APPRENTICE ALUMNI ASSOCIATION's Oldest Member

WALTER NEIL WOODALL
(Boilermaker – 1931)

~ Foreword ~

Walter Neil Woodall celebrated his 97th birthday on May 20, 2009. His memories of ships and shipbuilding go back to the early 1920s, when sailing vessels were still a fairly common sight on the Newport News waterfront and undergoing repairs at the shipyard. Before he retired, nuclear-powered aircraft carriers and submarines had taken their place.

Neil, as he prefers to be called, not only has a prodigious memory, but is quite computer-literate; a skill he picked up at age 84 as a result of being self-taught using *Windows 95 for Dummies.* At age 95 he created an illustrated autobiography of over 100 pages.

He has generously agreed to share excerpts from that compelling document in order to provide Apprentice alumni with his colorful memories of what shipbuilding (and life) was like during his long and extremely varied career, which included a unique experience in a Korean shipyard. When asked what he would like to say to present-day Apprentices, he responded as follows:

"There are so many more opportunities and choices of direction today for a young person entering the shipbuilding profession than existed in my time. I would hope that young people would love the work, as I did, and realize how very important shipbuilding is in today's world. I feel blessed that I was able to hang in there and accomplish as much as I did. Newport News Shipbuilding was good to me and I always tried to do my best. I live with good memories."

"I was born in a log cabin…"

Walter Neil Woodall was born May 20, 1912, in Campbell County, Virginia, a few miles southeast of Lynchburg. His parents lived in an austere log structure that his grandfather had built for them on his farm. It had one room downstairs, heated by a fireplace, plus an unheated loft room. His mother cooked on a wood burning stove in a lean-to attached to the rear of the log cabin. There was no electricity or inside toilet. Kerosene lamps were used for light and chamber pots augmented an outdoor privy.

Neil Woodall was the second of three sons, followed by three daughters. This photo was taken a few months after Neil was born. His father is holding older brother Raymond; his mother is holding him.

His father farmed for a living, but occasionally worked on the railroad and also on road construction in Campbell County. Neil Woodall has extensive and largely happy memories of his early childhood, living on a farm. But in late 1917, his family moved to Lynchburg when his father took a job with the railroad, and stayed there until World War I ended. One of Neil's earliest memories is marching in a parade on Armistice Day.

He also recalls seeing his first moving-picture show in Lynchburg. It was a silent film, in black and white, with music provided by an orchestra in front of the screen. After surviving the Spanish Influenza epidemic of 1918, the Woodall family moved back to the family farm, where his father resumed working the soil. Neil and his older brother walked about four or five miles to and from school. When he was old enough, younger brother Dallas joined them. Their mother reminded them each morning to cut a twig from a gum tree and to chew on it until frayed, thus brushing their teeth on the way to school.

In 1921, Neil Woodall first heard sounds coming from, as he characterized it: *"…a gadget called a radio."*

Neil's father bought an 86 acre farm in 1923. In addition to raising most of their food, they grew tobacco as their 'money crop'. Before he became a teenager, Neil learned how to plant, cultivate, cut, cure, strip, and take tobacco to market; and at age eleven, he learned how to drive a Model "T" Ford.

But then, blight infested the tobacco plant beds, killing everything. After planting fields of black eyed peas, Neil Woodall's father announced that he was going to quit farming. He had found a job as a Joiner in the shipyard in Newport News, Virginia in 1923. His father harvested the peas that fall and then went to work in the shipyard at fifty-eight cents per hour.

When school ended in the summer of 1924, Neil's father returned and found a renter for the farm. Following an auction of household items, their remaining worldly goods were loaded on a truck, destined to be transported to a house that had been rented in Morrison, Virginia; about five miles north of Newport News, but over 200 miles from Naruna.

This was not your ordinary household goods' move, as Neil would later recall:

"Loaded on the truck were barrels of flour, wooden boxes of salted side meat (pork), and several smoked hams. Plus, of course, several bushels of those black-eyed peas. Mom and the girls stayed behind for a while. Pop and we three boys took off for Newport News in his 1922 Model T Ford. He had two spare tires strapped to the back and a shoebox full of extra sparkplugs, headlight bulbs, and magneto fuses. Raymond rode up front with Pop, while Dallas and I sat in the back on a pile of quilts that Mom had made."

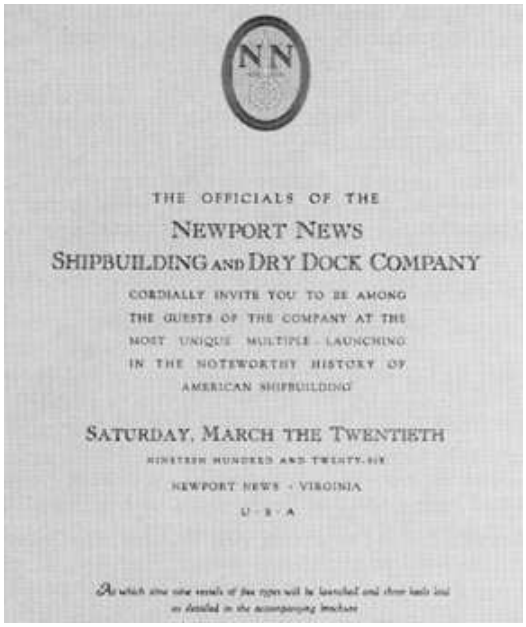
So began an adventure for three boys who had never been out of Campbell County.

"There were no paved roads until we got to Richmond…"

"…as I remember, the road surface was red clay from Naruna to Keysville, and gray soil topping from there to Richmond. Once we got on US Route 60, the roads were paved all the way to Newport News."

"It was dark when we got to Pop's boarding house at 125-34th Street. We boys slept in one of the attic rooms. The next morning, the noise from the shipyard and the street cars was deafening to a farm boy. When we walked down Washington Avenue, we could look down side streets and see the wide expanse of the James River with lots of big ships anchored there. The sight was unbelievable and lingers in my mind even today."

Once the house in Morrison was ready, their mother and sisters rode the train to Norfolk. Neil and his brothers experienced their first boat ride when they took the C&O steamer "Virginia" (better known to local people as Smokey Joe) across Hampton Roads to Norfolk.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NEWPORT NEWS
SHIPBUILDING AND DRY DOCK COMPANY
CORDIALLY INVITE YOU TO BE AMONG
THE GUESTS OF THE COMPANY AT THE
MOST UNIQUE MULTIPLE-LAUNCHING
IN THE NOTEWORTHY HISTORY OF
AMERICAN SHIPBUILDING

SATURDAY, MARCH THE TWENTIETH
NINETEEN HUNDRED AND TWENTY-SIX
NEWPORT NEWS - VIRGINIA
U · S · A

Neil Woodall's first venture into the shipyard took place in March 1926 when his father took the family to see nine vessels launched at NNS on the same day. In less than two hours, they witnessed a dredge, three house barges, a car float, three yachts and a large passenger & cargo vessel sequentially christened. The last of these vessels slid down the ways; the rest were simply floated off their building blocks.

Although the Woodall's home in Morrison was an improvement over prior residences, it did not have indoor plumbing, and water came from a well fitted with a pitcher-pump. The Woodall boys learned that there were many differences in life in Tidewater, as compared with farm life. New-found friends showed them a path to the James River, about a mile away, which crossed a small creek via a rickety bridge. A few years later, that creek was dammed to form Lake Maury, when the Mariners' Museum was built.

In the fall, the boys enrolled in public school. Neil Woodall became a freshman at Morrison High School. Although he got along well in school, at the end of his sophomore year, when this photo was taken, Neil decided that he wanted to work that summer in the shipyard. His older brother Raymond had previously quit school after one year at Morrison, and had become an apprentice in the Joiner Shop where their father worked.

