



Johnson's Boat Works on Lake Coeur d'Alene, circa 1905. TrW-20-2

P. W. "Pete" Johnson "Norwegian No. 2"

by John V. Wood

In *Steamboats in the Timber* Ruby Hult distinguished Captain P. C. Sorenson with the title "father of Coeur d'Alene boating" – a title he clearly deserved, and Sorenson himself named P. W. Johnson "Norwegian No. 2" when they met in Coeur d'Alene. And while Johnson was Norwegian and clearly came to Coeur d'Alene after Sorenson he was certainly not second to Sorenson when it came to the number of steamboats constructed, for Johnson produced more than any other builder. This in no way diminishes the achievements of Sorenson, but simply makes it correct to say that Sorenson and Johnson were the two most important steamboat builders on Lake Coeur d'Alene.

Peter W. Johnson (known as P. W., or "Pete" to close friends) was born 16 September 1861 on the island of Atley in what is now Askvoll municipality, Norway. On the island there is a Catholic church built in 1674 that is known as Vilnes Church, and apparently the area around it went by that name, as Johnson gave the name "Vilnes, Norway," as his birthplace on a pass-

port application. His father, William P. Johnson, and his mother, Johanna, had a farm named "Bakken" on the island.

In December of 1866 William sold the family holdings, and in 1867 the family left Bergen, Norway, on the sailing ship "Mary" bound for Quebec. Many years later P. W. described the trip:

This was a small ship, 300 capacity. Everybody had their own food chest, and the cookhouse was on deck. When we crossed the Newfoundland banks we all had fresh codfish. When we left Quebec it was rail and boat transportation, and St. Paul was the western terminal of the railroad. As we were heading for the Village of Madelia, Minnesota, we took the boat up the Minnesota River to St. Peter. There we stayed while Father walked 40 odd miles and brought back ox transportation.

The Johnson family first appeared in the U.S. records in the 1870 Census at Madelia, Watonwan County,



Launching the Victor, 5/18/1901 on the ramp Johnson built in 1893. TrW-20-16

Minnesota, where William was farming, then in the Minnesota Territorial Census of 1875; but by the 1880 census Peter was not present. He would have been 19 at the time and was probably out on his own working. He may have had his first taste of boat building, for late in life P. W. Johnson was a friend of the Wood family, and the author's uncle, George E. Wood, recalled that, "When twenty-two years of age he [Johnson] became interested in boat building, the scene of his operations being on Lake Minnetonka, Minn. " In his autobiography Peter explained that he travelled west to the "Puget Sound country" in the fall of 1888, but soon returned to Spokane which he had passed through on the way to the Coast (apparently he took the Northern Pacific Railroad) because the Coast was too wet and Spokane had been sunny when he was there.

On February 7th, 1889 at 3:30 a.m. I left Spokane for Coeur d'Alene on a ticket that cost \$3.40. Soon after arrival I met Capt. Sorenson at his Shop and Boat Livery on the Lake front. When he found I was Norwegian [sic] he took me to his shack. There he pulled out his dimi-john and poured two glasses of whiskey and welcomed me to Coeur d'Alene as Norwegen No. 2 and advised me to stay and grow up with the place.

When P. W. arrived in Coeur d'Alene in 1889 it is unclear how much experience he had boat building. Besides what he may have gained on Lake Minnetonka, Ruby Hult stated that he came to Coeur d'Alene to install a boiler in a boat. If this was true, he must have had some experience with boat machinery. Nevertheless, Capt. Sorenson began working with P. W., although it is unclear if this relationship was a true partnership in the beginning. P. W. must have been a "quick study," for he rented Sorenson's boat shop in 1890. Just what this involved is not clear although Johnson did say that the two "worked together in building boats until he [Sorenson] gave it up and turned it over to me...." But Sorenson's shop was really quite small, and a photo of the interior seems to

confirm that the construction of rowboats and other small craft was a large part of their business.

The first evidence that Johnson worked on steamboats was Ruby Hult's statement that Sorenson and Johnson were involved in constructing the *Georgie Oakes*. But while the two probably did work on the boat, it is doubtful that they were in charge of the project. The boat was being built for the Northern Pacific Railroad and that concern must have brought in its experienced boat builders from the Puget Sound to superintendent, and since it had a near-by division point at Sprague, Washington, experts from there must have worked on boiler and steam engines.

