

# Sisu on the sea

By Vince Roman

The mouth of the Columbia River and surrounding area is known as the Graveyard of the Pacific. Countless vessels have succumbed to the water's fury as far as nautical records date back. Escaping the river's death trap most always seemed hopeless when a ship became distressed. This certainly was the case when the steam schooner Washington ran aground off the shores of Astoria, Oregon on November 17, 1911. Battered by ferocious seas for hours, the Washington looked as if it was the Columbia's next meal. Fortunately, as history shows, the Washington and its passengers would not perish that day due to the relentless and brave crew of the tugboat Tatoosh. The crew's life risking rescue efforts proved to be a major feat, and one crew member who showed extreme courage, or as the Finns say *sisu*, aboard the Tatoosh that stormy day was my great-great Grandfather, John Eskola.

John Eskola was born in Viipuri, Finland in the year 1850. To this day, much of John's childhood remains a mystery. John left Finland during the Franco-Prussian War before he was 19, kick starting his life on the water.

John's early sea voyages eventually brought him to Goos Bay, Oregon in 1873. His son Dick once recalled his father chanting, "In eighteen hundred and seventy three, I came to Amerikee." Shortly after arriving in Coos Bay he filed a homestead claim and applied for citizenship. Since he was to be an American, he changed his name from Eskola to Wilson, most likely because it sounded more "American." However, my cousin Judy Wilson of Beaverton, Oregon, uncovered convincing evidence suggesting Pyykola, not Eskola, was actually John's birth name. As a young boy, John's real father, a man by the name of Pyykola, died and his mother Kaisa married a man named Erick Eskola, who adopted young John. John's stop in Coos Bay proved to be a fine choice. During his brief sojourn there he met his wife Johanna Mattsson. A young widow also from Finland, Johanna had immigrated to the United States with her daughter Aleksandra a short time earlier. Shortly thereafter, the trio moved north to the coastal town of Astoria, Oregon.

Astoria was fast becoming a destination for Finns in the 1870s, mostly due to the fishing industry and the natural landscape and weather which reminded them so much of

Finland. John, Johanna and little Aleksandra (or Sandra) settled in a large Victorian home in the Uniontown District, where most of the other Finnish families were settling. John quickly immersed himself into the local economy by fishing the Columbia during the season, a steady paying job, although not year round. Between fishing seasons he found employment as a fireman (shoveling coal) on tugboats and coastal vessels. This is how John found himself aboard the Tatoosh that frightening November day in 1911. For his role in the life saving rescue of the Washington's passengers, John received a medal of bravery. The medal now resides at the Clatsop County Historical Museum in Astoria. John experienced several remarkable sea adventures throughout his life, the Tatoosh just one on a list of many terrifying incidents.

While firing on a lumber carrier in the off season he had to leave the fire room stripped to the waist after the lumber ship sank off the California coast in the middle of winter. He and the crew were picked up two days later floating adrift in the freezing ocean. Another time his fishing boat was rammed by a side-wheeler at the mouth of the Columbia and once again, he had to be rescued. His fishing partner drowned.

A fourth frightening ordeal on the seas occurred while John was a young man on one of his adventures that would eventually take him to America. He was a cabin boy on a ship that sank off the coast of Turkey. Being the lightest and smallest of the crew, and therefore the guinea pig, John was sent to shore in a breaches buoy to test the gear and means by which the rest of the crew would use to save themselves. If the test failed, who knows what would have happened to John or the rest of the crew.

Hundreds of Finns who fished the Columbia River, Pacific Ocean and surrounding area at the turn of the century experienced similar situations as John, but without these fishing pioneers, the Pacific Northwest would not have its rich unique Scandinavian culture, upon which Astoria was built. These Finnish pioneers left their homeland behind for a chance at a better life. In fact, Finnish influence and culture still thrive in Astoria to this day. The old Finnish meat market, Suomi Hall and the old public sauna building still stand in Astoria's Historic Uniontown District. Every June Astoria hosts its annual Scandinavian Festival where people celebrate Scandinavian food, culture and music. If you flip through the phone book you will come across hundreds of Finnish and other Scandinavian names. Astoria also gained national attention when it hosted the 2006 FinnFest. And still standing after all these years in Uniontown is the house where John and Johanna raised their family. The house



is now converted into a triplex and my youngest sister Kelly lives in one of the units.

John Wilson died February 7, 1929 in Astoria at the age of 78 and is buried at Oceanview Cemetery in Warrenton, Oregon. Besides Johanna Wilson's daughter Aleksandra from a previous relationship, John and Johanna had seven children together, four of whom survived to adulthood. One of their sons, Bill, was my great-grandfather and he married a fellow Finnish woman named Lydia Hongola and together they had one child — my grandfather Eiem Wilson. Another son, Fred, became a well-known photographer in Astoria and many old photos in Astoria bear the name of his studio, Wilson Studio. Two other sons, Dick and Ed, also married and had families. Daughter Aleksandra married Isaac Panttaja and eventually settled in California where she raised her family.

**Author's notes:** The photograph of John Eskola was taken by his son Fred Wilson at Fred's studio in Astoria. John proudly displays the medal of bravery he was awarded for his role in saving lives from the Washington.

**Editor's note:** Vince Roman, of Astoria, Oregon, was always interested in stories told by his grandparents about growing up there. Now 27, Vince — who is of Finnish, Swedish and Norwegian descent — has become his family's genealogist.

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