Neil's older brother did not complete his apprenticeship, but his younger brother Dallas did (Boilermaker – 1938). Four of Neil Woodall's high school classmates also became graduate apprentices: Jack Dyke Daniels (Shipfitter – 1934), Richard Hamilton Seward, Jr. (Machinist – 1934), and Ellsworth Emerson Stockman (Machinist – 1934).

The shipyard was not hiring that summer, because of a low backlog. Nevertheless, a neighbor who worked at the shipyard suggested that Neil try to talk to G. Guy Via, the yard's supervisor of training, in hopes of becoming enrolled in the Apprentice School.

In 1927, the Apprentice School was located in a brick building on Washington Avenue; where the DOROTHY and 'the rock' are now on display. Arranging a meeting with Mr. Via only required that he first talk to a secretary and then walk in the front door of that building on the appointed day and time.

"So I talked with Mister Via…"

Guy Via advised Neil Woodall that there was an opening for an apprentice in the boiler shop. Neil decided to quit high school and begin a four-year apprenticeship in Newport News Shipbuilding's Apprentice School. Since the required age for entering the school was sixteen at the time and he was only fifteen, his parents had to sign an affidavit giving their permission. Walter Neil Woodall started his apprenticeship on June 8, 1927. There was only one other apprentice in the Boiler Shop when he went to work.

"I will never forget my first day in the shipyard. I was really scared. Pop drove me in the old Model "T" to the shipyard early that morning, because I had to go to the employment office and pick up my papers. The employment manager advised the boiler shop clerk that he was sending down a new apprentice, and pointed me in that direction.

"Mr. Marks, the clerk, met me at the office door. He put me at ease, got me written up, explained the rule, and told me that my "check" number would be #1124. He showed me how to check in each morning at 7:00 o'clock and at 1:00 o'clock after the lunch hour.

"He then took me around the shop and introduced me to the foreman, Mr. Robert Carter, the assistant foreman, Mr. John Buchanan [Boilermaker – 1900], *and the shop supervisor, Mr. Artie Small. Those three men were instrumental in shaping my life."*

Neil Woodall's starting pay rate was 22 cents an hour. He worked eight hours a day, Monday through Friday, and five hours on Saturdays. He had to wait two weeks for his first pay as the shipyard held back one week. They paid in cash, and included no change or paper bills in the employees' pay envelopes. They used silver dollars and added the change to the next week's pay, to round out to the nearest dollar. Because his weekly pay was calculated to be $9.90, he took home $9.00 one week and $10.00 the next nine weeks. As Neil recalls, the method of pay dispersal was very different, back then:

"Each Friday afternoon, we lined up, in check order, at the appropriate pay window on the ground floor at the back of the main office building. When it was my turn, I would step up to the window, repeat my check number and be handed an envelope that held my week's wages. If you were late, you had to get in the 'scrap line' and wait until everyone else in the department had been paid. I was late once, missed my ride and had to walk five miles home. I had no other option."

Fledgling apprentice Woodall was first assigned as a helper of Edward Hall Roach (Boilermaker – 1899). Eddie Roach was the second apprentice to complete his time as a boilermaker at NNS. The first thing he taught Neil Woodall to do, while laying out steel plates for a Scotch Boiler, was how to properly sharpen a stick of soapstone and to make precise marks with it on raw steel.

Scotch Boiler was another name for the fire-tube boiler technology used in marine applications. Scotch Boilers were a holdover from the 19th century, and usually utilized coal as fuel. They were rapidly being replaced by modern oil-fired, water-tube boilers when Neil Woodall started his apprenticeship.

Amenities for craftsmen, back then, were pretty primitive, according to Neil Woodall:

"There was no wash room or any lockers in the Boiler Shop. Men working on ship repair often would leave the yard at quitting time completely covered with black soot. The nearest toilets were located at the head of Pier 3. They were fabricated of sheet metal, hot in the summer and freezing in the winter. They discharged directly into the river.

"My mother gave me a two-gallon bucket to use for washing up before I went home. When I had been working on a particularly dirty job, I would stand behind a big machine in a corner of the shop to change clothes."

Neil's youngest sister was born the year he entered the Apprentice School. She was the only one of the six Woodall kids to be born in a hospital. In 1928, the house they were renting was sold, and the family had to move. Just before leaving the Morrison house, this picture was snapped by an obliging neighbor. Left to right, front row: Myrtle, Laura, Dallas. Left to right, back row: 'Mom', 'Pop' holding Lois, Raymond and Neil. Soon, the family moved again, this time to downtown Newport News on 43rd Street; within easy walking distance of the shipyard.

Neil Woodall tried out for the Apprentice School's football team in 1928. He and his teammates had to suit up in the basement of the school building on the corner of Washington Avenue and 43rd street, then sprint to the Casino grounds at West Avenue and 29th street. After practicing there until it got dark, they would run back to the school. This activity, added to a full day of working in the Boiler Shop, left him exhausted. He did not go out for football the next year. But he did participate, later on, in preparing the grounds for the school's first football field and in building the field's original bleachers.

Neil attended classes three hours a day, three days a week from 1:00 until 4:00 PM. At first, he attended classes in the building on Washington Avenue where he had first met with Mr. Via. In 1929, the school moved 'behind the fence' into a renovated building, designated in shipyard parlance as Building 63. But that building, which was situated about where the medical clinic complex stands today, had previously been a mule stable; a fact that was not lost on the school's detractors of that period.

Neil Woodall and his classmates' subjects included Algebra, Economics, Physics, Geometry, Mechanical Drafting and Shipbuilding Terms. He put some of that knowledge to practical use:

“I liked mechanical drawing and geometry. They held my interest, and the more I learned, the more I wanted to learn. Applying this knowledge to my work eventually earned me the best job in the boiler shop. Meantime, I worked as a boilermaker's helper and learned new things every day. For example, during my apprenticeship, the shipyard contracted with the C&O Railroad to overhaul a fleet of steam-driven locomotives.”

That work was, logically, accomplished in the boiler shop. The mechanic whom Neil Woodall was working with was assigned to the task of taking those huge mobile machines apart. As a helper on that job, Woodall learned how those complex engines, the heart of which was a fire-tube boiler, worked. When the work was done, the railroad engineer testing the results let him ride in the locomotive’s cab on a trial run.

Then, Mr. Buchanan, Boilermakers’ assistant foreman and apprentice grad, selected Neil to become a "***Layerout***". The previous Layerout man, Amiel Schultz (Boilermaker – 1927), had recently quit, leaving the assistant foreman to do all of this work plus his regular duties. Neil Woodall describes his workplace and his duties as a Layerout man:

“The Boiler Shop Mold Loft was on the second floor of a building adjacent to Dry Dock #1. It was clean and quiet; quite a contrast to the boiler shop. It had a wooden floor, approximately 50' wide x 100' long where full-size patterns could be developed. The Engineering Department would send a blueprint and an order to the boiler shop office, which sent it directly to the Layerout, who would then make patterns for such parts as a ship's smokestack, boiler, tank, rudder, etc.”

“Working from blueprints, I drew full-sized outlines on the loft floor. I then made a wax paper pattern for every piece. A stovepipe might consist of one piece of flat tin, rolled up to make a pipe, but a large ship’s smokestack required numerous steel plates of many different shapes. Each one required a separate pattern. I made the patterns, numbered and match-marked each, so that when steel was cut, the pieces would fit together.”

“I happened to be at the right place at the right time, and was happy to get this opportunity to apply my knowledge of mechanical drawing and geometry.”

