school furniture, church fitments, and building contractors' requirements generally. The Wilson Bros. are also contractors and architects, and keep on hand constantly a good supply of good dry materials. A large amount of work manufactured by this firm is shipped to the North and North-West, and also to the United States, facts which speak for themselves. A number of first-class workmen are employed in these works, and altogether the firm has on its payroll a list of over fifty names.

The September 1896 issue of *The Canada Lumberman* features information about two major planing mills in Collingwood: Bryan Manufacturing and Wilson Brothers:

TWO COLLINGWOOD PLANING MILLS. *Among the industries of the town of Collingwood, Ont., are two of the best equipped and most prosperous planing mills to be found in Ontario. With its two railroads and two lines of palatial steamers, that town possesses the best of facilities for reaching distant markets, affording means for quick transportation, which accounts to some extent for the success of many of its industries. The two planing mills referred to are those of the Bryan Mfg. Co. and Wilson Bros., both of which manufacture builders' supplies, sashes, doors, mouldings, dressed lumber, mantels, counters, etc., besides carrying on a general contracting business. Their goods are shipped to all parts of Canada, although the chief trade, of course, is done in Ontario. By the two industries about 100 men are given constant employment.*

The article then goes on to describe in detail the Bryan Manufacturing business and then turns to the Wilson Brothers:

WILSON BROS. have been established in business for a somewhat longer period. Starting in a small way a number of years ago, indomitable pluck and strict attention to business has secured for them an extensive connection. A specialty is made of the better class of interior hardwood finish. Their works consist of two

buildings, the front one on Hurontario street being 110x30 ft., with a side annex 66x14 ft. containing the boiler and engine room, with dry kiln and office above. The rear building is 40x56 ft. and three stories high.

In the front building on the ground floor is all the heavy machinery similar to the Bryan Mfg. Co. Above is the sash, door and blind machinery in full complement. The office of this company is neatly finished, and protected by fireproof doors. The dry kiln is 12x33 ft. A first-class engine and boiler supply the power. The rear building lately erected has a drive-way on the ground floor, where the matched and planed lumber is stored. The second floor is used for the fine work, such as finishing, panels, mantels, stair railings, etc. The top floor is taken up as a store room.

The premises are heated by exhaust steam and lighted by electricity. The machinery therein is from the Galt firms of Cowan & Co., McGregor, Gourlay & Co., and the Goldie & McCulloch Company. Complete fire protection is afforded by hydrants in the yard and hose throughout the buildings.

The business prospered but by the turn of the 20th Century, the Wilson Brothers were so busy that they ran out of space on Hurontario St. and could expand no further. In 1902 they relocated to a large site on First St. at Walnut where the tracks of the Grand Trunk Railway from Hamilton crossed over First St. (the Hamilton & North Western Railway had been taken over by the Grand Trunk in 1888). The *Vernon's Directories* for 1910-11-12-13 place the new planing mill just east of those railway tracks. Here, a massive brick building was erected with drying kilns and a boiler and engine house with the requisite massive, tall brick chimney. A large freight elevator facilitated the movement of materials from one floor to another. The *Collingwood Bulletin Industrial and Commercial Edition* of December 1906 stated that the building's north-south footprint ran for more than 260 feet along the railway while the frontage on First St. was 165 feet. Locating adjacent to the railway was of great benefit in shipping out finished work as well as bringing in raw material, an advantage the Wilsons did not have on Hurontario St. where teams of horses and wagons were the only transportation available. Kitty-corner across the street from Wilsons' new location was the Collingwood

Milling Company (now Kelseys) which also relied on the railway for receiving and shipping.

In speaking of the success of the new location the *Bulletin* goes on to say,

Indeed, the demand is so great that although the mill is kept running to its utmost capacity, it is impossible to fill the orders which are constantly coming in from all parts of the country, especially the Great West. So great is the call for this class of material that the members of the firm feel assured that they would be warranted in erecting a new mill of equal capacity to the present one upon their property on the opposite side of the track.

