

Hydro Giant

Wally Brown helped build Northwest water power

By Audra Hoefer

In 1921, a vigorous young man wrangled a large log from an eddy of the Columbia River near his Wilbur home. After a bit of crafting, he completed his first carpentry project: a working raft that he paddled on what is now known as Lake Roosevelt.

Wally Brown's tenacity earned him a barrage of jobs on large dams and bridges throughout his life as he helped shape the Northwest's hydroelectric power empire.

Born in Othello on June 23, 1910, Wally has had a colorful life that included raising three daughters, Pamela, Diane and Karen and a number of horses for 4-H; farming alfalfa; and building a home from the ground up, where he still lives.

Now 100 years strong, Wally recalls his experiences with clarity.

As a strapping 16-year-old, Wally worked at a Camas paper mill during the summers, earning enough money to buy school clothes. His last job there was as "straw boss" on swing shift. He quit and went to help build Grand Coulee Dam when he was 26.

At Grand Coulee, Wally was first a laborer "because I didn't know anything about construction." His brother-in-law got him a position up on the trestle where the concrete trains ran. He served as a brakeman for about six months and then became engineer. Later, he worked as dispatcher and operating engineer.

"I poured a lot of concrete," says Wally. "As dispatcher, my job was to locate people and pass orders along. Fifteen thousand people were working there at one time."

In 1940, he took a job on the Friant Dam in Fresno, California, and continued there until World War II began. He transferred to the shipyards and operated a crane there from 1941-1947 after a foreman friend "set me up."

Word of mouth and having friends in the industry served Wally well and kept him working for decades.

After the shipyards were finished, thousands of people went to work on the Grand Coulee pumping plant. A friend at the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation secured a pipefitter's helper position for Wally.

"I worked there 30 days and then everyone got laid off because a contractor's association brought suit for going into heavy construction (without being union)," says Wally.

He worked at Sullivan Dam for about two weeks before hearing about jobs at Hanford.

"I shipped my wife and daughter to her mother's home in Portland and headed to Hanford," says Wally. "At Hanford, they were getting ready for the Korean War, after shutting it down after World War II. They started it back up so everyone was flocking back here, and I couldn't find a place to stay."

It was September 1947. Wally spent three nights sleeping in his car.

"I couldn't find a hotel, motel or anything," he recalls.

He hung out at the Union Hall all day, where he hooked up with a friend. Together, they went to see the supervisor.



Wally Brown, above, at his Benton City home, where he has lived for 63 years.

"He set us up as his assistants, all of us local boys, and we were in like Flynn," says Wally.

He worked there off and on for 20 years, mostly running motor cranes and long boom rigs.

After moving from Troutdale in 1947 into a refurbished chicken house in Prosser, Wally says, "If I was going to live in a chicken house, I was going to live in my own."

Later that year, while working in the Hanford area, Wally paid \$70 for almost 4 acres near Benton City and broke ground for a new home. Despite the absence of running water and electricity, Wally, his wife and young daughter moved into the home on the sixth weekend after breaking ground.

"We only had a stove and some paper over the ceiling," he recalls. "We had a part roped off and tarped so my wife and oldest daughter could keep warm. Mine was the only place here."



Above, Wally in a photo taken in 1944.

Left, Wally and an unidentified worker operate a large rig at Libby Dam in Montana, one of the many projects he worked on.

Photos courtesy of Wally Brown

The home started with two bedrooms, but was later added on to accommodate his growing family.

“I’ve been here 63 years,” says Wally. “It’s been my home and all the kids were raised here. My oldest could barely walk when I built this home. I’ve told my daughters, ‘very few people can come back to the house they were raised in.’”

In 1951, Wally worked a one-year stint at McNary Dam. Another friend who was an equipment superintendent at Hanford offered him a job there again. A few years later, he was laid off—a common practice at Hanford in those years.

Shortly thereafter, Wally received a call from a superintendent at The Dalles Dam.

“He asked if I was working and then if I’d like to be down there for swing shift at 4:30 that day,” Wally says, laughing. “I made it down there, and they had my employment slip all ready. We moved down there (temporarily) in 1955.

“I never had to hunt for a job. There was a lot of work going on and when I worked in the field shop at Grand Coulee, I met a lot of big shots. They kind of helped me through the years. It’s a different lifestyle now.”

Wally worked at Ice Harbor, Lower

Monumental and Priest Rapids dams and, eventually, Niagara Falls.

He told a Niagara Falls manager whom he worked with at Grand Coulee that he was “a whirly operator.”

“He said, ‘How soon can you be here?’” recalls Wally. “I said ‘a week,’ and so I dragged up and went to Niagara for about a year.”

His mother’s illness brought him back home.

“I figure I went through the heydays of construction,” says Wally. “I retired off the Libby Dam in Montana and there’s been no such work since that time.

“I pretty much liked all of my jobs. It was all a challenge to me. I was doing my best whatever rig I was on.”

After “retirement,” a nephew convinced Wally to be a drag-line operator at Hanford. He dug a 100-foot wide, 30-feet deep, 4,400-foot long trench throughout the summer. He finished just in time to fulfill a lifelong dream: traveling with his 31-year-old daughter Diane and 150 others on a 15-day trip to Israel as part of a Jerry Falwell tour.

Despite traveling from job to job, Wally remained involved in his daughters’ lives.

“He took us hiking, camping, to the

fairs and hauled our horses around,” says daughter Diane Reynoldson. “He was a great dad. He’d put our hair in little curlers, wash and iron our little dresses, and put us in old apple boxes in the snow and pulled us behind the horse.”

Having lived through a century of innovation and change—the biggest related to automobiles and roadways, says Wally—the centenarian is now content to enjoy the home he built, read Western books and the Bible, and watch old VHS tapes of dam pictures.

He maintains that “eating regular meals, not smoking or drinking, and just keeping busy” guarantees longevity.

Last year, Wally asked his heart doctor, “What’s my problem?”

“He answered, ‘You’re 99!’” says Wally, with his characteristic positive attitude toward whatever life hands him.

Wally treasures his family and places his faith in God’s hands.

“My oldest daughter was talking about family and she said, ‘Look what you started,’” says Wally, laughing. ■

Wally Brown’s daughter Diane Reynoldson is an employee of Ohop Mutual Light Co. in Eatonville. Besides Diane and his other two daughters, Pamela Sensney and Karen Rak, he has six grandchildren, 10 great-grandchildren and two great-great-grandchildren.