Mr. Buchanan told Neil that he would need some special tools that were not stocked in the shipyard’s tool rooms. Since there was no store in town then that carried such things, Mr. B took Neil home with him one evening, where they looked through a Sears/Roebuck catalogue and made a list of tools. The list included a 24-inch hand saw, a folding rule, various dividers, including a small spring-loaded divider to space rivet holes, an adjustable angle square, a framing square, a protractor and a 33-foot steel tape with a diameter conversion table on the back.

Neil had to pay for all these tools out of his own pocket. Consequently, he took exceedingly good care of them, and still has a number of them in his possession.

The boilermakers at NNS were responsible for building many things besides boilers. They built other ship components, tanks for industrial use, wind tunnels for Langley Field, and hydraulic gates, scroll cases, pit liners, draft tubes and penstocks for hydraulic turbines.

"The most complex components for which I developed patterns were the Scroll (or Spiral) Casings. They were shaped like a snail shell, and when fully assembled, were large enough, to permit an 18 wheeler to be driven into its mouth.

"Skills in descriptive geometry, mechanical drafting, and the triangulation method were necessary for making the patterns for a spiral case. I am very proud of my part in this accomplishment. I was 17 years old at the time, and in my second year of apprenticeship."

For the next eleven years, Neil Woodall crawled around the Mold Loft floor, making patterns and using his dividers to space rivet holes. One result of that effort was the development of large calluses on his knuckles. During that period of time, he visited ships under construction and went onboard ships under repair to lift dimensions so that needed items could be manufactured by the shipyard.

"Tom and I shared workspace on the second floor of the HF&P Shop…"

During the mid-1930s, Neil Woodall witnessed something far removed from other shipbuilders' experiences. He was utilizing floor space above the Hull Fitting & Plant Shop to create patterns for those huge scroll casings. Nearby, shipyard artist-in-residence Thomas C. Skinner had his easel set up and was busily producing a series of large and colorful oil paintings depicting life in the shipyard. Neil was fascinated by the artist:

"I liked to watch him work; jumping from ashtray to easel and back after making a few brush strokes. At times, Tom would have several cigarettes going at the same time."

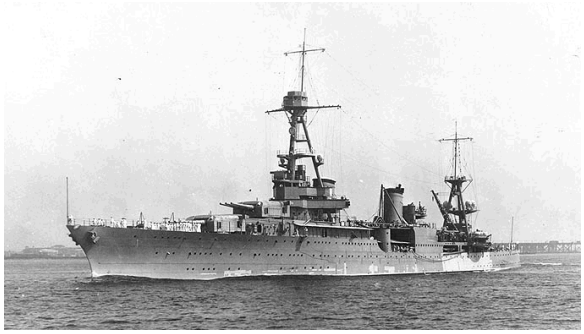
One of the numerous murals that Skinner created, and which still hangs in the Mariners' Museum, depicts a typical activity in the Heavy Forge Shop at NNS. Long-time shipyard employee Joe Basham was Skinner's model for the 'hump-shouldered' individual wearing a protective leather apron and standing closest to the forge press.

"The HOUSTON holds a very special place in my memory…"

Of all the famous vessels that Neil Woodall developed patterns for in that time period, the cruiser HOUSTON (CA-30) was his best remembered one. He was selected as the only student in his class to go on her ten day trial trip in the spring of 1930. He was 18 years old and had never spent a night away from home, or ever been aboard a ship at sea. He was assigned the role of "Engineer's Messenger", and stood four hour watches in the boiler room. His job was to run messages to the bridge or elsewhere when told to do so.

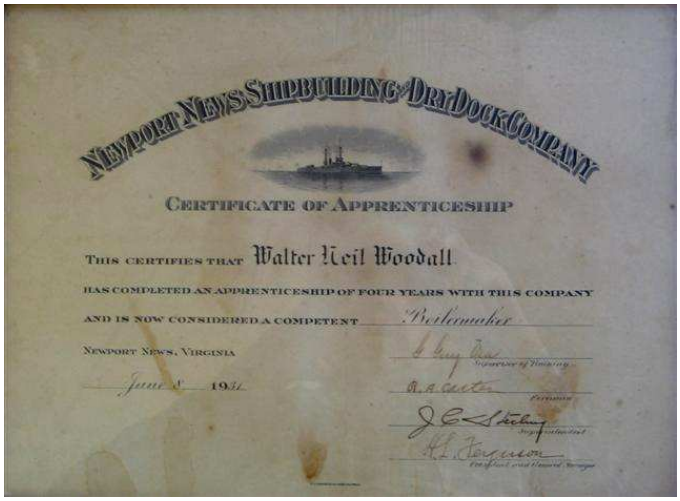
"I never got seasick, and feel sure I had been born to my destiny. On our way back, I was exploring the ship with another young chap, but did not know of an approaching storm. We climbed a ladder on the main mast to a platform to better see a pod of whales.

"When the storm hit, the ship rolled and pitched violently. The wind was blowing very hard, and we hung on with both hands. It was past my watch time when we were finally able to get below. I got a severe scolding from the engineer in charge for being late. That was a lesson well learned."



Like all apprentices, Neil Woodall also had some adventures outside the shipyard. Before 1929, the only way to get from Newport News to the south side of the James River was by ferry. That year, a narrow two-lane bridge that crossed the river north of the shipyard was completed. There was a huge celebration on the day it was dedicated. The shipyard closed that day, and there was a colorful parade. Neil, his brother Raymond and a friend followed the parade to the bridge entrance. When the dedication ceremonies were complete, they decided to walk across that new five mile-long bridge. They didn't get home until long after dark.

Near the end of 1930, Neil's father bought a house on Little Farms Avenue in what was then Elizabeth City County. They rode the street car to and from work, which cost five cents each way.


NEWPORT NEWS SHIPBUILDING & DRY DOCK COMPANY

CERTIFICATE OF APPRENTICESHIP

THIS CERTIFIES THAT Walter Neil Woodall

HAS COMPLETED AN APPRENTICESHIP OF FOUR YEARS WITH THIS COMPANY

AND IS NOW CONSIDERED A COMPETENT Boilermaker

NEWPORT NEWS, VIRGINIA

June 1 1931

Walter Neil Woodall graduated from the Apprentice School on June 8, 1931, shortly after his nineteenth birthday. He was the 10th boilermaker apprentice at NNS to become a craftsman.

"My pay increased to 70 cents per hour…"

That was first-class mechanics' pay at that time. Neil also received the customary $100.00 check as a gift from the shipyard. Neil Woodall had longed to have a motorcycle but could never save enough for the down payment. That $100.00 check was the answer.

Neil went to a Harley Davidson dealership in Norfolk and purchased a beautiful black and red 72 cubic inch motorcycle. He proudly rode it home via the James River Bridge. He couldn't have been more proud, but his mother was frightened to death every time she heard Neil start the motor. Her fears were soon well founded.

The Friday before the 4th of July weekend, he impulsively rode with friends to Washington, DC. Neil neglected to tell his family that he would not be home that night. Actually, he was gone three nights. After looking around the nation's capital, the bikers rode on to New York City. Neil finally returned home on Monday afternoon. When his mother heard him arrive, she ran out of the house, tears of joy streaming down her face. She had not slept for three nights. Neil felt so guilty he sold his motorcycle very cheaply.

Later that same summer, while attempting to impress a girl, Neil imprudently tried to cross a road by going hand-over-hand on a wire suspended between a tree and a telephone pole. But halfway across, he lost his grip and fell to the pavement. Taken to old Riverside Hospital, X-rays revealed a compound fracture of his right femur. Neil had to endure major surgery to realign the bone, plus have six screws inserted in his leg to attach a metal plate over the fracture to hold it together. He had to lay on his back in a body-cast for fourteen weeks, unable to turn over the entire time. It was after Christmas before Neil Woodall could return to work. Worst of all, during that period of time, he missed his class' graduation ceremonies.