Johnson purchased the boat shop from Sorenson in 1892, but soon he built a new, larger boat shop on the shore of the lake rather than a floating one like Sorenson. Completion of the shop was reported in the Press 20 May 1893. "The building is 20 x 70 feet and a model of convenience. Through the centre is a track upon which is a car to be used in launching boats. Along both sides of the building racks have been erected for holding the boats [rowboats and other small craft] when not in use." Clearly, the launching track was for larger craft than rowboats (photos show steam launches using it), but the building would still have been too small for even medium sized steamboats. These would still need to be constructed outside.

In 1897 P. W. embarked on a new career, that of boat owner and captain. He purchased the *Laura Lyon*, a boat he and Sorenson had constructed in 1895; formed a new company, Johnson Navigation Company; he rebuilt the steamer; and then he renamed her, the *Defender*. For a time he ran the boat and was known as "Captain" Johnson, but the experience was a disaster, and by 1899 he sold a half interest to her new captain, A. B. Allen. Then the next year sold the boat entirely to A. A. Darknell.

During the time P. W. was captain of the *Defender* he sold an interest in his boat house to Captain Charles Sischo, and Sischo ran it. It is not known what happened to this relationship except that Johnson was back in the boat house sometime in 1898. By June of that year he was working with John C. Rosen (brother of his "soon to be" wife, Augusta). On 17 September 1898 just under ten years after he arrived P. W. Johnson married Augusta K. Wahlberg in Coeur d'Alene. Augusta was a little older at 40, while P. W. had just turned 37. This was P. W.'s first marriage and Augusta's second. P. W. and Augusta did not have any children of their own, but some time prior to the 1910 Census they adopted Anna T. Johnson who turned 12 years old that year.

The boat building operation was known as Johnson & Rosen for a time, but this association didn't last long. By the fall of 1902 company was back to being called

Johnson Boat Works and John Rosen had left.

In the spring of 1903 work was started at the Johnson Boat Works on the second largest (by some figures largest) boat that would operate on Lake Coeur d'Alene, the side-wheel *Idaho*. While the Boat Works was leased, Johnson was not the chief builder. That distinction went to George Ryan who the owners, the Coeur d'Alene & St. Joe Transportation Company, brought in from Oshkosh, Wisconsin.

In July of 1903 Johnson started construction on a, "...comodious [sic] store house for housing gasoline launches. The building is to be located just south of his shops on the lake and will be 80 [later stated 50'] by 150 feet affording room for the accommodation of about 30 launches." And in August he enlarged these plans and started, "...to build a large shop on pilings, south of the Sherman street extension and opposite his present building."

In 1904 the new boat house was the scene of a large steamboat under construction - the *Boneta*, and photos show her sitting in a cradle that ran on rails down the launching ramp from the new shop into the lake (the "ways"). Strangely, the month after the *Boneta* was launched in October, *The Independent* reported the new shop was not yet done, and when it completed Johnson would, "...move all machinery from old shop into new and will build an addition on the old building bringing it out to Sherman street and fit it up for a store building."

But by January 1906 boat building at the new shop was straining its capacity. The steamer *Schley* was on the ways after being completely overhauled, the tug *Powerful* had just been returned to the lake after similar work, and a new boat, the *North Star*, was under construction. *The Journal* reporter summed up the situation:

The importance of this ship building establishment is not appreciated by the citizens of Coeur d'Alene, as directly and indirectly it gives employment to a great many men.

The yard is thoroughly equipped with all necessary appliances, such as blacksmith shop, machine shop, plumbing shop, resaw, etc., and machinery is driven by a six horse power engine. It is so arranged that small craft can be taken from the ways to the building and all repairs made in a comfortably steamheated workshop.

Mr. Johnson, in speaking of the matter recently, said the outlook for business was never better, many boats waiting their turn to get into the ways.

The following month P. W. had an accident that clearly could have killed him. While working on the *North Star* he, "...slipped and fell from the scaffold on which he was working, to the platform, a distance of nearly

20 feet, receiving a pretty bad shaking up, but fortunately breaking no bones. He was picked up in an unconscious condition and taken to his home, but yesterday was able to again be at his office." His quick recovery was fortunate because the boat building business could not have been more rushed. Unexpectedly, later that month the *Boneta* that was launched less than a year and a half previously, returned to be lengthened 25 feet. But not only did this work need to be done, the *North Star* was still being constructed and "a great many smaller craft" were also scheduled to be ready by spring.

