George Van Wilby – Chronicler of UBC Fairview

George Van Wilby – known to his friends as “Van” – entered the University of British Columbia in September 1917. He completed his B.A. (Zoology) in 1921 and an M.A. in 1924 – his graduate thesis was entitled “The life history of the ling cod Ophiodon elongatus Girard”. During his time at UBC, Wilby became a popular member of the student body at UBC’s original campus at Fairview. His entry in the 1921 Annual read, in part, as follows:

If you wish to get acquainted with, or find out about, anybody, get pictures of them, or snapshots of a college group or event, consult the genial Van – he knows them all – (and if it’s a girl, you can get the address, too). He is enthusiastic about everything from Spanish to entomology, from dances to girls’ basketball games, from native sons to Victoria daughters….

A bad leg prevented him from making a mark in athletics, but Wilby became a fixture around Fairview in other ways. He played viola in the orchestra for the Players’ Club performances of Alice Sit-by-the-Fire (1918) and The Importance of Being Earnest (1919). His entry in the 1920 Annual noted his “pet aversion, English Lit.” while The Ubyssey documented his quick wit:

Dr. Clark : “Wilby, will you translate, ‘This room is twenty feet high.’”
Wilby : “Cette chambre a –“
Dr. Clark : “But ‘chambre’ means a sleeping-room.”
Wilby : “Well…” (Interrupted by rude laughter from the class.)
(6 February 1919)

Perhaps most importantly, Wilby became well-known for documenting campus life through his photographs. A number of his shots were used to illustrate the 1920 and 1921 editions of the Annual. Over the years, a small selection found their way into the University Archives’ historical photograph collection, and were included in the Archives’ photo database. Several years ago, another 370 of Wilby’s original negatives were found in the Archives among Alumni Association historical materials collected by researcher Frances Tucker – these were also scanned and made available to researchers on-line.

Many of Wilby’s images are candid shots of students and faculty going about their daily business: walking to class, smoking, or eating lunch. Others are obviously posed, including almost 100 images of people mugging for the camera. Many pictures show buildings and grounds of the Fairview campus, while others offer unique views of the Point Grey campus before its completion. Finally, many pictures document student activities, events, and outings: rugby games, the annual grad picnic at the Wigwam Inn on Indian Arm, the Arts ’20 Relay, and Congregation, to name a few.

Most of the individuals shown in the images remain unidentified. Exceptions are well-known campus personalities of that time such as Art Lord (AMS President, rugby star), William Tansley (janitor, night-watchman, raconteur), and Garnett Sedgewick.
Van Wilby himself also found his way to the other side of the lens – obviously the chronicler of life at UBC Fairview was sometimes able to cajol a classmate into taking his picture for a change.

Wilby worked as a teacher in Rossland, B.C. after completing his B.A. before returning to UBC to complete his masters’ degree. He was later a zoology instructor and teaching assistant at UBC, taught zoology at the North Dakota Agricultural College, and did post-graduate work in biology at the University of Toronto. In 1946 he co-wrote *Fishes of the Pacific Coast of Canada* with UBC zoology professor W.A. Clemens. “It will undoubtedly become a standard text in its field”, remarked UBC President N.A.M. MacKenzie to *The Ubyssey* upon its publication; it served as a required zoology textbook from 1947 to 1954.

Van Wilby also remained connected to his alma mater for many years after leaving UBC. While living in Toronto he served on the social committee of the local branch of the UBC Alumni Association. He also compiled the 1925 Alumni Directory. Through the 1930s and 1940s Wilby also generously donated a number of biological specimens to the Department of Zoology.

As an unofficial chronicle of the early years of the University, George Van Wilby’s photographs are a valuable source of visual information. They are a unique historical record, both of the built environment of UBC’s first home at Fairview and of student life during that period. Unfortunately, as noted above, many of the people and events depicted in the images remain unidentified. Readers who can provide information about any of the people, places, and events depicted in the photographs should contact Erwin Wodarczak (erwin.wodarczak@ubc.ca) at the University Archives.

George Van Wilby’s photographs are available on-line here and here.