After paying all of his medical bills, he decided to buy a new car. However, he did not have enough money for a down payment, so his father generously gave Neil his 1927 Whippet to serve as the down payment on a new Desoto sedan.

Neil was a little concerned about the price; $990.00. Still, he felt he could handle the payments. For the next eight months Neil was proud when he took his future wife, Myrtle Hull on a date. But, at the same time, he fell seriously in arrears in car payments. On the morning of February 18, l933 they planned to drive to North Carolina and get married.

"We were just ready to leave when the repro man came…"

Since that was a Friday, Neil persuaded the repro man to wait until Monday, and he agreed. The couple then picked up brother Raymond and his wife to serve as witnesses and drove to North Carolina. The groom drove to work on Monday morning and then turned the car over to the dealer that afternoon.

Neil's was not the only car repossessed that year, when the country was in the midst of the Great Depression. To make matters worse, his boss informed him on that same day that the shipyard's first-class pay rate had been reduced from 70 cents/hour to 64 cents. In addition, production workers were limited to 32 hours of work a week. Neil and his bride lived with his parents for about three weeks, then moved into a fourth floor walk-up unit in the Shipyard Apartments on Washington Avenue.

"I borrowed $50.00 from the shipyard credit union. It was to be paid at $1.00 per week for 50 weeks. The rent on our one-room apartment was $15.00 per month. That left enough money to buy necessities such as pots, pans, dishes, towels, soap, etc. I was also able to make a down-payment on a small amount of furniture. We furnished the small combination living/bedroom, and I bought a small icebox for the kitchen.

"When we moved in, I realized we had no money left to buy food for our dinner. I walked to Hogg's grocery store on Huntington Avenue. The grocer agreed to give me credit until payday. When I went to pay the bill, there was a sign on the door, GONE BANKRUPT. CLOSED. A year later I received notice from a collection agency that I owed $6.00."

The Great Depression caused more than half of the shipyard's employees to be laid off. Neil's father was one of them. His parents and sisters were forced to give up their home on Little Farms Avenue and move back to the farm. Dallas had become an apprentice, and moved in with his older brother Raymond and his wife in a flat over a grocery store at 45th Street and Huntington Avenue. Somehow, Raymond escaped being laid off.

The saving grace for many a shipyard worker was a contract to design and build the yard's first aircraft carrier. Many unemployed men were called back to work to build that ship, and Neil Woodall's father was one of them. The USS RANGER (CV-4), delivered June 1934, was unique in many ways, including the design of her six smokestacks. Set three to a side and well aft of the carrier's island, they were rotated down, out of the way during flight operations. In addition, their uptakes were configured to allow boiler exhaust fumes to be directed to one side or the other.

As the Layerout, Neil Woodall was faced with many and unique challenges when developing patterns and laying out the stainless steel sheets to form the RANGER's smokestacks and complex uptake assemblies. Neil is quite proud that when the patterns for this one-of-a-kind project were copied in steel, the pieces all fit together perfectly.

"The most challenging part was making patterns for the double 90-degree elbows at the base of each stack. They were about six feet in diameter and consisted of multiple 'orange peel' segments that overlapped.. They were fastened together with rivets spaced about 1-1/2 inches apart. They were also double-walled with a three inch air space in between. My greatest worry was to have all the rivet holes match up properly."

During that same time period, Neil also participated in the construction of the tug HUNTINGTON. He made patterns for her single boiler, which was a fire-tube boiler, very similar to the one he helped build when he started his apprenticeship.

The first of three children, all girls, was born in August of 1934. The following spring, Neil moved his small family to a downstairs flat on 23rd street. There they survived the record cold winter of 1935/1936, when a 35 inch snowfall hit Newport News. They only had a coal stove for heat, and they shared a bathroom with their landlord. Neil dreaded the thought of another winter under those conditions, and began looking for a house.

Neil heard about a housing development, halfway between Newport News and Hampton where new homes could be financed with a low interest loan, guaranteed by the newly-formed Federal Housing Administration (FHA). The price of such a home was $2,500, including a down payment of $500. Neil was able to secure a $2,000 loan at 5% interest from a Hampton bank. But Neil needed more money for the down payment and items to furnish a new home, so he boldly applied for an $800 loan at a bank in Newport News.

"Since I had absolutely no collateral, I had little hope…"

"…but when I returned, the banker, who was a family friend, said he had checked with the shipyard to make sure of my continued employment. He said I was a good risk, accepted my personal note and added that he was letting me have that loan interest free."

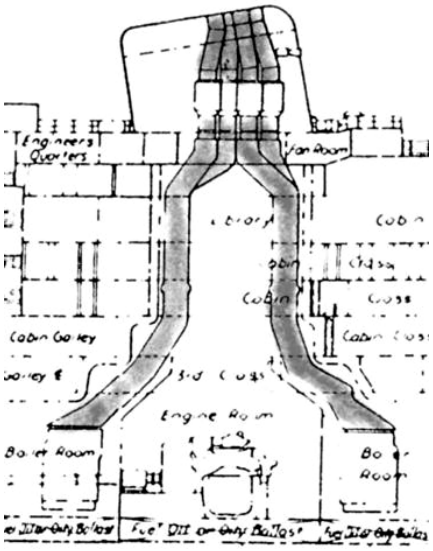
Neil moved his family into their first real home at 312 Cherokee Road in September of 1936. That small, but well-built home is still there…

They had no car and no bus service. The street had not yet been paved. The street car line, which ran from Newport News to Hampton, stopped a quarter mile away. Neil used that mode of transportation to get to and from work, still paying a fare of five cents each way.

"The year of 1938 started badly..."

On New Year's Day, Neil Woodall and his wife, along with younger brother Dallas and his girl friend, were involved in a serious traffic accident. Everyone was hurt, to varying degrees. Neil, who was in the back seat of Dallas' vehicle was the least injured; suffering a broken heel and ankle. Nevertheless, it was six weeks before he could return to work. In November, his second daughter was born, and work in the shipyard had picked up substantially. Neil Woodall's wages had increased to 94 cents per hour.

NNS had received a contract in 1937 to build a transatlantic ocean liner. In addition to creating patterns for items like the ship's main condenser shells, that work presented Neil Woodall one of his biggest challenges; making the patterns for the ship's unusually complex uptakes. Later named SS AMERICA, NNS Hull #369 was fitted with six boilers, three forward and three aft of her engine room in separate compartments. Individual uptakes necessary to carry the boilers' exhaust fumes to the atmosphere snaked upwards through several decks. The half-dozen uptakes all came together within the AMERICA's active smoke stack, where they were connected to individual centrifugal dust catchers.



When the AMERICA was launched on the last day of August, 1939, it was one of the biggest and most exciting days in Newport News' history. The ship's sponsor was First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. Although it was a weekday, the yard shut down operations for an hour and employees were allowed to bring their families into the yard to witness the event. Over 30,000 attended the gala event. Neil's sister-in-law somehow managed to make her way onto the launching stand and shake Mrs. Roosevelt's hand.

The resurgence of work in the late 1930s meant that many new employees (called greenhorns) were hired by NNS. Men were sent to the Boilermaker's mold loft with instructions to 'just ask Neil' and 'he will show you how to make patterns for your job'.

"I found myself spending so much time as a teacher that I began losing my potential for bonuses. There was a job category back then called 'Leading Man'. That job paid a regular rate of $1.02 per hour. I requested a Leading Man re-rate, but was turned down. I felt this was unfair, so I decided to seek employment elsewhere."

In 1940, the Panama Canal Company was advertising for people to work on an planned expansion project. Two apprentice graduates, Thomas Henry Leighton (Blacksmith – 1931) and William Pierce Hodges (Plumbers – 1933) had gone there to work and through those friends, Neil Woodall learned of this Central America work prospect.