The year of 1907 was one where Johnson's inventive mind was to forever change the "face" of Coeur d'Alene. In the summer P. W. formulated plans to build a huge electric dredge that was to solve a problem that had plagued Coeur d'Alene since the first steamboat, the *Amelia Wheaton*, began operating. The Coeur d'Alene waterfront, from Tubbs Hill west to the Spokane River outlet, was very shallow and only gradually sloped down into the lake. This had made it necessary for large boats to have very long docks into the lake because their draft would not allow them into the shallow water. The dredge would remove the "offending" soil which would then be used as fill to extend the shoreline into the lake making the long docks unnecessary. The extent this changed the appearance of Coeur d'Alene can be somewhat grasped if you note that the "natural" shoreline of the lake at First and Sherman was about where the south edge of the street now is. This means that everything south of Sherman at that point is fill! Of course, all the "land" the Coeur d'Alene Resort sits on is fill and did not exist when Johnson built his dredge.

Johnson's dredge was to be, "...an elaborate as well as expensive piece of work and will cost eight or nine thousand dollars when completed. The engine on her will be one hundred horse power. Two men is [sic] all that will be necessary to handle and work her." The barge that would be the "platform" of the dredge was launched 24 September 1907. Now the machinery needed to be built and installed, but in addition, cribbing needed to be placed along the properties where the filling would be made.



Constructing the Idaho at Johnson's shop, 1903. TrW-20-6



Coeur d'Alene waterfront, about 1906-07. Sherman Ave. had been extended west from 2nd St. where it originally ended. While a little fill has extended the shore into the lake Johnson's fill with his dredge has not yet begun. CDA-9-85

Dredge Nearing Completion Only One in United States Run by Electricity.

The new dredge is being pushed to completion at a rapid rate. It is hoped to have it finished within a few days when the filling in of the lake front will begin. Already the planking is practically complete on the Blackwell, Johnson and Coney Island property.

The new dredge claims the unique distinction of being the only one in the entire United States that will be operated by electric power. There are hundreds of these dredges in the union or upon its coasts but it is claimed the one in our midst is the only one entitled to the distinction of being run with up to [sic] date machinery, combined with electric power. The others are said to be operated with steam alone. It is claimed this will give the new dredge an advantage over the ordinary one little realized by the average person.

Within two months from the time the filling in begins, it is claimed the work will be completed.

By the end of October the dredge was tested and it was found "works like a charm." Actual operation was set to begin either the 5th or 6th of November, but it is not known if that goal was met. Nevertheless, the dredge certainly was working in January of 1908. Where the first filling was done is not clear, but by the 17th the dredge had, "...been moved to a position along the electric dock, and it is expected it will soon be running again, dredging the channel so that boats can land much farther up along the dock. As it is now only the farther end of the dock is available as a steamboat landing." Besides benefiting the steamboats at the

electric line dock, "The property of George Crittendon & Co. on which is located the Coney Island pavilion [later Playland Pier area] will be greatly benefited by this improvement [sic] as will also all the property from the electric depot up to Second street." But at this time a big hindrance to the filling was the inability to get enough electricity to run both day and night.

Considering all the improvements that had been made in Johnson's boat works and other lakefront property, it would seem that the business was at the height of production, but perhaps P. W. could see the coming decline in steamboat building. For in 1910 the chance to sell out came in the form of a new railroad entering Coeur d'Alene – the Milwaukee. The railroad wanted a location for its terminal in Coeur d'Alene, and the waterfront seemed to be the ideal location at the time.

Milwaukee Makes [Move?] Takes Up Right of Way Options Lake Front Will be Depot Site for New Road

The American Trust company today began paying over money for the Chicago, Milwaukee & Puget Sound Railway company in taking up the options on the property for its right of way through the city. The larger deals closed today in which money was paid over were options on the property of P. W. Johnson, G. S. Searles, M. D. Wright and F. A. Blackwell. The above property takes in about 500 feet of lake frontage.

The largest amount paid for a single property is to P. W. Johnson, owner of Johnson boat works, which



Coeur d'Alene waterfront after 1908 but before 1910. Notice the cribbing holding in the fill in front of the Hotel Idaho. At this time 1st St. does not extend to Sherman Ave. When the Milwaukee Railroad built its depot and tracks in front of the hotel even more fill was added into the lake.

includes all the holdings on both sides of Sherman street west of the Idaho hotel, including the boat works. The purchase price is reported as \$92,000.

With the business sold and a virtual fortune (for that day) in the bank, P. W. Johnson who was only approaching age 49 decided to enjoy life. Along with his wife, Augusta, and daughter, Anna, they set out on a European vacation. At a reception honoring their return held in October, P. W., "...took his audience over the route covering their trip from this city [CdA] to Montreal and then by steamer to Europe, and on a tour of the continent through Norway and Sweden, a visit to the old home, which he left when a small boy with his parents for America, and then through Germany and Italy. He told of their visit to Rome and later by steamer to New York and across the continent to Idaho."

