

History of the Western Canadian Wheelwrights Association (WCWA)

A traveler to western Canada in the 1970's and 1980's was treated to wide expanses, to prosperous farms and ranches. But here and there were picturesque barns and farmhouses abandoned when farms were consolidated into larger more modern operations. In the weeds near many of these buildings were abandoned wagons and buggies. Some people scavenged the wheels as garden props while others dragged off what was left of actual buggies and wagons, either to plant as ornaments in their yards or perhaps in the hope of one day rebuilding them.

About the same time an interest in driving began to take root. People went on wagon treks, drove their rigs in parades or joined competitive driving clubs. Chuck wagon driving at rodeos also stimulated a demand for good wheels. The interest in driving these vehicles created a demand for people who could rebuild wheels. Some people looked to eastern Canada where Mennonites still built and used horse drawn vehicles. They were a source of wheel parts for aspiring wheelwrights. In the United States the trade was much more developed and the parts were of very high quality. But in the early days western Canadian wheelwrights knew little of the American trade.

Learning How to Build Wheels

The Western Development Museum (WDM) in Saskatoon has played a major role in the development of wheelwrighting in western Canada. Bill Mojelski, a WCWA member, compiled a history of the WCWA in 2002. In an interview he did with Leslee Newman, Education-Extension Coordinator for WDM, the WDM began collecting agricultural implements in the late 1940's. The collection expanded to include transportation, business and domestic vehicles. Vehicles which needed repair were repaired by museum staff. Soon the director of the museum started receiving requests from colleagues all across the country to run a class on how to repair of wooden wheeled vehicles. Leslee was asked to organize a class. She turned to Tony Burlack, a retired blacksmith to help her prepare a syllabus for the course which was mailed to museums across the country. The first class was held in 1975. Eight people attended. From then until 1985, classes were held every year. From 1975 until 1985 Tony was the chief instructor. He was assisted by Eugene Buckle, Bert Blackie and Al McLeod. Roy Musgrove, and Mike Steckham, former students, became his assistants in 1983. In 1985 the main instructors were Roy Musgrove and Jack Shepherd. Ken Lorenz of the museum staff joined the course instructors in 1994 and Doran Degenstein in 1999. Jack ended his role as an instructor in 2001. From 1975 until Bill's article in 2002 three hundred people had taken the course. What an enormous contribution to wheelwrighting!

Here is a partial list of class participants. A lot of names will be familiar to people in the WCWA.

Bill writes:" Those who took the course from Tony Burlack: Bert Buckle, David Lockyer (Quesnel), Jack Shepherd, Roy Musgrove, Mike Steckhan, Betty Harrison-Hourie.

Those who took the course from Roy Musgrove, Jack Shepherd and associates: 1988 Ken Lorenz, 1991 Bruce Morrison, Mike Webisky , 1992 Tom Adams, Rick McAvena; 1993 Darrel Kostyk, Eric Hagan; 1994 Larry Bowering, John Sock, Doran Degenstein; 1995 Brian Edwards, Neil McKinnon, Gary Scheerschmidt; 1996 Doran Degenstein (2nd) Dwayne Danley, George Knudslie, Chuck and Carl Gora (Illinois); 1997 Marvin Johnson, Ted Wald, Steve Waddell (Minnesota), Bob Scalese (Montana); 1998 Doran Degenstein + blacksmithing; Terry Aris, Norbert Callaghan, Ken Connolly, Einar Franson, Joe Olson, plus one woman;

1999 Dale Befus, Brian Fitt, Joe Moyer, David Pomeroy, Tom Adams (2nd time); 2000 Mike Hartigan + upholstery; Wayne Kristiansen, Cory Neil, Bruce Hanson, David Plante, Stan Teitge, Gordon Meek, Ron Greig, Fred Finley, Joe Mayer, Joe Olson.”