"I applied for a job with the Panama Canal Company…"

Within a week of applying, Neil was offered a job at $1.45/hour; roughly 50% more than his NNS hourly compensation. The job required a commitment to spend at least a year in the Canal Zone and reporting for work within thirty days of acceptance of the offer. Neil Woodall decided the opportunity for an overseas' adventure at such a substantial pay increase was too good to refuse. He signed up, resigned his shipyard job and set off via steamer for the Panama Canal Zone on the Monday after Easter, 1940.

Upon arrival in Cristobel, he was initially assigned to work in the Mt. Hope workshops on the Atlantic side. After four months, Neil transferred to the Balboa shops on the Pacific side. There, he found temporary quarters:

"The apartment had one bedroom, a living room and a kitchen. It also housed many cockroaches, and was hot and humid. There were screened windows with no glass. There were mango trees outside the open windows, and early every morning I was awakened by the many noisy parakeets that lived in those trees."

Neil made patterns for such items as 'dredge buckets' and 'booms'. His workplace was located near a large dry dock, and he often went there to make patterns for sea chest strainer plates, fairwaters and propeller hubs. He had a helper, from Barbados, who spoke no English. Neil soon grew homesick, living alone under primitive conditions. One day he was reminded of the better life he had left behind, when he saw the SS AMERICA transiting the canal.

Once assigned permanent living quarters, Neil Woodall arranged for his wife and children to join him. His wife leased their home and its furnishings to an Army Air Corps lieutenant stationed at Langley Field.

They lived comfortably in the Diablo Heights neighborhood of Balboa for nearly nine months. During that pre-war time period, they frequently made sightseeing trips to the interior of the Isthmus of Panama. During one such outing, they posed for this photo. Left to right: Neil, his wife Myrtle, six year-old Sylvia, two year-old Judy, and the wife of a neighbor.

Panama's tropical climate took its toll on Myrtle. A doctor advised that she leave, but Neil had to stay his one year in order to get free passage back to the States. Fortunately, his tour was nearly completed, so he gave notice in March 1941. They all returned to the Virginia Peninsula, but couldn't get into their house until their tenant's lease was up.

Although Neil Woodall didn't have a job, he did have a month's vacation pay coming from the Panama Canal Company. When shipyard officials learned that he had returned to the area, he was advised that the yard would gladly rehire him, since the yard was rapidly building up its workforce and experienced craftsmen were in very short supply.

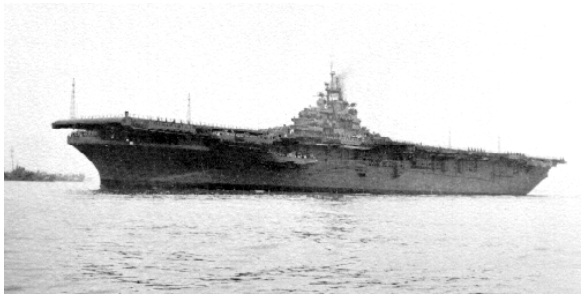
"I was offered and accepted a weekly position…"

He declined to go to Wilmington, North Carolina where a subsidiary yard was being built to mass-produce Liberty Ships and also turned down his old Layerout job. The shipyard's personnel manager then urged him to look around and find a position. Neil soon became an Estimator in the Time Study Department, setting piecework prices for the Boiler Shop.

After four months, he was offered a supervisory position; managing mold loft and layout work for the Boiler Shop. Soon, he became responsible for a workforce of 150. Throughout World War II, they produced patterns and laid out work assigned to the Boiler Shop, which had moved to a larger building on the yard's North Side.

The number of employees in the Boilermakers Department during World War II peaked around 500. Roughly 100 were women, and operation of the new shop's cranes was turned over to them, freeing up men to perform more arduous tasks. When several of the men Woodall had trained to do layout work were drafted, he trained willing women to take their place in evening Vocational Training classes.

Their normal work schedule was three eight-hours shifts each weekday. But they often worked through weekends and on holidays as well. Neil Woodall remembers that they seldom had a weekend or a holiday off during the war years. But he also proudly notes that they accomplished all the work and met the schedules assigned to the boilermakers.



Near the end of the war, when production pressures were eased somewhat, Neil Woodall and a number of other members of the shipyard's waterfront management were onboard the aircraft carrier BOXER (CV-21) when she made a brief voyage from the shipyard to Norfolk for her commissioning. That trip was doubly significant, for the Navy was so confident in the shipyard's capabilities that the customary sea trials for the carrier had been waived. When BOXER steamed across Hampton Roads, it was the first time she had been underway on her own power.

During those hectic years, the shipyard transitioned from riveting to welding for most of its structural work. Hand-held bare rod electrodes were first used, then coated rods, and eventually very advanced and automated welding processes. Neil and his associates also had to comply with Section 8 of the ASME Pressure Vessel Code and figure out how to adopt new-fangled non-destructive methods of testing to shipbuilding.

At home, the Woodall's had two schoolteachers who roomed and boarded with them during the war, and things got even more crowded when the youngest of his daughters was born in late 1942. Near the end of World War II, Neil Woodall started looking for a larger home. Property values had skyrocketed during the war, and he was offered $6,500 for the house on Cherokee Road for which he paid $2,500 less than ten years before.

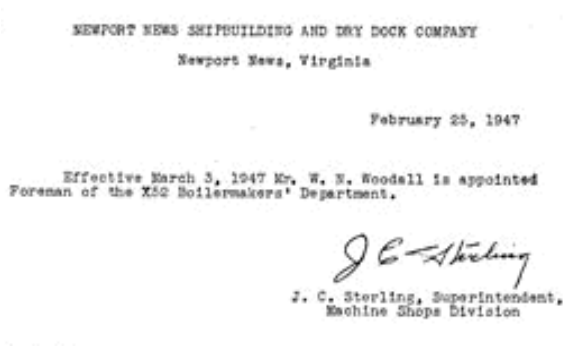
An available and suitable house, located at 108 Nelson Drive, very near the Mariners Museum, was found. It was for sale by Joe Basham, the man who once posed for T. C. Skinner when that forge shop mural was created. Using savings and proceeds from the sale of his first house, Neil was able to swing that deal by acquiring a $6,000 mortgage. His parents thought he had lost his mind to undertake such an obligation.

That house still appears much like it did when it was Neil's home. In addition to acquiring a bigger house with a large yard, Neil Woodall also got a chicken house, 25 laying hens and a rooster. He sold eggs to neighbors for two years, then plowed up the chicken yard, and planted a vegetable garden.

Shortly after the end of the war, John Buchanan retired and Neil was promoted to his position as assistant foreman, responsible for all work in the Boiler Shop. Neil says the toughest part of his new job was handing out termination slips to many of the men and women who had worked so hard and faithfully for him throughout the war years.

"The proudest moment of my working career…"

In early 1947, J. J. Robinson, foreman of the Boilermakers retired. Effective March 3, 1947, Neil Woodall was appointed Foreman of the Boilermakers Department (X-52). He held this position for thirteen years, during which time Newport News Shipbuilding transitioned from designing and building conventionally-powered vessels to ones using nuclear reactors.



NEWPORT NEWS SHIPBUILDING AND DRY DOCK COMPANY

Newport News, Virginia

February 25, 1947

Effective March 3, 1947 Mr. W. N. Woodall is appointed Foreman of the X52 Boilermakers' Department.

J. C. Sterling, Superintendent,
Machine Shops Division

Ironically, one of the first tasks he faced was to find craftsmen that could build obsolete Scotch boilers for a pair of C&O tugs, identical to the one he helped create for the HUNTINGTON in 1933. At the other end of the technical spectrum, in the early 50's the shipyard's boilermakers were very much involved with erection of the eight steam generators (water tube boilers) for the SS UNITED STATES. These generators were unique. They operated at higher temperatures and pressures than any previous design.