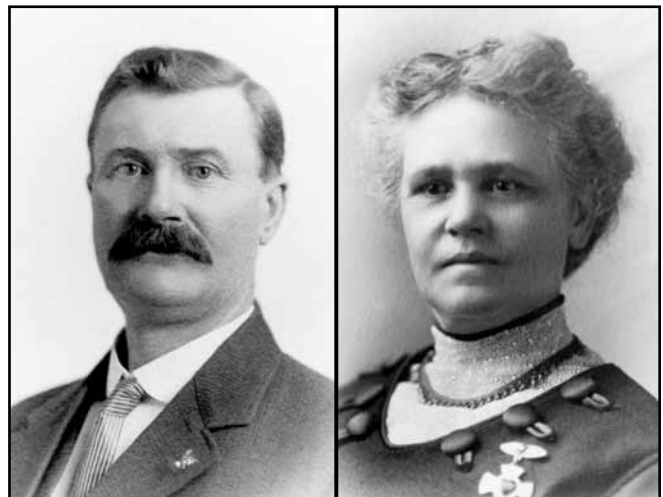
Following his return Johnson wasted little time drawing up plans for a new house, one that was to be built at the corner of Seventh St. and Coeur d'Alene Ave. at a cost of \$10,000, and construction was begun toward the end of May the following year.

In the 1910 Census P. W.'s occupation was listed as "own income," but by 1920 it had again become "builder boat." Unfortunately, this work was not just taken to occupy time in retirement, but rather had become necessary to live. The seemingly inexhaustible money had disappeared rapidly. This occurred partly due to bad investments and a poor economy, but also due to Johnson's generous nature.

By the time of his death on 1 April 1951, P. W. Johnson had lost his home and was living in a rented room on Sherman Ave. Augusta had died earlier in Coeur

d'Alene on 25 February 1942, and their daughter, Anna T. [Johnson] Haglund, died in Spokane 8 August 1987.

During the 62 years that "Pete" Johnson lived in Coeur d'Alene he had a profound impact on the history and appearance of the town. He was responsible, in whole or part, for the construction of 20 or more steamboats including: the *Georgie Oakes*, *Laura Lyon*, *Belleville*, *Bonnie Doon* (launch), *Schley*, *Bessie*, *Spokane* (2nd), *Victor*, *Colfax*, tug *St. Joe*, *Harrison* (1st, not sternwheel), *Idaho* (sidewheel), *Boneta* (initial & lengthening), *Wallace*, *Flyer*, tug *Rose Lake*, *North Star*, and tug *St. Maries*. In addition he rebuilt and maintained many others making their operation possible. Finally, with the Lake Coeur d'Alene tourist trade being of paramount importance to the area's economy, we can thank P. W. Johnson for much of the land that today supports Coeur d'Alene's attractive waterfront.



P. W. and Augusta Johnson circa 1910. Peo-1-271 & 272

Museum News

Board Greetings

I hope this new year finds all of you and your families in good health and secure in the feeling that this year will be better than the last. The board has been busy with the usual year-end business and I am happy with the work that the Museum staff and volunteers are doing to continue our mission.

There is also ongoing board activity with regards to the new Museum site and facility. We are developing an improved strategy for securing our capital funding and evaluating our facility plan to see if there is any way to reduce the cost of the facility without compromising our mission. Thrift is the watchword for any non-profit, but it is even more important that we balance it with our expansion plans in these challenging economic times.

I look forward to the annual meeting when we can gather our membership together to celebrate our successes and discuss our challenges.

Mike Dolan, President

Serve on the Museum Board

The Museum of North Idaho's nominating committee is seeking applicants to fill three-year terms on its 9-member non profit Board of Trustees. As the Museum works towards a new facility and expanded programming the Board's role in connecting with community leaders and potential donors is essential.

Please contact dd@museumni.org for an informational packet or visit www.museumni.org. Interviews with the nominating committee will take place in early March. Board members are elected by the membership in April.

In Memory of Charles and Eileen Seymour Building Fund Donation

The Seymours were longtime residents and supporters of the Museum. Eileen was a board member from 1983 to 1988 serving as secretary from 1984 to 1988. She continued to volunteer until 1992. They donated many artifacts representing the Seymour and Shallis families and local history. Eileen died in March 2010 and Chuck in May 2011.

