



THE ADVENTURES OF AN OFFICE BOY/MESSENGER IN THE COLLINGWOOD SHIPYARD WITH REFLECTIONS ON LAND USE ALONG THE WATERFRONT

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For five summers in the 1960's during my C.C.I. and York University days, I worked as an Office Boy/ Messenger in the Collingwood Shipyard. My summer employment in the Yard provided the funds for my annual tuition fee of \$550.00—and no, that amount is not a typo!—and books at York. In the summer of 1964 a telephone call came from our across-the-street neighbour, Joe Clute. He was the Secretary/Treasurer of Canadian Shipbuilding & Engineering and they needed an Office Boy at the Shipyard right away because someone had quit. This was my hands-on introduction to the fascinating place that was Collingwood's main employer in those days. Prior to that, I had, of course, been inside the Yard for numerous ship launchings in the 1950's. During that first summer in 1964, I was attached to the Main Office and Personnel Office when Gordon Braniff was the Personnel Manager and Fran Hunter was his secretary.

I put many miles on my Robin Hood bicycle during those summers. Duties were varied: picking up the mail at the Post Office in the Federal Building every day, then later opening the mail with Joe Clute and

sorting it into different piles to go to various people, taking coffee break orders for everyone in the Drafting Office and Main Office then crossing the street to Kelly's Quick Lunch to fill the orders, delivering blueprints, messages and work orders to various departments all over the Yard, taking documents to the Steamship Inspection Office at the Federal Building, taking documents to the Bank of Montreal, picking up items at G. E. McLean Wholesale and taking purchase orders for tools to Canadian Tire (13 Hurontario St. in those days) to name a few.

Paydays were a major event in that era, for the workers were paid in cash every two weeks. The Time Office would calculate the hours and cash required, and mid-week I would head up to the Bank of Montreal (now The Strand Restaurant) with three large leather bags and a list of the money required. The bank would then fill the bags with the cash and the Police would deliver them to the Main Office building. While the staff filled the envelopes, one of the Shipyard security guards would patrol the Huron St. sidewalk packing a gun. On payday various office staff, me included, would be stationed at the Main Gate (east side) and the Pine St. Gate (west side) where the time cards were punched and we would hand each worker their pay envelope as they punched out.

There would occasionally be someone who was off work sick and their envelope would not be picked up. This instance of pay envelopes not being picked up happened on a large scale one summer. Except for maintenance people, the Shipyard closed down for two weeks in August every year so that families could take a two-week vacation while their children were out of school. One year the payday happened to fall during the two week shutdown and very few people were around to pick up their pay envelopes. All the unclaimed envelopes had to go back to the Time Office to be opened and the cash tallied up and sent

back to the bank. I went to the Bank of Montreal on my bike carrying a leather case containing \$12,396.17 *in cash* to be deposited back into the Shipyard account. On another occasion I delivered a cheque for \$10,600,000.00 (payment for a ship) to the bank.

Subsequent summers from that first year, I was attached to the Administration Building at the base of the water tower where I answered phones, filled out various forms, and delivered pieces of paper to all departments. This put me much closer to the action of ships being built and repaired. The three superintendents in that office were Fred Crew (General Supt.), George Cooper (Hull Supt.) and Norm Paton (Outfit Supt.). One of my daily duties was to go down the stairs in the drydock Pump House to check the water level at the entrance to the drydock and then record it in a log book. The water level was important information for when ships came in for inspection or repair because it would indicate the depth of water available for a ship to clear the drydock gate's concrete sill which was several feet higher than the bottom of the drydock. The usual level was about 14 feet of water over the sill where the gate would close the drydock off from the harbour and the water level showed in a tall glass tube marked off in feet and inches under the Pump House.