From the *Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Canada 1800-1950* we learn that both Wilson Brothers had begun to style themselves as architects by 1895, drawing plans and acting as contractors and builders. Considering how busy their planing mill was, along with their building and contracting, one has to wonder if they ever slept. John Wilson “retired” from the planing mill in 1903 (at age 40) to go into architecture full time, leaving his brother Daniel to run the place. John’s knowledge of building construction is said to have resulted from him working as a carpenter’s assistant when in his teens (quitting school at age 14 as did his brother) and in his early twenties he helped build the Centre Ward (later “Victoria”) School on Maple St. in 1884 but he found his real passion in the study of architecture. The *Biographical Dictionary* includes an impressive list of residences, schools, factories and church buildings John Wilson designed, not only in Collingwood, but in other communities too. Here is just a very brief sample: the Collingwood Furniture Company (which we met in our January story), the Collingwood Meat Company, Connaught Public School, King George Public School, the 1925 Collingwood Collegiate on Hume St., several landmarks at Wasaga Beach (Capstan Inn, Dardanella and Wasaga Inn) and the Roxy Theatre in Barrie, one of Wilson’s crowning achievements.

As recorded by authors Su Murdoch, B. E. S. Rudachyk and K. H. Schick in the book *Beautiful Barrie, The City And Its People*, John Saso, a wholesale/retail fruit dealer (the family had emigrated from Italy circa 1906), was captivated by the advent of “talking pictures” and hired John Wilson in the fall of 1930 to design “a wonder

screen palace". John Saso's nephew was Sam Russ of the Gayety Theatre in Collingwood and these two men had participated in an earlier venture with sound movies in Barrie prior to the building of the Roxy as well as jointly operating the Gayety in Collingwood. The 700 seat "atmospheric" Roxy Theatre (now known as Mavrick's Music Hall) opened on August 13, 1931 with a domed ceiling designed by John Wilson to feature "drifting clouds" created by a special projector to create the illusion of being outdoors. The *Barrie Examiner* of December 24th, 1931 carried this announcement:

SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT—The Huge Cloud Effect Machine Is Now Completely Installed. *Theatre Patrons will receive a surprising spectacle Wednesday night at the large snow white clouds floating about the deep blue sky of the main auditorium. This is the latest and last word in Special Lighting Effects.*

The Roxy claimed to be the only fireproof theatre in the district, and was the classiest movie house in Barrie where patrons were "greeted by a doorman and student ushers in uniforms". I had a slight acquaintance with the Saso family when I tuned a brand new Heintzman piano for Mrs. Saso in Barrie over a period of four years in the 1970's before I moved west, but I digress.

John Wilson who lived to the age of 89 was active in his profession up until he died. He was involved with alterations to the Collingwood Town Hall clock tower in 1951 when the town clock and bell were installed, and is said to have been involved with alterations to the Gayety Theatre in 1952 at the time of his death (well-known Collingwood architect William J. Carswell apprenticed with John Wilson near the end of Wilson's life). Wilson's brother Daniel, however, did not live a long life. In addition to running the planing mill after John withdrew, civic-minded Daniel also served on the Town Council for years (starting in 1896) and served as Mayor of Collingwood for four years (1904-1907), ran as a Liberal candidate for North Simcoe in 1908 but died in December 1909 at age 49 of a cerebral stroke at the Iroquois Hotel in Toronto while on a business trip. Daniel had begun his working life at age 14 in Geo. Buck's shingle and stave mill in Collingwood and up into his mid-twenties he learned all aspects of the lumbering

trade (including in the woods) in multiple locations both in Ontario and the U. S. before he and his brother took on the planing mill on Hurontario St.

As for who was running the planing mill on First St. following John's exit into full-time architecture in 1903 and Daniel's sudden death in 1909, by the time of the *Vernon's Directory* for 1910-11, we find that Walter Frederick Wilson (1877-1944), a life-long bachelor and younger brother to John and Daniel was listed as Vice-President. The 1911 Census lists him as the Factory Manager and working 60 hours per week, perhaps a 10-hour work day, six days a week.

In 1911 the Wilson Bros. planing mill display ad took up the entire back cover of the *Vernon's Directory*:

WILSON BROS., LTD. WHOLESALE AND RETAIL MANUFACTURERS OF Doors, Sash, Wood-turnings, Interior Finish, Hardwood and Pine Flooring. OUR FLOORING IS KILN DRIED, STRAIGHTENED, HOLLOW-BACKED, BORED, END MATCHED, STEEL POLISHED AND BUNDLED.

