

Leaving a legacy: Herman Petersen, one of the first apprentices

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This is the story of one special person who worked at PSNS & IMF. There are many dozens more, both from the past and from those who are here right now; however, this one is the newest inductee to the PSNS & IMF Apprentice School Hall of Fame. Stop by the school and check out more about this story!

One thing you hear said about Puget Sound Naval Shipyard and Intermediate Maintenance Facility is the people who work here are “special, awesome, fantastic, super.” It’s the people that make PSNS & IMF so successful. There are thousands of special people in the Command right now; however, this is not a new situation. Let’s go back about 110 years and check out the conditions then.

The Shipyard was 10 years old in 1901 when a few young men were chosen to be the first apprentices. To be chosen, you had to be at least 15 years of age, have completed the fourth grade and have five references attesting to your good character.

Born into a second generation family of blacksmiths in Pueblo, Co., on Oct. 16, 1887, Herman Petersen moved with his family to Tacoma, Wash., when he was 2 years old. An industrious boy, he landed his first job at age 10 as a Class B caddy at the Tacoma Golf and Country Club. Petersen knew how to work and soon advanced to a Class A caddy, an accomplishment of which he was very proud. When he was 12, he decided he’d give printing a try and went to work as a printer’s devil, making 50 cents per day. It wasn’t a good fit and after a year-long trip to Denmark and Sweden with his mother, Petersen became a “boy” in the Shipyard in 1902, right after his 15th birthday making 72 cents per day. It was a brief start; Petersen quit his job to go back to school, but not for long. He reentered the Shipyard in November 1903 and started his apprenticeship with the Shipfitter Shop. Evidently, this was a perfect fit.

He completed his apprenticeship Feb. 1, 1908, as a Class 4 shipfitter; advancing to Class 3 on Jan. 29, 1909; then Class 2 on Nov. 1, 1909; and Class 1 on Aug. 16, 1910. Petersen continued to advance as he made leadingman (work leader), Sept. 9, 1912; quartermen (foreman), June 16, 1916; special quartermen-in-charge (general foreman), Dec. 1, 1917; master on Feb. 16, 1919; and finally maximum-rate master on Aug. 24, 1923. He was the fourth superintendent of the shop and one of the first to rise from the ranks of that early apprentice program.

The experience gained through WWI and the massive amount of boat building that was accomplished probably tested and honed his skills to

perfection, both as a shipfitter and as a leader. Times were hard after the war, but the needs of the Navy kept the yard busy ... and another conflict was developing. By 1941, construction on Bldg. 460 started and continued for several years. In the end, the Shipfitter Shop known as “Pete’s Palace,” was one of the largest buildings in the Shipyard, and it was his pride and joy. During WWII, there were 33,000 employees working 24/7 at the Shipyard, and 8,000 of those people belonged to the Shipfitter Shop. Petersen’s good friend, George Penketh, master boilermaker, kidded Petersen saying, “Pete’s idea of the Shipfitter’s Shop is to place a roof over the Shipyard and put up a sign that says, ‘Shipfitters.’”

Petersen was a strong believer in progress and had great faith that even though the wars were over, the viability and demand for the work would not go away. As the country and the Navy continued to have a larger place on the world stage, PSNS would be as vital as it had been over the last 50 years.

By 1948, Petersen’s friends and co-workers were beginning to retire and his eyesight wasn’t what it had been; apparently the print on the work documents was looking microscopic in size. To Petersen’s way of thinking, he explained, “So, it’s a question of either retiring or getting glasses. I’m too young for glasses, so I’m getting out.”

After 45 and a half years, Petersen retired on Aug. 31, 1948; he was 61 years old. He spent his remaining years with his family living on Hood Canal, fishing, hunting and enjoying life, saying, “Someone else can build the ships now; I’ll be content just to watch them go by.”