It was fascinating to watch the drydock being pumped out. For many years the big pump was operated by steam from boilers in the adjacent Boiler House. A large coal pile that was replenished from a self-unloading coal boat (it also replenished the three coal piles on the spit down by the Sheer Leg) sat outside the Boiler House and the boilers were fed from a tall hopper outside that was kept filled by a crane. Whenever a ship was launched from the building berth at the foot of Hurontario St. some of this coal pile was always washed overboard into

the harbour. In the days following the launch, the Shipyard's Caterpillar crane with a clamshell bucket could be seen trying to retrieve the coal from the bottom of the harbour. When coal was phased out, the drydock pump was then run on compressed air from the adjacent Power House on the ground floor of the Electrical building. As the water level in the drydock went down and the ship settled on the wooden blocks, the fish that happened to be swimming in the drydock before the gate was put in place ended up flapping around over the grate for the pump intake. One or more Shipyard workers would go down the metal stairs with large pails to rescue the fish and bring them up to ground level and dump them back into the water on the harbour side of the gate.

In the Power House along with a number of dynamos for the power throughout the Yard for cranes, welders, etc. there were two large air compressors, not small items like a compressor you buy at Canadian Tire, they were more like the size of a ship's engine. The smaller of the two ran non-stop to supply the air throughout the yard for pneumatic tools and winches, etc. The larger one would be brought into use when pumping the drydock was required and even then, Joe Mason, the Shipyard's Chief Electrician would have to make some calculations to see whether running this enormous compressor would negatively affect the Shipyard's power factor/hydro consumption for the month.

Drydock No. 1 at the foot of St. Paul St. had reached its then-current dimensions in about 1901 when the original dock from 1883 was lengthened and widened. It remained this size, able to accommodate a ship 519 feet long (with the steel road bridge at the south end removed and the ship's rudder turned at a right angle to clear the gate) until the late 1970's when the gate was moved about 55 feet farther north (right

to the end of the entrance slip) to accommodate longer ships. In 1883 Collingwood's drydock was a state-of-the-art facility for its time, the Pump House being situated on the east side of the gate; after lengthening in 1901 and construction of the new Pump House on the west side it was still very up-to-date. As the decades went by, ships became wider and longer and while the drydock could still ably accommodate smaller ships, it could not service the new generation of ships that started to appear in 1959 to fit the St. Lawrence Seaway. Just one of the many stated reasons for the 1986 closing of the Yard was the lack of a large drydock to service the new fleet of 730 ft.-long ships (more on another reason later in this story.)

Back in 1954 when Canadian Shipbuilding & Engineering realized they did not need two shipyards on Georgian Bay, the decision was made to close the Midland Shipyard which had no drydock at all whereas Collingwood had two drydocks: No. 1 at the foot of St. Paul St., and No. 2 at the foot of Hurontario St. As the time drew near to start rebuilding the Great Lakes fleet in preparation for the St. Lawrence Seaway (opened in 1959), Drydock No. 2 was decommissioned to become the launch basin for the large seaway-size ships which were well over 700 feet long. The stone abutments for the No. 2 drydock gate narrowed the available width for safely launching a ship 75 feet wide and they had to be removed. As early as 1917, when launching a large ship, there was always the possibility that the hull could strike the larger gate abutment on the east side causing damage and sometimes this did happen simply because the abutment on the east side containing the stairs for workmen to go down into the drydock jutted out much farther into the drydock entrance than did the abutment on the west side.

To further lengthen the building berth at the south end, the drydock basin was extended a short distance toward Hurontario St. and this necessitated taking a corner off the large brick Boiler Shop to leave room for a roadway linking the east and west sides of the Yard. That is the reason for the angled south-east corner. After the decommissioning of Drydock No. 2, the 105 ft. long ancient gate was towed out into the harbour and sunk as was told to me by one of the Pump House staff and it is still visible on some aerial photographs, looking like a sunken ship [see Christine Cowley's article in *On The Bay Magazine*, Summer 2011]. There is an excellent close-up photo of the No. 2 Drydock gate in its prime taken no later than the first half of 1910 on page 181 of Paul Carroll's book *The Wexford-Elusive Shipwreck of the Great Storm, 1913*. This photo shows the *Wexford* and the *Germanic* side-by-side in Drydock No. 2. Since the closure of the Shipyard and the dismantling of its infrastructure, the 105-foot wide launch basin has now reverted back to being the "Hurontario St. slip" which is what it originally was in the late 19th Century and early 1900's before becoming Collingwood's second drydock.