Meanwhile in Alberta, wheelwrighting instruction had its beginnings in the early 1980's. Although the old guard of professional blacksmiths and wheelwrights were largely gone, there were those with skills who were willing to teach others. Harry Harrison, one of the founders of the WCWA, was an Edmonton Policeman in the early 1980's. One day Harry and a police buddy discovered an old buggy while clearing brush on a piece of rural property his friend bought for retirement. Harry and his buddy brought it home with an idea of someday doing something with it. His friend discovered that Jack Kearns and Irv Nessel were teaching a wheelwrighting class at Grant MacEwan College. Harry's buddy suggested they take course. It was a weekend course. To give you an idea of the interest at the time in wheelwrighting, forty people registered for the course. They worked on one wheel for the whole weekend and went home with handout of several pages. From then on, Harry learned the trade mostly by trial and error. Irv Nessel who got parts from the east, supplied him with parts. Harry's trial and error paid off because he went on to have a flourishing business after he retired from the police force a few years later. Not only did he rebuild wheel, and buggies, but he also sold parts to others. In keeping with his generous spirit, Harry taught others for the rest of his life. In his later years, he was joined by Chris Jenson.

The Beginnings of the Western Canadian Wheelwright Association

In the past when wooden wheeled vehicles were the norm, budding wheelwrights worked and apprenticed in a shop, or later on, in carriage factories. With master wheelwrights guiding their study and practice they eventually became masters themselves. However in the 20th century, except among Amish and Mennonites, the opportunities for apprenticeships in the trade were nonexistent. Short courses, while valuable beginnings simply did not suffice to equip wheelwrights with a repertoire of skills required to open a shop and go into business.

In Bill Mojelski's article on the history of the WCWA he wrote: "Tony always cautioned students that they would not leave the WDM course as a wheelwright. He could only give them the basic skills to take home and to work with - to grow and to develop into a true wheelwright takes years."

I certainly found that to be true in my experience. I also found that it was really frustrating to continually encounter problems in the course of building wheels. Many times I called Harry to discuss a particular problem. In conversation with Harry and others building wheels we agreed that what was needed was a network of wheelwrights of various levels of competence to provide advice to those who were struggling to learn the trade. The idea that such a network should be established began to gain momentum, like a snowball rolling downhill.

We had heard that a Canadian Wheelwright Association had been organized and wanted to find out about it. We were told that Jack Shepherd in Saskatchewan was somehow connected with it. We called Jack who told us that the group had been organized in 1981 after one of the courses at the WDM. Arnold Harris of Prince Albert was elected president. Jack Shepherd agreed to be secretary/treasurer and to edit a newsletter called the "*Squeaky Wheel*". The directors were Boyd Wilson, Ken Silverton, Galen Kennel, as well as, Bert Buckle, Mike Steckhan, Tony Burlack and Jim Cleave were also on the board. Later Betty Harrison and Roy Musgrove joined the Association.

We asked Jack, who was affectionately known in the wheelwright community, as the “Side-Hill Gouger”, if he thought we should all simply join the Canadian Wheelwright Association, which was on its last legs and \$500 in arrears. After some discussion, he suggested that we might be better off to start fresh. He also said that he would be glad to join us in organizing it.

On November 1991 five individuals residing around Edmonton met at the New Sarepta High School to discuss the possibility of founding an association. They were **Terry Francis, Harry Harrison, George McKenzie, Dick Baker and myself**. Although **Jack Shepherd** was unable to make the meeting, he said “Count me in.” At the meeting we agreed on the need to form a network to exchange technical information on wheelwrighting, as well as information on where to get tools and parts. We would have liked to have called the new organization The Canadian Wheelwrights Association, but at the time that name was legally attached to the other organization, so we couldn’t use it. So after some discussion, we settled on **The Western Canadian Wheelwrights Association**.

The next step was an organizational meeting which occurred at the Denham Inn in Leduc, Alberta in April, 1992. Eighteen people attended. I served as acting chairman of the meeting and Harry Harrison as secretary. Rick McAvena was elected as president. Terry Francis was elected as secretary-Treasurer. Joyce and I agreed to start a newsletter. When I suggested the idea to Joyce she accepted on the basis that it was a two or three page newsletter. She had no idea that it would grow into a 40 plus page document with both colour and black and white photographs. Nor did she foresee that the newsletter dubbed the *Traveler*, would involve her for as long as 12 years! If she had, I suspect she would have grabbed her suitcase and bolted for the door. That she stayed the course, says a lot about her generosity.

