



A Depression-Era Collingwood Ship Makes Its Final Journey

By H. David Vuckson

The Great Depression of the 1930's saw little activity at the Collingwood Shipyard other than grass growing on the two building berths as well as some repair work on older ships. The year 1930 saw the completion of only three small vessels—two tugboats (*Bersimis* and *Pugwash*) for the Dominion Government Dept. of Public Works for use on the east coast and a gate lifter for the Welland Canal. The gate lifter wasn't even "launched" in the traditional sense of the term—being constructed *in* Drydock No. 2 at the foot of Hurontario St., it was merely "floated". There used to be a comment that during the Depression the men "built" ships on the steps of the Post Office (now known as the Federal Building) because they had nothing else to do but sit there and talk about when times were prosperous. In 1931 a very welcome rescue came from a Federal Government contract: Hull #87, the *WILLIAM J. STEWART*, a coal-fired twin screw hydrographic survey vessel named after a famous Canadian hydrographer. This million dollar ship was a welcome injection into the depressed economy. Another ship would not be built until 1938. Prosperity would not return to the Collingwood Shipyard until the frantic years of World War

II with round-the-clock construction of Corvettes, Trawlers, Tankers and Minesweepers.

At an overall length of 228 feet (keel length 214 ft.) and a 35 ft. beam, the *Stewart* was built to fit through the old St. Lawrence canals in order to reach her intended destination, the west coast of Canada.

Construction progressed through the winter of 1931-32 and on April 14, 1932 with a light dusting of snow on the ground, the *Stewart* was launched into Drydock No. 1 at the foot of St. Paul St. My mother's older brother, Reginald Hewson, a 24 year-old apprentice draughtsman and former C.C.I. track and field athlete who had joined the Shipyard staff at age 18 following his graduation from C.C.I., climbed up the Shipyard's tall water tower to take photos of the launch. It was a less-than-perfect launch because when the launch triggers were cut, the ship slid unevenly and the heavier stern hit the water first with sufficient impact to strike the wooden blocks on the bottom of the drydock. This resulted in some minor damage to the hull requiring drydocking to inspect and repair that damage. The launch photos can be seen on page 14 of Robert Woodcock's book *Side Launch*.

The *Stewart* was a classy-looking ship. Uncle Reg said that "When completed and on trials traversing the harbour she looked like some millionaire's yacht rather than a Government work boat." The *Stewart* left Collingwood on June 5th bound for its home port, Victoria, B.C. via the Panama Canal. Arriving in Victoria on July 23, 1932 the ship worked for 43 years collecting data for marine charts (crew capacity: 56) and almost ended her days prematurely in 1944 when she struck the notorious Ripple Rock in the Seymour Narrows (north of the town of Campbell River) between Vancouver Island and the mainland. Ripple Rock consisted of twin underwater mountain peaks that had claimed

over 100 ships and a similar number of human lives in a narrow, turbulent channel with very strong tides. At low tide, the taller of the underwater peaks was only 9 ft. below the surface. Despite taking on water from being holed, the crew managed to beach the *Stewart* three miles away to prevent her from sinking. The husband of one of my clients here in Victoria was on the *Stewart* during this incident. Following the battle with Ripple Rock, the ship was salvaged and served another 30 years, being converted to oil-fired in 1958.

The top of Ripple Rock was removed on April 5th, 1958 in what is claimed to be the largest non-nuclear controlled explosion in history up to that time. Underwater shafts were drilled from a nearby island to plant 1375 tons of explosives inside the twin peaks. The explosion was broadcast live coast-to-coast on CBC television “in glorious black and white” and can be seen today on YouTube. 370,000 tons of rock were removed: 45 feet from the lower peak, and 70 feet from the higher peak. In the 19th Century Ripple Rock had been a candidate to serve as footings for a railway bridge in one of the earlier (rejected) surveys for the Canadian Pacific Railway in order to bring the line from Bute Inlet on the mainland over to Vancouver Island. This was at a time when Victoria was certain it would be the western terminus of the transcontinental railway for one simple reason—Vancouver did not exist at the time the surveys for the CPR were being made. The CPR was originally expected to cross Seymour Narrows via Ripple Rock and then proceed down Vancouver Island to Esquimalt and Victoria. The route eventually settled on was down the Fraser Canyon/Valley to Burrard Inlet. Vancouver Island had to settle for a separate island railway which today is in pretty much the same state as the railway from Utopia to Collingwood.

After being retired in 1975, the *Wm. J. Stewart* was purchased in 1979 by the Oak Bay Marine Group of Victoria, an operator of fishing lodges on the west coast. The ship's interior was modified in Victoria's harbour while keeping her original white hull and it was then towed to the Village of Ucluelet on the west coast of Vancouver Island. Given the new name of *Canadian Princess*, the ship was permanently moored in the harbour as part of a sport fishing resort. Pam and I stayed and dined on the *Canadian Princess* about 25 years ago (no fishing but we did go whale watching) and my uncle Reg would have been pleased to know that the ship he helped build in 1932 and whose launch he recorded on film still looked like some millionaire's yacht in 2016 over 80 years after her construction.

On May 21, 2016 it was announced that the Oak Bay Marine Group had decided to sell off their fishing resorts in order to concentrate on their marina businesses. The Canadian Princess Resort was sold and the ship did not figure in the plans of the new owners. Still looking elegant with its white hull, the ship was towed out of Ucluelet harbour on Friday, September 30th, 2016 to begin her long and final journey around Vancouver Island to be dismantled at a scrapyard on the Fraser River in Surrey on the B.C. Lower Mainland—thus ended a proud Collingwood legacy from 1932. Some items from the ship were donated to the Ucluelet Historical Society.

There is a video on YouTube "*Canadian Princess* Leaving Ucluelet" shot from a drone by Steven Whitworth showing the ship being towed out of Ucluelet harbour. My Uncle Reg would have enjoyed the drone view from high up as a "book end" to his 1932 photos taken from the water tower at the Collingwood Shipyard when the *William J. Stewart* first tasted the water of Georgian Bay.

Despite the demise of the *WILLIAM J. STEWART/CANADIAN PRINCESS*, the west coast of Canada is not without a product of the Collingwood Shipyard. Another Collingwood ship, in fact the last one to be launched (in December 1985), the Canadian Coast Guard Ship *SIR WILFRID LAURIER*, now in service for over 30 years, still operates on the west coast and in the Arctic with Victoria, B.C. as its home port.

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