In the 1960's many of the old freighters still in use had been built either before 1900 or in the first decade of the 20th Century and were well past their "best before" date. Some of them that came in for their regular five-year drydocking/inspections were little more than functioning rust buckets and during my time in the Yard some of them were condemned. On one ship in particular, the inspection revealed that not only were the boilers shot, but also 55 steel plates in the hull needed to be replaced. It doesn't take much imagination to realize that a 60 to 80-year-old ship is not worth the cost of such extensive repairs.

Since the drydock gate's keel was largely wood below the water line it was not entirely watertight and there was a constant leakage into the drydock when it was pumped out. To handle this without running the big pump sporadically, there was an electric pump they called a "stripper pump" which "stripped away" the small amount of water that leaked through the gate in order to keep the bottom of the dock dry for the workmen. One of my summers in the Yard, there was an old ship in drydock when there was an all-night torrential downpour of rain. The next morning, Blair Wright, the Foreman of the Power House/Pump House, told me that if it hadn't been for the stripper pump working throughout the night, he thought that the combination of the water leaking through the gate and the heavy rainfall could have been sufficient to have floated the ship.

The concept of side launching into a narrow basin as practiced at the Collingwood Shipyard caught more than one ship owner by surprise. On July 23, 1958 I was at the Yard to witness the last ship ever to be launched into Drydock No. 1 at the foot of St. Paul St. This launching nearly caused heart failure for one person: the wife of a Shell Oil executive had the (she thought) pleasant task of first making a nice speech to christen the ship and then smashing a bottle of champagne against the hull of the *Tyee Shell*, Hull #167. She had never seen a side launching and assumed that the ship would glide gracefully *backwards* into the harbour. When the Launch Foreman gave the signal to cut the launch trigger ropes and the canal-sized tanker began to move sideways away from the official platform, tilting over to take its plunge into the water accompanied by the sound of crunching and cracking launch timbers, in sheer terror she shouted into Art Bull's open

microphone for hundreds of people to hear, **“OH MY GOD, WHAT HAVE I DONE!”**

On June 16, 1967, Hull #188 the *Feux Follets* (named after a Montreal Ballet Company) was launched for the Papachristidis Company of Montreal, the only ship for that fleet built in Collingwood. I saw the look of disbelief on the face of Mr. Papachristidis as he arrived at the south end of the launch basin (former Drydock No. 2) and was shown where his 730 ft.-long ship would be launched into. He pointed at the launch basin and with a sweep of his hand asked how a ship that size could possibly be launched sideways into that narrow expanse of water without destroying the ship. Like some others before him, he was accustomed to ships being launched gracefully in a rearward direction, not sideways with massive drag chains and drag boxes to keep them from striking the other side of the basin. He must have breathed a heavy sigh of relief as the ship settled following its launch. The *Feux Follets* became the flagship of the Papachristidis fleet and, including its later sale to another shipping company and a name change, put in a 43-year career on the Great Lakes/St. Lawrence Seaway before it was retired and scrapped. Alex Webster, the General Manager of the Shipyard once offered me the rare opportunity of riding a ship in on launch day during one of my Shipyard summers. I would have gladly accepted, except I was waiting for a friend to arrive who ultimately never showed up and so I missed that once-in-a-lifetime chance.

The Shipyard was not without tragic incidents in those years. There was the premature launching of the *Tadoussac* in May 1969 resulting in death and injury. And I was present the day a few years earlier when the largest crane on the building berth toppled while doing a heavy lift. I didn't actually see it go down but as I arrived back at the Main Gate on

my bike, Al Partridge, one of the guards looked ashen as he told me the big crane was down as he telephoned to the G & M Hospital to request doctors. The operator's cab which was offset from the main crane housing where all the machinery was located was torn off and left hanging precariously over the edge of the ship under construction with the operator, Charlie McPherson, still inside. I saw where pieces of the massive counterweight from the crane had buried themselves in the ground between the crane tracks. In a later summer, as Charlie prepared to lift a massive funnel onto a ship being fitted out in the launch basin, I saw him get out of his cab, and carefully survey the fitting-out crane housing where it was connected to its tower before he lifted the funnel completely off the ground.