The first WCWA Annual meeting was held at Rick McAvena’s “Wild Rose Spoke and Buggy Shop in Millarville, Alberta. Things got off to a rocky start. We had invited Bill Twigg, master wheelwright from Moscow, Idaho, to drive up to give a talk on making hubs. We thought, since no one had a clue about making hubs, it would be interesting for ever one to see how it was done.. But he very nearly didn’t make it because when asked at the border why he was coming to Canada he answered honestly, that he was giving a class in hub making. The Canadian Border folks got all excited! Unknown to us or Bill, someone giving classes needs to fill out all kinds of special forms to teach in Canada! Then there was the issue of Bill bringing up some wheel parts that I had ordered. When Bill arrived he felt so hassled that he wanted to drop off my wheel parts and beat it back to the safety of his shop in Idaho immediately! But we convinced him that Rick had laid on a really good lunch and he shouldn’t make that long drive without something to eat. After lunch we pointed out that since he was here anyway he might as well talk about building hubs. Otherwise, we would let the air out of his tires! Bill not only stayed, but over the years, he has contributed to members of the WCWA by offering advanced courses in his shop and contributing to our books on wheelwrighting.

Over the years meetings have had many wonderful speakers and folks who have given demos. Those meetings during my time in the association were a great time to learn, not only from the guest speakers but also by sharing information with other members. I’m sure that wonderful tradition continues to this day.

More Ways to Learn

The Traveller and the Annual General Meetings were important resources for members wanting to become wheelwrights. When I became interested in building wheels and wanted a reference book I bought a copy of Mel Dewitt's book: ***Wheels, Wheels, Wagons & More***. Mel lived in Moscow, Idaho and was influential in getting Bill Twigg in to building wheels.

In the early 2000s the Executive decided that it would benefit the organization if there was a manual that went beyond Mel's book. They wanted a manual that not only covered the basics, but covered complex tasks beyond simple wheel repair. They asked Joyce and I to put one together. We saw it as daunting task. I figured I could write it, but that I needed help getting the information on various tasks that were beyond my skill level. Once we figured out what the book should contain we contacted Bill Twigg and others to provide the information. I wrote it up and did the photography and Joyce took on the computer graphics and layout. Fred Finley provided the wonderful computer graphics. A number of members read the manuscript in draft form and made valuable comments. It was a big challenge for all of us. I think we all substantially expanded our vocabulary of expletives!

In 2003 ***Wheelwrighting: A Modern Introduction*** was published. That it received a positive reviews and has been sold not only in Canada but all over the world has been gratifying to all of us. We left Alberta in 2005 to enjoy our retirement in BC. The executive once again approached us to write something. To us, this task looked to be no less daunting that the first. What the executive said was "look when you open a shop people ask you to do other things, like building seats, shaves and buggy tops. What about creating a manual that addresses those things?" Once again we looked to people who had the expertise to help us out. Fred Finley played such an important role that we made him one of the authors. Luckily, we had quite a few experts to contribute, people with a wealth of knowledge such as Everette Burkholder in Virginia, Dwayne Danley, Stan Teitge, Bill Doyle and Brian Reynolds.

In 2013 ***Wheelwrighting a Modern Introduction: Vol II*** was published. Like the first volume, it too seemed to meet a need within the wheelwrighting community.

Today, thanks to the Association's hardworking executive, the needs of wheelwrights the world over are finding useful support for their activities. Another critical part in the WCWA success story has been the continued publication of ***The Traveller***. When we retired from editing the newsletter, Ron Greig took over the daunting job for 5 years. When he could no longer do it, Diana Matsuda stepped up and continues to do a wonderful job to this day! Oh, and yes, we have a website – www.wcwa.ca – with Joyce Morrison as webmaster since 2006. Both ***The Traveller*** and the website are the basis for communication for and by the members and those who might be interested in wheelwrighting.

This brief history has left out a great deal which hopefully will be filled in by others. My thanks to Bill Mojelski for the material he published in 2002. I have drawn heavily upon it.

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