Our plant is one of the largest in Canada and equipped with machinery of the latest type. We obtain our raw material from the immediate neighborhood of the factory. We are so situated as to provide the most excellent shipping facilities. All of these advantages enable us to produce the best material at the closest prices.

Special attention given Western business. WILSON BROS. Ltd. Collingwood, Ontario.

The July 1, 1912 edition of *Canada Lumberman & Wood Worker*, Vol. 32, No. 13 has a large display ad showing the Wilson Bros. factory, drawn by an artist, as a massive 3-storey T-shaped building with a tall brick smokestack belching a stream of heavy, black smoke, as well as a train on the Grand Trunk railway tracks running alongside the building. Artists were usually quite generous in their depiction of factories of the era, in this case adding a third floor to what was actually a 2-storey structure. The larger the building in the drawing and the more smoke emanating from the chimneys was an indication of prosperity and jobs and suggested the solidity and success of the firm. The text reads,

*This illustration does not show you the largest factory in the world. But it does show you a plant that is unusually well-equipped—where only experienced workmen are employed—where the highest grade materials are used—the home of **Wilson Bros., Limited, Flooring***

*The fact that we are one of the oldest and largest manufacturers of **Maple Flooring** in this country should give you confidence to specify and buy not only **Wilson Bros., Limited, Maple Flooring**, but also **our Beech, Birch and Oak Flooring**. **Wilson Bros., Limited, Flooring** means a carefully kiln dried and manufactured article. It is straightened, hollow-backed, bored, end matched, steel polished and bundled.*

Wilson Brothers, Limited. COLLINGWOOD, ONTARIO

All of this success and prosperity came to a tragic halt on March 5, 1917 when the Wilson Bros. planing mill burned to the ground in a spectacular fire. We pick up the story from *Ordeal By Fire, A History Of The Collingwood Fire Department 1852-2005* by Douglas G. Skelding:

Mr. Charles Trollope, the night watchman, first noticed the fire about two o'clock in the morning. He immediately ran to the fire alarm box across the street and turned in an alarm that brought the fire department very quickly to the scene. In the short time it had taken them to arrive, the building had become a roaring inferno.

To quote Chief McLean: "it was a seething furnace". The heat had been so intense it was only with extreme difficulty that firefighters were able to even get close to the building. A strong breeze was blowing at the time, causing the flames to increase, making this fire quite a spectacular event. Now and then a piece of machinery fell through the upper floor, or part of a wall tumbled down, sending out great showers of sparks. Fortunately no damage had been caused to other buildings, since their roofs had been covered with snow. With all hope of saving the main building gone, the firefighters turned their attention to saving the stock of lumber in the adjacent yard and to the nearby dwellings...For the best part of the morning continual streams of water had been played on the ruins to prevent

re-ignition. It was a wet and cold job, but fortunately this time, the waterworks supplied water at a good working pressure.

Mr. Trollope, the watchman, a man of great integrity, had dutifully made his rounds at one o'clock and everything had been in good order at that time, however when he was making his two o'clock rounds, that's when he discovered the fire. The source and cause of the fire remained a mystery, although it was thought to be either arson or an electrical fault. In any case the financial loss was between \$80,000.00 and \$90,000.00 of which only two thirds of this amount had been covered by insurance.

Note the parallel circumstances of this fire to the fire at Peterman's Planing Mill in our March story. Factories like this were home to highly-combustible materials like kiln-dried lumber, sawdust, wood shavings, hot-running machines, varnishes, etc. Whereas Peterman's mill on Birch St. was not insured at all when it burned during the Great Depression, the Wilson Bros. facility was only partially insured, the high cost of insurance premiums (based on risk) for such a factory being a contributing factor in the lack of full fire insurance coverage.

Having died eight years earlier, Daniel Wilson did not live to see this disaster. His brother John had been a full-time architect for 14 years at the time of the fire and so it was their younger brother Walter who experienced the full extent of the loss of a major Collingwood industry. The latest view of the site on Google Maps shows a Pioneer Gas Station where the Wilson Bros. factory stood and there is no trace of the old Hamilton & North Western Railway to be found in Collingwood.

David Vuckson is a great-grandson of pioneer Collingwood merchant R. W. O'Brien. His roots in town go back to 1875. David and his wife Pamela live in Victoria, B.C.