We are grateful to the Seymour children Charlene, Susan and Rick for fulfilling Chuck's wishes to donate \$10,000 from the estate to the Museum's Building Fund.

Building Fund Donations

Jack & Helen Yuditsky
Diane Dahlheim
Mae Ann Henderson
Bill & Judy Drake

Cash Donations

Thanks to the following people for donations totaling over \$4,500.

Jack & Helen Yuditsky
Craig & Dorothy MacPhee
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Wayne & Faye Sweney
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Caterpillar Foundation match
for James Wogsland donation

The Museum office will be closed
February 4 - 28

Artifacts and Other Donations

B. J. Campbell: *Close Calls: The True Tales of Cougar Bob*

Linda Hackbarth: *Bayview Centennial 1910-2010*

Nadine Lavonne: Doll clothes made by Opal Brooten, tablecloth and dresser scarf.

Rick Carlson: Indian pestle found between Driftwood and Turner bays.

Don Johnston: Joan Davaz oil painting of the Ft. Sherman Chapel.

Randy Teall: DVD player for the theatre room.

Wanted: Exterior and interior photographs of the Northern Pacific Railroad Depot on 3rd and Lakeside, Coeur d'Alene.

Please Update Your Address

If you have a secondary address, are temporarily away, or changing your address please let us know. Newsletters go out in early February, May, August and November and the Post Office will not forward them, so please let us know your address to ensure you receive your newsletter. The Museum is charged for returned newsletters.

Mark Your Calendar April 17
Museum of North Idaho Annual
Banquet & Speaker
Hayden Lake Country Club

Speaker Jack Nisbet

David Thompson's Role In
North Idaho History

Support for the Nisbet program is provided by the Idaho Humanities Council and is free to the public.



2012-2013 Hydroplane Calendar

The 18-month calendar features color photos of the recent Hydroplane Regattas held in Coeur d'Alene, and color vintage photos. The calendar benefits the Museum of North Idaho and the Hydromaniacs.

Calendars are \$20 including mailing

Museum of North Idaho, PO Box 812, Coeur d'Alene, ID 83816-0812

Or pick them up at

The Yacht Club on Blackwell Island

Toblers Marina in Hayden

Angel Gallery, 423 Sherman

Red Lion Templins Resort in Post Falls

Specialty Recreation, 910 W. Kathleen

steamboat builder P. W. Johnson is an abridged excerpt from that book. Wood expects to submit the manuscript for publication to the Museum by September 2012. Look for *Ladies of the Lake: Steamboats on Lake Coeur d'Alene* in 2013.

Exhibit Hall Reopens April 3

If you have a collection the Museum wants to hear from you. A sampling of your collection may be showcased in this season's lobby exhibit. The feature exhibit explores the differences and similarities between how and why Museums collect and how and why private collectors collect. Email dd@museumni.org or call before Feb. 4.

Museum Press Books Coming Soon

COE The First 60 Years: The Coeur d'Alene Airport by Gene Soper

Coeur d'Alene airport is a jewel of an aerodrome and this book is full of interesting and fun facts and photographs. An icon of Northwest aviation tells, with flair, the tales of successes and failures, good days and bad days of aviating and bios of some truly interesting characters. A must read for all airplane lovers. The book is expected out in late March and retails for \$19.95. Reserve your copy today.

Spokane International Idaho's Main Line to Canada by Clive Carter

This book provides extensive and engaging coverage of the Spokane International Railroad. This uniquely Northwest railroad operated a 141-mile branch line between Spokane, Washington and Kingsgate, British Columbia. It is expected out in late summer.

About The Newsletter Author John V. Wood

John V. Wood, the author of *Railroads Through the Coeur d'Alenes* has been interested in the steamboats on Lake Coeur d'Alene since he was very young and heard stories about the boats from his grandparents. And, while he did some casual research earlier, he started seriously working on a book about the steamboats when he finished the railroad book in 1983. He has been working for nearly 30 years on this project. This biography, of the great Coeur d'Alene



180 visitors attended the October 29 end of season free day at the Museum.

Memorials to the Museum

Remember your loved ones and friends with a memorial to the Museum of North Idaho. Your cash donation builds the Museum's endowment fund. The name of the deceased is placed on the memorial plaque at the Museum.

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Steamboat names represent levels of support

- Georgie Oakes **\$100+**
- Idaho **\$100**
- Flyer **\$50**
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Museum of North Idaho Mission Statement

The Museum of North Idaho collects, preserves and interprets the history of the Coeur d'Alene Region to foster appreciation of the area's heritage.

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