Neil Woodall organized two teams; one to prepare those boilers in the shop, the other to install them onboard the ship. Neil's younger brother Dallas, who had served as foreman of the boiler shop at the shipyard's subsidiary yard in Wilmington during World War II, was responsible for shipboard installation and testing of the UNITED STATES' boilers.

To make sure they got materials delivered on schedule, Neil made numerous trips to the boiler manufacturing plant. He also witnessed full operational tests of one boiler at the Philadelphia Navy Yard's large component test facility. These generators developed 950 psi of 1000 degrees F. superheated steam to spin her four turbines which, collectively, generated 240,000 shaft horsepower. That was more horsepower than NNS had ever previously installed in one of their ships.

When she went on builders' sea trials, veteran shipbuilders were amazed by her speed, even in rough seas. T. C. Skinner captured that memory, as only he could.

The 'Big U', as every proud 1950's era shipbuilder knows, broke the transatlantic speed record on her very first crossing. That record remains unbeaten…

"I was assigned a stateroom (M-80)…"

After the UNITED STATES made her record-setting maiden voyage, it became desirable to upgrade the super heaters in her eight boilers. Plans were formulated and materials gathered. A team of shipbuilders led by Neil Woodall attended a conference in New York and then surveyed the job. When the ship sailed for a previously planned dry docking, Neil was onboard, and assigned stateroom M-80 for the brief, overnight voyage.

The ship was dry docked at the Norfolk Navy Yard because no dock large enough was available at NNS. The super heater modification work was accomplished by a team of Newport News craftsmen who commuted from Newport News to Portsmouth each day. They worked around the clock. Neil Woodall retained his stateroom and stayed on board to oversee all three eight hour shifts for the duration of the ten day job.

Back in Newport News, his three girls were growing older, and each wanted her own room. Neil Woodall enlarged his home in 1953, and with the help of his multi-talented father, did most of the work himself. The expansion work included what was a luxury item at the time; window air conditioners.

Neil Woodall felt he had somewhat come full circle, living within a couple of miles of where his family had lived when they first moved to the Virginia Peninsula in 1924. Eventually, his children attended the same high school that he had, although its name had been changed from Morrison to Warwick High by the time they enrolled there.

For several years following World War II, the shipyard continued to build hydraulic turbines for both domestic and foreign customers. One contract was for several units for a huge power plant about a mile downriver from Niagara Falls. Building these units' scroll cases was assigned to the boilermakers. They were the first "high strength steel" scroll cases designed for "field welding". Following their completion, Neil was asked to author and present a technical paper about that work at the annual meeting of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers. Neil recalls:

"When the boss approached me to undertake this task, I was filled with apprehension. I felt inadequate to deliver a technical presentation to a group of professional engineers and university professors, most of whom had doctorate degrees. But I swallowed my fears and accepted the challenge. I had never written a technical paper, nor even heard one presented. A young engineer in the Hydraulic Division offered to help me.

"We drafted a document, edited it and added slides in time for me to rehearse a week beforehand. Several nights, I went into the attic at home and practiced my presentation, using a borrowed slide projector. When the big day came, my presentation went well and I was highly complemented for a job well done."

Years later, Neil Woodall became a member of ASME. Previously, in 1955, he had been accepted into the Society of Naval Architects and Marine Engineers, and became a Life Member of that prestigious organization in 1984.

When Newport News Shipbuilding entered the navy nuclear program, the Boilermakers Department was given the responsibility for building numerous components, plus shop preparation work and shipboard installation of the all-important steam generators that derived their heat source from the power of the atom. With those responsibilities came strict quality control procedures and elaborate production methods in order to satisfy all Navy, Atomic Power Commission and technical society requirements.

Neil Woodall organized training programs to qualify men to do nuclear work, which included vessels made of stainless steel and even more exotic and difficult-to-weld materials. Curious components, such as this homogeneous reactor, were manufactured and shipped to Atomic Energy Commission facilities in Oak Ridge, Tennessee and Hanford, Washington.

The Boilermakers work during that productive period of time also included the manufacture of paper mill digesters and Lundstrum air preheaters. One of their biggest jobs was the manufacture of huge pressure vessels for a refinery in Delaware. These components were too large to be built in the shop, so platen space on the North Side was utilized to assemble match-marked sections which were later shipped in sections to the refinery site.

The Boilermakers continued building boilers for conventional powered tankers and cargo vessels. But the nuclear era also brought to the department new challenges; to construct missile tubes, diving planes and hatch covers for Polaris submarines, as well as major components for the first nuclear powered aircraft carrier, the USS ENTERPRISE.

Much of this work in the Boiler Shop was placed under the supervision of former apprentices by Neil Woodall. Men like Allen Leonard L Davis (Boilermaker – 1942), Robert Sidney Holloway (Boilermaker – 1934), and Lawton John Rogers (Boilermaker – 1933). Installation work onboard ships was supervised by Dallas Woodall.

"The title "boilermaker" was discontinued…"

In 1960, as a part of a yard-wide reorganization, the Boilermakers Department was consolidated into other departments. Neil Woodall became foreman of the Shopfitters Department that year. For the next five years, he managed the production of the building blocks which form a ship's hull. Included in this assignment was the creation of a series of huge 'ring' modules, which formed the pressure hull for nuclear-powered submarines.

In 1963 the shipyard was awarded a contract to build a prototype (260-inch diameter) solid fuel Rocket Motor Case for NASA. This casing was intended to be used to test the feasibility of using solid versus liquid fuel for boosting the moon landing capsule into space. Neil Woodall was assigned the responsibility to build this first-of-a-kind NNS component.

"It was built in the North Side boiler shop. I organized a team to man three eight-hour shifts to complete this project within a tight schedule. This work was complicated because it was also an experimental project to determine the feasibility of using a 'Submerged Arc' instead of a 'Tungsten- Inert- Gas' (TIG) welding process.

"When it was finished, it was filled with 75,000 gallons of water. When we applied pressure it shattered. Thousands of pieces were retrieved and re-assembled by a team of experts from NASA to determine the cause of failure. Eventually, they abandoned the concept of using solid fuel boosters. I was very disappointed. I was also exhausted."

The broken leg he had suffered in his teens came back to haunt Neil. He spent six weeks in a hospital to prevent deterioration of his right femur.

Once back at work, Neil Woodall designed a tool for aligning adjoining high strength (HY-80) transverse bulkhead sections for aircraft carriers and holding them firmly in place. That tool facilitated uninterrupted welding operations to take place. Cost savings that were realized through its use resulted in a substantial monetary award, presented to Neil Woodall by the president of the company in the presence of two of his daughters who were also shipyard employees.

Neil Woodall had previously developed another specialized tool; one used for holding irregular shapes together for welding hydraulic turbine scroll casings. In addition to using its cost-saving features, NNS patented Neil's invention and he received a certificate from the U.S. Patent Office identifying him as the inventor.

Over the next several years, Neil Woodall had an interesting variety of assignments. He participated in the development of a $15 million plant improvement program on the yard's North Side, participated in the development of a proposal for building a fleet of helicopter carriers (LHA's). During 1968 and 1969 Neil coordinated the yard's Industrial Products work. Two years later, after 38 years of marriage, Neil Woodall and his wife went their separate ways.

Neil's varied work assignments continued. Company president Bud Ackerman sent him to tour seven shipyards, to study advanced modular construction techniques being used in Europe. Next, he participated in a study to determine the economic and technical feasibility of transporting crude oil from Prudhoe Bay, Alaska to the east coast of America, via the North West passage. This study involved coordinating the efforts of several shipyards to modify an existing oil tanker with special icebreaking features.

