

Barge family has long, storied history in White Rock

Lasting legacy

Few can match the Barge family in its early and long-lasting connection with White Rock.

More than a century ago, with his wife, Ruby, and their three children, William R. Barge arrived to take up his duties as an immigration officer, and stayed to contribute

much to what characterizes early White Rock.

Their first home was a tent on the beach.

By April 1913, Barge had purchased property and built a house in the Vidal subdivision across the

seafront road (Marine Drive) from the Great Northern Railway station.

We met recently with his granddaughter, 85-year-old Marie Barge McCullough, her son, Don, and her nieces, Linda Barge Balback and Carol Barge Higgins.

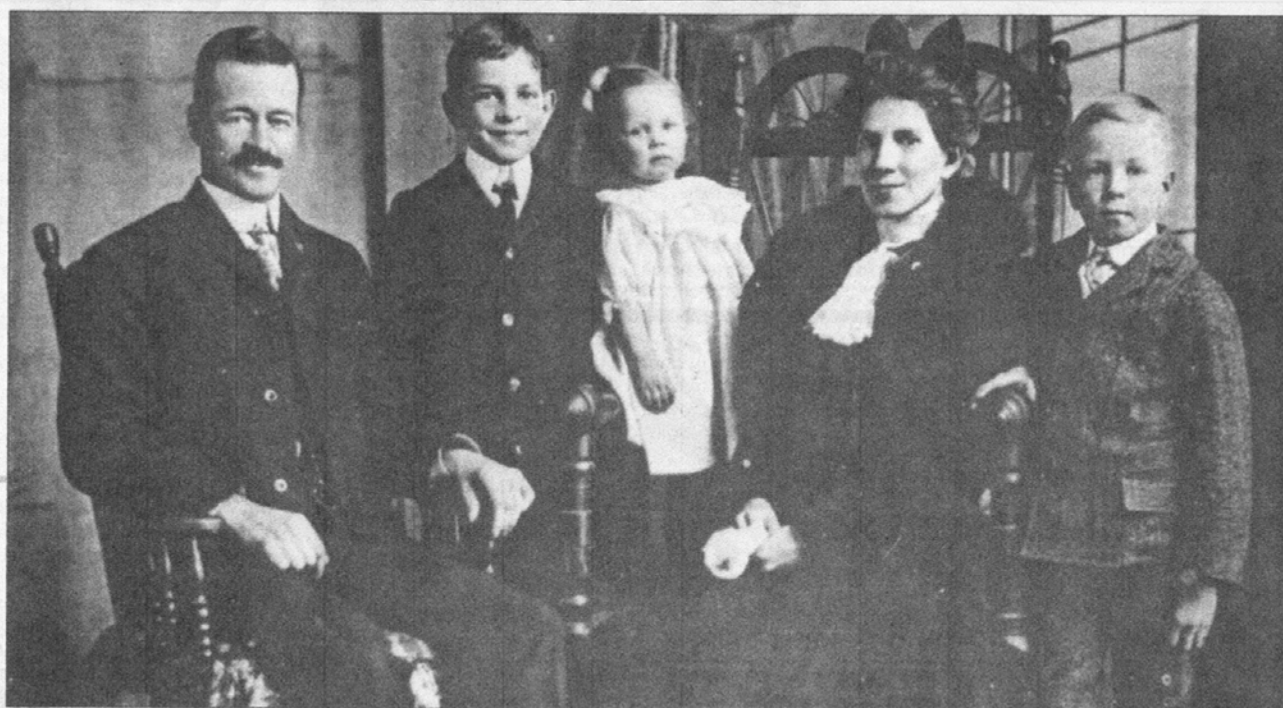
With obvious amusement, Marie recalled "the Barge compound", the cluster of family residences near the foot of Victoria Avenue. She especially remembered walking to school up through 'the forest' (the Hope property), and sorting nails for her father, William Jr., in the Barge hardware store.

Her grandmother's habit of burying money in the backyard – because she didn't trust banks – brought a chuckle as she wondered if the bulldozers uncovered the loot when the property was redeveloped.

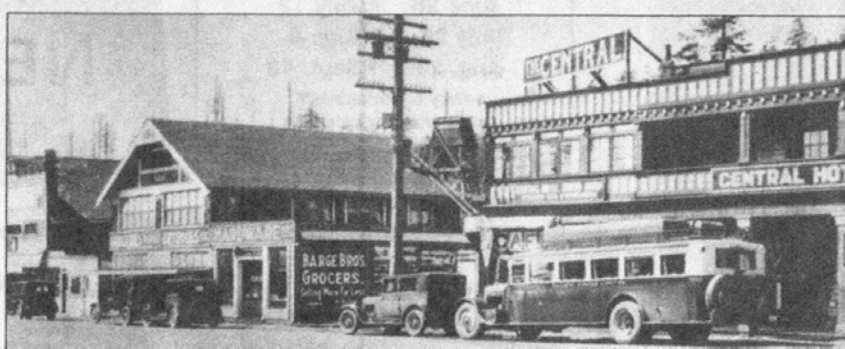
Soon after the outbreak of the First World War, volunteer Will Barge was on his way to France as a transport sergeant with the 7th Battalion. By the time he was invalidated home in 1915, both his sons, William J. (Bill) and Earl, had joined up.