Reflections on the use of land along Collingwood's Waterfront

Land use is an interesting thing. It is so easy to view the use of any piece of land based on our limited human life span when, in fact, land use changes over time more than we realize and perhaps more than we want to admit as we hold onto memories of the past and of "what used to be there". The Collingwood Shipyard is an excellent case-in-point. It's easy to think that "the Shipyard was *always* there" but, in fact, it *wasn't* always there even though it seemed that way to the older generations in town because for some of them it *was* there during their entire lifespan. Even the land the Shipyard sat on wasn't always there. In 1856 the "shore" along much of Huron and First Streets over to at least the foot of Pine and Maple Streets was almost at the edge of those streets. There were a number of 2-storey wooden buildings on the north side of Huron St. sandwiched in between the road and the water's edge along between St. Paul and Hurontario Streets. These were mostly saloons with several other businesses and the residence of

W. B. Hamilton, Collingwood's first Mayor, mixed in. The only two things extending out into the deeper water in those early years were the Ontario, Simcoe & Huron Railway spit (now Heritage Drive) going to the harbour freight shed and the first wooden grain elevator and Smith's Wharf at the foot of Hurontario St., both of them man-made. Collingwood's iconic cement grain elevator, opened in 1929 just in time for the stock market crash, was constructed in open water and all of the land going to it and around it is man-made.

All of the former Shipyard property is landfill produced initially by the railway (Heritage Dr. area in the mid 1850's) and the Queen's Drydock in the 1880's at the foot of St. Paul St. and the Hotchkiss & Peckham Sawmill at the foot of Pine St. The balance of Shipyard land was subsequently created by the Shipyard itself in the second half of the 20th Century as it gradually expanded westward beyond the tall wooden fence that used to run along the north extension of Pine St. all the way to the Town Dock. This resulted in the filling in of the old booming grounds left over from the big sawmill and the demolition of the old 2-storey brick furniture factory as the Yard expanded westward beyond the foot of Maple St.

That the former Shipyard property is landfill is easily confirmed not only by vintage maps and drawings, but also by the reminiscences of tailor John Nettleton who came to Collingwood in July 1857 and saw these events first-hand. By the time of the 1875 *Bird's Eye View of Collingwood* drawing, more landfill had taken place to the extent that there was now another street or lane *north of* and parallel to Huron St. with wooden buildings on it—a road which today is more-or-less replicated by Sidelaunch Way—an example of the saying "*the more things change, the more they remain the same*".

The *Bird's Eye View* tells us something else about the waterfront in 1875. Huron St. going east ended at the water's edge not far past where Rodney St. turns off it at a 45 degree angle (Huron St. would not be a "through" road heading toward Sunset Point until March 13, 1913). Rodney St. in 1875 more or less paralleled the original shoreline down to near the intersection of Simcoe and Niagara Street (Niagara St. was called Wellington St. in those days). Because of its location adjacent to the waterfront, Rodney St. was host to a couple of industries. On the water side of the street was Robert Kirk's Sash & Planing Mill and on the opposite side was the Collingwood Foundry, both with the requisite tall smokestack belching black smoke into the sky which, in that era, signified progress and prosperity. Near the previously-mentioned corner of Simcoe and Niagara, the effluent from Tobey's Tannery flowed into the water. Much of the land in the area bound by Rodney, Simcoe and Niagara Streets right out to the present shoreline is largely man-made and until 1923 some of it was used as the Town Dump. The "treasures" it yielded (some of which ended up in the windows of Ernie Thomas' Antique shop at the corner of Niagara and Huron Streets), when grown over with scrub trees are documented by Barbara Arp in the book *Reflections* (pg. 230) based on her childhood treasure hunts when her Simcoe St. home bordered this area. In 1923 the Town Dump moved to the west side of town.

