

## Rapatz at Ripple Rock

For those familiar with Victoria, few can imagine living in the upscale suburb of Uplands and bagging coal in sacks for a living, nor sharing accommodation with Liechtenstein royalty whilst working at a winery on Quadra Street, but all this and more are Willie Rapatz's memories of his first year in Canada. Born in the summer of 1933 the youngest of 3 brothers and with 4 sisters, Willie's father was a successful business man, later to become Mayor of Poertschach, a village just west of Klagenfurt in southern Austria.

Willie's father had spent 3 years in Russia as a POW in the first World War and his brothers served their country in the second World War, thankfully all surviving, all of which may have created the travel lust in their younger brother. Living in Austria it was not unusual to be multi lingual and Willie's eldest sister spoke 8 languages including Farsi. It was therefore not surprising that she was chief interpreter for British Troops, The Royal Engineers, based in Klagenfurt after the War and gave Willie his first job. Her brother could speak Italian and Slovene , had learned Greek and Latin in school and rapidly improved his English too whilst working for the Brits.

However, the travel bug was taking hold and he decided to join a friend in Bogota, Colombia. Poertschach was and still is a village that enjoys a huge influx of tourists each summer when the population increases ten fold. This invasion proves a distraction to the young men of the district but in the summer of 53 a girl friend suggested that if Willie was going anywhere, he should go to Victoria BC where she had an aunt and uncle. Based on this advice, Willie Rapatz decided to emigrate to the Pacific Rim. After clearing the immigration hurdles in Austria he informed his father and requested financial assistance. Viktor Rapatz wanted to give this some thought and asked his son for a few weeks but when Willie told him he wanted to go the next day, his father knew better than to prevaricate and provided the necessary funds.

Willie left Le Havre on the RMS Georgic, a Cunard liner en route for Halifax with \$30 after having parted company with \$300 for the passage itself. A good time was had by all, or at least by Willie as he arrived in Halifax with a mere \$5! Then followed the long train journey across Canada to Vancouver and eventually on to Vancouver Island. Arriving in Victoria's inner harbour via the ferry, he walked to Ripon Road in Uplands to stay with his ex girl friend's aunt and uncle. By good fortune they were part of the Westinghouse family and Willie was provided with stylish accommodation including servants. He took a number of menial jobs which included bagging coal and working in the winery but an 'accident' at the latter that incurred a substantial spillage of Loganberry wine saw his services dispensed with! By now he had left Uplands and was sharing an apartment with Alex who turned out to be a Liechtenstein Prince, but Alex went up Island to study the logging business and Willie, seeking new employment opportunities, moved to Bowser near Courtney. There he worked as a labourer for the E&N Railroad.

Travelling to Courtney one evening with a friend, they saw a ship, the Willie J Stewart, tied up at Union Bay loading coal. On a whim they decided to make a call on the Captain later that evening to enquire about work only to be told the "ship would sail at 5 in the morning". They assumed they were hired and joined the Willie J at the appointed hour. Willie was told to go and scrub the decks and so began a career with the Canadian Hydrographic Service in 1955 that was to last 38 years.

A willing recruit, Willie moved from deckhand to coxswain operating a survey launch for the hydrographers and within a year was assisting with the surveys. On the recommendation of a superior, Willie joined the civil service as a Hydrographic Surveyor in the same year as he got married to Margaret, 1957. His first ship was the Marabell but he worked on various ships. In early 1958 he joined a group whose main concern was making tidal surveys of the Pacific coast and the Canadian Arctic and investigating the damage tsunamis in the Pacific Ocean could do on the Canadian West Coast This entailed investigating sea levels and tidal streams and installing gauges which in the event of tsunamis would record their effects. Encouraged by his superior, Tom McCullough, the same man who had brought him into the civil service, and at the age of 32, Willie decided to go back to school. Married with 2 children and a

mortgage it must have taken a lot of courage and personal belief to tackle a 3 year degree course at UVic without financial support from an employer. Thanks to the support of his wife who worked as a nurse, Willie graduated with a B.Sc (Honours) in mathematics in 1969. This was particularly gratifying for a man who readily admits he was “naughty” at school and impressed the hell out of his father who visited Victoria whilst Willie was attending university. His mode of transport at this time was an elderly Austin A40 donated by a friend at a cost of \$10. Willie claims that if he drove around **the UVIC ring road** he would meet his own smoke on the second orbit!

At this point he rejoined the Tides and Currents group and in the early 70’s took charge **and after a long career in Tides, Currents and Tsunami investigation was** appointed the Pacific Region Canadian Hydrographic Service’s head honcho. Six uneventful months were spent in Ottawa as Director of Publications but bureaucracy did not suit Win-fried (Willie) Rapatz and he retired in 1990. Thereafter he worked as a consultant to the Institute and then as Executive Secretary of PICES a group of Scientists from Canada, Russia, Chile, Peru, Japan, Korea and China working on scientific problems in the Pacific Ocean. This entailed a globe trotting schedule which at one point found him in the same part of Siberia where his father had been a POW 80 years before!

Willie’s greatest source of pride was **that, just after becoming a hydrographer, he was invited to take part, in a small way, in** the destruction of the notorious Ripple Rock in Seymour Narrows just north of Campbell River. Described by George Vancouver as “One of the vilest stretches of water in the world”, Ripple Rock over the years had sunk 119 vessels, its twin peaks only a few feet under the surface within the confines of a narrow passage with fierce currents and whirlpools.

In a major feat of civil engineering, a shaft was sunk on Maude Island and a tunnel reached out under the twin peaks. Upward shafts into them were then packed with 1375 tons of explosives in a project that took 3 years to complete and cost a shade over \$3 million. On a Spring day in 1958 Ripple Rock was destroyed and in the process removed 370,000 tons of rock in an explosion claimed to be the biggest non nuclear event in history. Willie was involved in assessing half an hour after the explosion that the job had been done “to everyone’s satisfaction.” In reality it exceeded expectations reducing Ripple Rock by 47ft and so today the largest vessels can use the Inside Passage.

Always an avid reader, Willie has enjoyed skiing, he was after all an Austrian, together with tennis and swimming and has no regrets about his life to date. He recognises that today many wealthy adventure seeking tourists pay small fortunes to emulate what he got paid for doing in the Arctic and on the coast. Not a bad legacy for a self professed “naughty boy” who came to Vancouver Island 56 years ago and fulfilled his potential.

*Allstar Crocks*