

PETER SAMUEL CORWINE WILLS

Died January 9, 1937 - age 78

By DAPHNE RAMSAY

Nov. 15, 1979

In one of the early Skamania County Historical quarterlies Jim Attwell wrote an interesting article about P. S. C. Wills as he remembered him. As I went through old copies of the Skamania County Pioneer I found many references to Mr. Wills and his various endeavors and I would like to add something more to Jim's reminiscences.

Those of us who knew him as an old man would hardly think of him as a man of vision and of more than average intellect, but I believe he was.

In an old interview, Mr. Wills tells of not being able to read when he was a child because of his poor eyesight. When he was in his teens he got special glasses which opened up a new world to him. As a boy he was interested in better roads. He tells of laying out footpaths which later became good neighborhood roads by using his eye and a bottle of water on a board for a level. He found a dilapidated old ferry boat which he operated and which paid off for him, but his ferry boat was carried away in river ice ending that venture.

Later, he began rebuilding foothill roads in the Santa Clara Valley in California, about 1893, and made his cheaply bought lands valuable and saleable. He then mentions his holdings in Stevenson, which he later sold. He owned much of the land on which Stevenson was built for a time and pioneered some of Stevenson's first civic enterprises.

In a Pioneer of January 28, 1904 it is mentioned that Mr. Wills was well along with his telephone line and expected to connect with Washougal by the end of the week. That apparently was Stevenson's first telephone system. It was called "The Cooperative Telephone Company." The name leads one to believe that he was not alone in this venture and I cannot say how long he operated it.

In those early times Mr. Wills wrote a column for the Pioneer called "Zig-Zag Zephers." The news was from the Cooks area and I am sure that Mr. Wills lived in that area at that time because he speaks of his strawberry patch and the Pioneer speaks of the nice strawberries he brought in from time to time from his acreage there.

June 27, 1907, the Pioneer mentions that Mr. Wills installed a 4-horsepower gasoline engine and 3" centrifugal pump to pump water out of his hot spring north of Stevenson and that his "Stevenson Hot Springs" would soon be open for camping and bathing. It is stated that Mr. "Wills hauled in his supplies and

equipment to this operation on a sled.” Whether Mr. Wills sold out his Stevenson Hot Springs operation to Sam Sampson is not clear. The water was piped down to the Hot Springs Hotel in Stevenson but that, too, was not a success. Ivan Donaldson is doing some interviews at this time, trying to find out more about the fate of the hot spring.

From the Pioneer 1907: It was at the suggestion of P. S. C. Wills that a Board of Trade was organized in Stevenson. He wrote to the editor asking that to dedicate the new courthouse, the people organize a board of trade, a town improvement club, or a public library.

An item of August 3, 1911 states that P. S. C. Wills donated a lot on Vancouver Avenue for a Congregational Church and gave them a deed. I am confused about this because the Congregational Church, which is now the Nazarine Church, was built in 1909, according to other items in the paper and is not on Vancouver Avenue.

Jim Attwell mentioned in his article that Mr. Wills saved so many newspapers. In 1928 Mr. Wills lived in a house just behind Ash’s old brick store and my family lived in the house next to it on the east. One day his house caught fire and his precious newspapers were all but destroyed by the fire and water damage. The house we lived in did not burn but suffered a lot of water damage the houses were so close together. From there Mr. Mills moved into the old Doumitt store building down across the railroad track. It was there in another fire that he died.

The accompanying picture was taken in either 1920 or 1921. On our way back from a high school picnic at Red Bluff we met Mr. Wills and he let us take his picture.

About 1928 Mr. Wills’ sister and her husband and daughter came to Stevenson, Mr. and Mrs. Smith and daughter Gussie. They operated a second-hand store in one of the buildings up the hill from Ash’s old store; either what is now the liquor store (*below Windermere Real Estate*) or the Club Tavern. They had come from Sedalia, Missouri and went back there in a short time. Gussie married Nels Brenholm and lived where the Clifford Olsons now live (*on Kanaka Creek road*). Gussie suffered from asthma and died in 1939.

He must have taken over Stevenson’s water system in 1914, according to the Pioneer and operated it for many years. It was not unusual to see Mr. Wills starting out in the evening with his sack of tools and fittings and carrying a lantern to work on the water lines and this was after he had worked all day. He was not a large man and very thin, but he must have been very strong.

He is just another unsung hero who did more than his share to better the living conditions of this small community in its early struggle, and I believe that he enjoyed what he was doing, no matter how dirty and back-breaking his work might have seemed to others.



P. S. C. Wills, regularly checking his water line in the town of Stevenson, pauses for snapshot with two local girls in 1920 or 1921. Ruth Mason, at left, was niece of Edith Palmer, who owned a dry goods store, and attended school in Stevenson for one year. In center is Daphne Hon, now Mrs. D. L. "Bud" Ramsay in Stevenson.



Peter Samuel Corwine Wills in 1905 photo. Always known as P. S. C. Wills, he installed Stevenson's first water line from Skaar Springs. He was also a stockholder in Stevenson's first telephone system. Mr. Wills perished in a fire January 9, 1937, at the age of 78.