Newport News Shipbuilding was the principal designer for this project, and physically added heavily reinforced sections to the existing tanker, increasing her hull thickness to 1-1/2 inches. An ice-breaking bow was also built. The MANHATTAN made one round trip through the Northwest Passage. Exxon, Humble Oil and several others evaluated the results of that experience and determined that this transportation method was technically, but not economically feasible. It was set aside in favor of building the Alaskan pipeline.

In July of 1971, the shipyard and Westinghouse entered into a joint venture to build Off-Shore Floating Nuclear Power Plants. A group of Newport News shipbuilders were relocated to Pittsburgh to join with Westinghouse engineers in creating this venture. Neil Woodall was selected to supervise development of the Manufacturing Plan. He and 35 others from NNS worked in Pittsburgh for several months to complete this task. Unfortunately, although a $200 million manufacturing facility was started in Jacksonville, Florida, the venture never came to fruition.

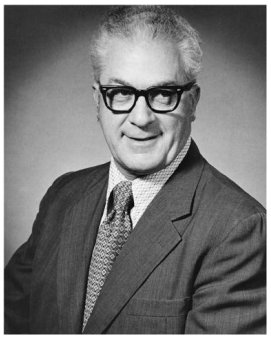
"One evening, I was invited to a party…"

Although Neil Woodall's months of work in Pittsburgh did not result in the creation of any offshore floating nuclear power plants, his time there was not for naught; far from it. One evening, he attended a party where he met Fay, his current wife. They married in October of 1972, and at this writing have celebrated almost 37 years together.

Less than two months later, Neil unexpectedly received a telephone call from a former shipyard employee. Wayne Theissen had become Manager of Transportation for the Trust Territories of the Pacific Islands (TTPI). TTPI was a group of islands which the United States had acquired at the end of World War II. Wayne advised that he needed a Resident Engineer to oversee construction of a new class of inter-island ships for TTPI.

The first ship was being designed by an architectural firm in San Francisco and was to be built by Dae Sun Shipbuilding, located in Pusan, South Korea. Interested, Neil requested more information, and soon was presented with an attractive salary offer, plus other considerations. He and Fay talked it over, and decided that the opportunity and promise of an overseas' adventure outweighed anything negative they could comprehend.

"I retired from the shipyard…"



Neil Woodall submitted a letter of resignation to his employer of 45 years. He was offered a substantial increase in salary to stay at NNS, but undeterred, he posed for the obligatory retirement photo and left the shipyard on December 1, 1972. A few days later, after disposing of most of their belongings by sharing with family members, the Woodall's packed 300 pounds of clothing and other necessities in two steamer trunks and had them air-freighted to Korea.

They flew to San Francisco, where Neil got familiar with the ship's design. Then it was on to Hawaii, where Wayne Thiessen briefed him about being a Resident Engineer. Upon arrival in Pusan, they were met by a shipyard representative and taken to a local hotel. The next morning Neil Woodall was transported to the Dae Sun shipyard to meet the shipyard's president and his staff.

Later that same day the Woodall's went to see an apartment. Workmen were still working there, installing teak flooring, but said the apartment would be ready by Christmas. The apartment was ready three days before Christmas. The shipyard representative who had met them at the airport took them shopping. His wife accompanied them, and after each selection, she peeled off the Won and paid in cash.

"There was no limit, apparently, so we bought everything we needed. When the shopping was finished we went to a tailor shop and were measured for traditional Korean outfits. Then on to a local restaurant. After dinner we returned to the tailor shop, found our new clothes were ready and tried them on. They fit perfectly.

"We went to our new apartment and found, a convoy of "manpowered" pushcarts out front, filled with all our furniture. The carts had been pushed and pulled about two miles from downtown Pusan and up a steep hill. The furniture was man-handled up seven flights of stairs, including a stove and a refrigerator! We moved in the next day. On Christmas Eve the president of the shipyard sent us a gift. It was a two Kilo package of the largest prawns I had ever seen. They became our Christmas dinner."

The magnitude of his task at first made Neil a bit apprehensive. Then he remembered:

"*Mr. J. C. Sterling* [long-time Superintendent of NNS' Machine Shop Division] *had given me some advice when I was an apprentice. He referred to "The Fragmentation Principle" whereby no job is too big or complicated that it cannot by broken down into "manageable fragments". I applied this principle during the 22 months it took to complete the ship, and am convinced it was through this process that I was successful."*

"The Koreans were eager to learn…"

Dae Sun had been in business since 1945, and its employees had considerable experience constructing smaller vessels. Most importantly, they were eager to learn the requisite skills needed to build the vessel for which Neil Woodall was the Resident Engineer. They quickly mastered the art of large-scale shipbuilding and in only a few years they became world leaders in the competitive commercial shipbuilding industry.

When Neil Woodall attended the Apprentice Alumni Association's annual banquet in 1983, he belatedly received his 50-year plaque and shipyard president Ed Campbell jokingly accused Neil of teaching the Koreans to become such great shipbuilders.

By NNS standards, the vessel that Neil was there to help build was not a large vessel; measuring a little over 242 feet in length and with a full load displacement of only 2,050 long tons. But it was the right design for its intended purpose; serving as a practical means for moving cargo to and from islands in Micronesia that had little in the way of port facilities. In addition, most of the islands had barrier reefs surrounding them.

The ship was designed to carry upwards of 36-twenty foot long containers. The design included a 40-ton gantry crane, plus accommodations for twelve passengers and a crew of fourteen. The vessel also carried a shallow-draft barge, which could be off-loaded by the crane to carry materials across barrier reefs at the islands with no port facilities.

As everyone dealt with the normal day-to-day activities associated with building an ocean-going vessel on an inclined shipway, the time approached when the ship needed a name, a sponsor and a christening date. The name selected was MICRONESIA PRINCESS. Wayne Thiessen wanted to have a “colorful Newport News type launching”. A veteran of many such an event, Neil Woodall happily complied, and Dae Sun enthusiastically did their part...plus they added some Asian traditions as well.

The MICRONESIA PRINCESS was christened on December 17, 1973 by the wife of the High Commissioner of TTPI. As the ship started her slide, a massive piñata affixed to the tip of the ship’s bow opened up, releasing a profusion of colorful streamers and fifty white doves. Neil Woodall and his wife [the couple in the center of the picture], plus all the other officials on the launching stand wore white gloves for the event; perhaps the first time in history that a burley boilermaker was so attired in public!

Outfitting and completion of the vessel continued for the next nine months, followed by sea trials. The ship was delivered to her owners on August 15, 1974. Neil Woodall was asked to sail on her maiden voyage to observe the ships operation and cargo handling capabilities, and arrangements were made to add amenities to one of the ship's staterooms so that his wife could accompany him.

When the ship left Pusan in early September of 1974, Neil and Fay Woodall were the only passengers on board. The second night out, the ship ran head-on into a full-fledged typhoon. The ship rolled and pitched violently, but otherwise performed well. Heavy weather continued for the next day and night.

Following stops at Guam and Yap islands, the ship completed her first voyage in Palau. The Woodall's flew to Hawaii, were Neil presented an assessment of the ship's performance to her owners. Neil Woodall soon learned that Congress had not allotted any money for the construction of follow-on ships. As a result, he became unemployed.

Neil took a job with Chevron Shipping Company in San Francisco. When an opportunity arose to buy a home in Florida next door to Fay's sister, Neil submitted his resignation to Chevron and they packed for another move. In parallel, an opportunity to visit some of Fay's relatives in Alice Springs, Australia arose. So, while a moving van with their possessions was en route to Florida, they boarded a Qantas flight and went to Australia.

Upon returning to the United States, they flew to Florida to set up housekeeping, which proved to be another adventure. The previous owner had left behind most of her furniture. The structure was also badly in need of repair, and they soon determined it was not large enough, so additions and extensive renovations were planned.