Subsequently, son William was awarded the Military Medal; Earl was wounded at Vimy Ridge, the first White Rock man to be hospitalized at the front.

Following the war, all three were involved



Lorraine and Hugh Ellenwood
historical perspective



White Rock Museum & Archives photos

Clockwise, from top: The Barge family, circa 1907 – William Robert, William Joseph, Ella, Ruby and Earl; The Central Hotel and Barge Brothers' store across Marine Drive from the station in the mid-1920s; Harold Barge (on right) and fellow White Rock firefighters pose with Miss White Rock in 1954.

in organizing the local branch of the Great War Veterans Association, forerunner of the Canadian Legion, and building the iconic Legion building adjacent to the pier.

In 1919, on the front of his property, Barge erected a store containing the first plate-glass windows in White Rock, and specializing in fish and green groceries. Expansion in 1924 included lumber, furniture, and hardware when sons Bill and Earl took over the grocery department.

A Ford runabout was purchased to provide delivery service. The following year, a gas tank was installed and auto supplies were stocked.

These were the days of few public services, and fire was an extremely dreaded menace along the seafront road. Reliance on each

other was vital.

In 1928, when fire broke out at the GNR depot, Barge Hardware quickly supplied pails for the bucket line from high tide to the station, as well as picks and axes to tear boards off walls and platform of the burning building.

These measures were not enough to save the stores ravaged by fire in 1930. When William R. died in 1932, his obituary noted, "Mr. Barge was a big loser in the disastrous fire that swept White Rock two years ago, and since then he lived in retirement."

Rebuilt after the devastating fire, the Barge stores endured in various forms and under diverse management for two more decades.

Perhaps Carol and Linda's father, Harold

Barge, was influenced in his career choice by the frequency of uncontrolled fires. He wrote of those times, "When we got a call to the flax plant on Campbell River Road, we hooked up the trailer pump to the old Studebaker fire truck and took off. We lost the trailer and pump at Maple and Marine Drive and didn't know it till we got to the fire. Couldn't do much: no water. We found the trailer and pump in a ravine on the way back, buried in blackberries."

Things hadn't improved much when they answered a request to attend the fire that destroyed the Opera House and Athletic Club in Cloverdale in 1952.

"My Dad drove the old Studebaker, while I

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Long history of service

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wiped the bugs off the windshield so he could see. We couldn't do much by the time we arrived."

Ruby – generally known as Grandma Barge, probably because she served as the community midwife – started the store's ladies' department in 1929. When she died in 1964, she was lauded as, "a neighbour who could be called out, day or night, to lend assistance or help with the birth of a baby. Her home, which had a living room large enough for dancing, was the scene of almost perpetual open house for friends and neighbours."

During the Second World War, both Bill and Earl served in the home guard Legion of Frontiersmen, and were two of only four in the area qualifying for Dominion Marksman Bronze Medals at the time.

Bill was promoted to captain and second in command in 1942. He also served as head of aircraft detection in the area.

Sports-minded Earl was the first in White Rock to light his backyard badminton court for night games. Many local residents still remember that his daughter, Meryl, an early WRASA swimming star, became a legendary coach, teaching generations of children as well as holding executive positions in the club until 1964.

Ella, third child of the senior Barges, married teacher Tom Carmichael, who was instrumental in forming the local PTA in 1924. After a stint in Prince George, they retired to White

Rock where Tom served on city council in 1966 and 1967.

Marie recalled that her brother, Harold, joined the White Rock fire department following his service in the armed forces during the Second World War.

He and his family moved into the living quarters of the White Rock fire station at the corner of North Bluff and Johnston Road in 1953. He was appointed acting fire chief during White Rock's transition from a ward of Surrey to a city, later transferring to the Surrey fire department holding the rank of captain with badge Number 1.

Harold retired in 1978. A few years later, the firefighters' union bought a small social club for firemen they named the 'Barge Inn'. At his funeral in 1995, an impressive full-dress honour guard of firefighters marked the high regard in which he was held.

Although the stores and 'compound' are long gone, a park near the western boundary of the city commemorates the role played by this remarkable family in the early development of White Rock. It is small and inconspicuous, but the neighbourhood children enjoy playing there.

That, in our opinion, would be 'enough said' for William R. and Ruby Barge.

*The Peninsula's best-known mother-and-son historians, **Lorraine and Hugh Ellenwood**, are dedicated to preserving history through the White Rock Museum & Archives. Call 604-541-2225, or email whiterockarchives@telus.net*