The Shipyard land along Heritage Drive, once home to the Time Office Building, Blacksmith Shop, Joiner Shop, Paint Shop and several other miscellaneous old wooden Shipyard buildings from the early years, was under a 99-year lease from the Grand Trunk Railway. The Grand Trunk had taken over the two railway lines into Collingwood in 1888. The Grand Trunk itself was then absorbed into the Canadian National

Railway system in 1923 and the lease would have transferred with it. When you add 99 years to 1888, it turns out that the lease would have run out in 1987 and this, no doubt, was just another one of the many reasons for the closure of the Shipyard in September 1986. There wasn't any sense in negotiating a new lease when there was no prospect of any future work building ships.

As the new era of steel shipbuilding began at the turn of the 20th Century, the Collingwood Shipbuilding Company Ltd. (as it was then styled) would eventually grow to occupy nearly all of the north side of Huron St. between Heritage Drive and Hurontario St. The Shipyard Main Office, Drafting Office and the massive Machine Shop gradually filled the space from St. Paul St. almost right up to the Mt. View Hotel. Between the Mt. View Hotel and the Machine Shop was a large electrical substation for the Shipyard occupying the space that had once been occupied by the Manitoba House Hotel, a rather narrow 3-storey building the width of only three windows.

Since the Shipyard buildings were demolished and, in more recent time, the Mt. View Hotel (in 2012), that land on the north side of Huron St. became a "clean slate" for starting over. And now we have the Mountain View Towne Centre, a new Bank of Montreal, and other developments planned for the remaining former shipyard land along Huron St. Going west from the foot of Hurontario St. on First St., the Admiral Building and its parking lot replaces the Woolworth Store which, itself, replaced Smart Bros. Cannery and the National Grocers warehouse building. At the corner of Heritage Drive and Huron St. modern residences replace D. G. Cooper's coal and lumber yard. Farther east, Sobeys and other businesses replace the Bryan Mfg. Co. lumber yard and the British-American oil depot. Every one of these

former industries mentioned was serviced by the railway which is also now just a fading memory.

A new development proposal was announced on CTV News Barrie on January 29, 2018. "Perfect World Collingwood" is proposing three six-storey buildings in the space between Drydock No. 1 and Heritage Drive. In the Shipyard era this land contained the east building berth with its gantry crane and a number of large wooden buildings: the Punch Shed/Mould Loft building, the Blacksmith Shop, Joiner Shop, Paint Shop and other miscellaneous smaller buildings as well as the original Steel Stockyard with its own railway siding. The 1883 Pump House for the original Queen's Drydock was once located in the northern part of this area. I was told in the 1960's that the flywheel from the original 1883 pump was still sticking out of the dirt floor at the north end of the Punch Shed. It had apparently been left in the ground at the turn of the 20th Century when the new Pump House was built on the west side of the drydock. There may yet be hidden treasure to be found when excavating begins for Perfect World Collingwood.

In *Gone With The Wind*, Scarlett O'Hara's father Gerald stated that "...land is the only thing that lasts" and this statement is amply illustrated on the Collingwood waterfront. When I saw the former Shipyard property in March 1993 for the first time in many years with all the buildings gone and the land overgrown with weeds several feet high, I could hardly believe my eyes. It was as though the very heart had been torn out of Collingwood. The Shipyard had defined Collingwood for over 100 years and it was known to many as "the town with a ship at the end of the main street" and now it was all gone. Now as new commercial and residential buildings gradually take their place on this manmade land, an area that was once all water in the mid-19th

Century, now takes on a new role and a new look in the 21st Century. To younger people or newcomers to Collingwood who never saw the Shipyard, the current newer buildings will one day seem to have “always been there”. The Collingwood Shipyard may be just a memory now over thirty years after it closed but I consider myself fortunate to have worked there as an Office Boy/Messenger and to have experienced its workings first-hand during its glory years.

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.