Before that work was completed, Neil got a call from Chevron, asking him to return to San Francisco, and for a nice increase in salary, do a job for them. He accepted and when the renovation work was finished, Fay joined him. What was supposed to be a six weeks' job lasted eight months. The next year, Neil Woodall settled in to enjoy retirement.

"I planted a vegetable garden that produced a bountiful harvest. We had an abundance of oranges, grapefruit, lemons, papaya, mango, avocado and bananas growing on our property. As do most Floridians, we got lots of company, especially in the winter months. We never got lonely."

Returning from as trip to Puerto Rico in April of 1979, Neil found a telegram awaiting his return. The Matson Navigation Company, based in San Francisco, advised him that they had a large container ship under construction at the Sun Shipyard in Chester, Pennsylvania, and asked if he would be interested in overseeing the installation of the ship's machinery. Neil responded, with interest, and an interview was quickly scheduled with Matson's representatives in Philadelphia.

"This would be a hard hat and coveralls job…"

After reaching agreement on employment terms, Neil was asked to report for work as soon as possible. Once again, the Woodall's bags were packed. They closed up their house and headed north around the first of July 1979. Upon arrival, they rented an apartment about five miles from the Sun Shipyard. As the owner's machinery inspector, Neil was responsible for assuring that the vessel's main and auxiliary machinery was properly installed and fully tested. This included everything from the main boilers, turbines and generators, down to the smallest pumps and motors.

Outfitting and dockside testing proceeded normally, and the ship was ready for sea trials the second week of May 1980. When the ship sailed for the first time, Neil Woodall was onboard, observing testing of the propulsion machinery and performing independent checks such as measuring the shaft bearing temperature. Following delivery of the vessel, Neil and Fay returned to Florida; pausing in Newport news on the way to visit family and relatives.

After a few years of Florida living, the Woodall's next moved to Garland, Texas in 1984 to be close to other family members. They purchased a home with a very large back yard, and Neil got busy creating a small vegetable garden and beautifying the back yard. When their family members moved away in 1988, Neil and Fay began looking at various retirement communities in Texas and elsewhere.

"We got a brochure in the mail one day…"

In early 1990, the Woodall's learned of a retirement community in Hot Springs Village, Arkansas that appealed to them. After making one of those typical free stay/presentation trips, they purchased a townhouse, then returned to Texas to sell their home. That property sold quickly and soon they were living in Arkansas, where they have lived almost two decades.

During the last nine years, they have made numerous trips abroad, and to various places in the United States, including a stop in Idaho Falls, Idaho, where they visited with Neil's nephew and apprentice alumni, Paul Eugene Woodall (Boilermaker – 1959).

Neil Woodall purchased a computer in December 1996, and taught himself to use it at age 84 by relying on a book: *Windows 95 for Dummies*. Recently, Neil remarked that getting a computer was one of the smartest things he ever did, and added that it continues to keep his days filled and his 97 year-old brain active.

Just before the start of the 21st century, the Woodall's began to think seriously about making a final move. After visiting a progressive care retirement facility, also in Hot Springs Village, they decided to down-size to an apartment and moved into their present residence on April 18, 2000.

"My health remains good…"

"I produced a bountiful harvest each summer, until last year when I finally realized that I could no longer garden in the heat of the summer. I have now turned my attentions to other, less strenuous activities, such as staying busy on the computer and taking courses at what the administrative staff here called 'senior college'. They keep us as busy as we wish to be."

Although long retired, and in spite of decades of moving about the United States, as well as to Panama and Korea; Neil Woodall has carefully maintained and retained the tools he acquired from Sears/Roebuck during his first year of apprenticeship…over eighty years ago.

After all, one of the first lessons any apprentice learns is to take good care of his tools…

~ Voices from Neil Woodall's Past ~

Not only did Neil Woodall take good care of his tools, he took equally good care of his subordinates; especially those who were Boilermaker apprentices while he was foreman of that department. Three individuals who served their time in the Boiler Shop during the early 1950s recently recounted their memories of MISTER Woodall.

None of them, back then, would have ever thought to have called the head of their department anything other than 'Mister'. That's also what Neil Woodall did, when he first worked in the Boilermakers and Mister Carter was his foreman.

As every apprentice alumni well knows, when one first entered the school, one's department foremen usually only talked directly to those unfortunates who had done something extremely bad. Such discussions were one-sided, blunt and seldom had to be repeated.

Robert Gordon Barron (Boilermaker – 1952) and James Byrd Ellis (Boilermaker – 1955) both remember Mister Woodall as being a gentleman and having a reputation of being strict, but always looked out for his people. In addition, Foreman Woodall met the acid test of the waterfront; he was well respected by the craftsmen in his organization. During their respective apprenticeships, they admired him from a distance, and recently expressed some relief that they never had to explain to him in person why they had done something to draw negative and unwelcome attention from on high.

Clyde Reginald Hughes (Boilermaker – 1954) concurred in those observations, but he also recounted a story that reveals much about the human side of Neil Woodall. When retelling that story, Clyde respectively referred to his former boss as Mister Woodall:

"After completing my time, I was working with my tools until one Friday in December of 1955. When I got home that evening, a draft notice had arrived in the mail from my home town of Chatham, Virginia. I was required to report there on the following Monday.

"I didn't know what to do. I didn't see how I could possibly do what was required by my draft board and also resign or even tell anyone about my situation in such a short period of time. Plus, I had personal tools and other things in my locker that I wanted to somehow retrieve. Having no other apparent option, I mustered my courage and reluctantly called Mister Woodall at home.

"He immediately put me at ease by telling me to go back to the yard, pass through the 50th street gate and get my personal items. Mister Woodall said he'd take care of everything else, and that my job would be waiting for me when I finished my service.

"Mister Woodall even paid me for an extra hour because I had to go back into the yard to clear out my locker!"

~ *Postscript* ~

While in my time, I knew who Mister Woodall was and his position in the shipyard. But I don't recall ever meeting him, even though his oldest daughter was one of my high school classmates. While researching the history of the HUNTINGTON, I searched for apprentices and alumni who had helped build her. Happily, I 'found' Neil by matching up his alumni association membership information with the Internet's white pages.

We talked, quickly establishing a first-name basis for corresponding, at his insistence. I soon discovered that he has a phenomenal memory and I also learned that a couple of years ago he had created a 100-plus page detailed, illustrated and computerized autobiography. With his kind permission, I have borrowed extensively from that document to summarize his life, with emphasis on his four-plus decades of work at NNS, as well as other ship-related activities.

Due to persistent questioning, Neil has willingly augmented his life story by patiently providing additional memories of his apprenticeship and lengthy shipbuilding career. I hope he enjoyed our vicarious visit back in time to 'the shipyard that was' as much as I. This essay, and in particular his memories that are quoted verbatim, will undoubtedly give apprentices and alumni of all ages a rare, first-person insight into 'how it was' at Newport News Shipbuilding in the 1920s, when this panoramic picture was made.

For all his willing help and cooperation, I most sincerely thank him. It has been my distinct and rare pleasure to learn much about this living legend. I think a memory he shared about the HUNTINGTON, which I used in her story, bears repeating here. To me, it nicely captures the spirit of the hard-working and hard-playing apprentice alumni and other shipbuilders of yesteryear that Neil Woodall so ably represents:

"In 1947, when I was appointed Foreman of the Boilermakers Department, I was initiated on that year's May Club outing along with Jimmie Wynne [Mold Loftsman – 1932] *and John Pruden* [Machinist – 1938]. *We had to strip to our waists, go down into the HUNTINGTON's fire room and shovel coal into the boiler while being drenched with cold beer being poured on us from above."*

If ever there was a shipbuilder who has 'been there and done that', it is Neil Woodall.

Bill Lee
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