

Discovering
 Carol
 'Cully'
 Wilson

*an Icelandic
 hockey pioneer*

In the early 20th century, descendants of Icelandic immigrants in North America had to fight for acceptance in many walks of life. Professional hockey was no exception, and few fought harder than **Cully Wilson**, who played for teams ranging from Winnipeg to Toronto to Seattle. **Wes Wilson** and **Elma (Wilson) Kozub** tell the story.



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While growing up in Vidir, Manitoba during the 1950s, our hockey experience was limited to watching weekend scrimmages played on an outdoor rink just north of my great-uncle Siggi Sigvaldason's general store. Memories of those crisp winter afternoons are as clear as if they happened yesterday. The stars of those games were hard-working men and boys from our community who relished the opportunity to let off a little steam after a long week on the farm. In retrospect, it's amazing how well they played. Their speed, skill and heady competition more than inspired the next generation of us kids who simply wanted to learn how to skate well enough to make it from one end of the rink to the other.

Vidir was also the home of our afi Albert Wilson who, in his later years, lived next door to us on our farm. Afi was a wonderful conversationalist, naturalist and storyteller, and it was through him that we first heard about the exploits of his brother Cully, who had found a measure of fame, if not fortune, during the early years of professional hockey in Canada and the United States.

Afi always spoke proudly of this talented athlete who had gone on to fulfill his dreams in the "pros" and his stories intrigued our family as we were growing up. But Cully was a mythic figure who lived far away, and after afi passed away in 1956, many of those memories gradually faded away as well.

For succeeding generations of the

Wilson family, Cully's story might well have been forgotten were it not for my sister Elma. Over the past 20 years, she has devoted herself to researching and documenting the many branches of our family tree with painstaking thoroughness. The result is a comprehensive written record of our family's roots that include the Erlendson (Wilson) immigration to Canada in the late 1800s through to the present.

One night in 2000, I was relaxing and reading the chapter Elma had written about Cully. As I read through the details of his life, I began to realize what a fascinating man this was. It was as if afi's pride in his brother had suddenly been awakened in me. I immediately went to my computer and typed "cully wilson" into the search engine. I didn't



Cully (back row, far right) started playing for the Winnipeg Vikings in 1909 at the age of 17.

have any great expectations as I waited for the page to load, but I was immediately rewarded with what seemed like a gold mine of information. Since then, Elma and I have continued our research as a kind of impassioned hobby and have managed to collect a comprehensive record of Cully's life in hockey.

We've thoroughly enjoyed the experience of getting to know our great-uncle better. What we discovered was a man full of grit, determination and pride whose talents with skates and a stick offered him unbelievable opportunities to succeed. It's also the story of an enormously competitive man with a short fuse who played and fought hard in the game he loved.

Cully was born in Winnipeg on June 5, 1892 to Sigurdur Erlendson and Metonia Indridsdottir. Like many

newcomers to Canada at the time, Icelanders experienced problems fitting in because of language and customs. Sigurdur understood this early on and decided to change his surname. Adopting an English-sounding name like Wilson was more likely to offer advantages in a job market not always friendly to immigrants. Their children, five sons and three daughters, all grew up adopting the Wilson name.

Cully grew up on Home Street in an area some referred to as Winnipeg's Icelandic "West End." From an early age he showed a natural talent and passion for skating, and ultimately hockey. We don't know a lot about how Cully developed as an athlete at this time but it's almost a certainty that he was noticed and nurtured by some of the great hockey players that made up the two-

tier Icelandic league in Winnipeg at the time — the Vikings and the Falcons.

Both of these teams were made up entirely of Icelanders. They were shunned by the elite Winnipeg City League and weren't allowed to compete. That only made the Icelanders more determined and they formed their own league that included teams from Selkirk, Portage la Prairie, and Winnipeg's AAA League. At times adversity and alienation can provoke greatness, and out of that situation a hockey powerhouse grew. It finally manifested itself in 1920 when the Winnipeg Falcons won the Allen Cup, and with it, the right to compete in the 1920 Olympic Games in Antwerp, Belgium. They won the gold. But that's another well-documented story.

Our first record of Cully's career

begins in 1909, when he started playing hockey in earnest with the Vikings. He was 17 years old. The next year he started the season with the Winnipeg Falcons, but his talents soon brought him to the attention of the Kenora Thistles, who had won the Stanley Cup in 1907 in a matchup against the Montreal Wanderers. To this day, Kenora, Ontario retains the distinction of being the smallest town to ever host a Stanley Cup winner. There he played for a portion of the year before finishing off the season with the famed Winnipeg Monarchs.

The Monarchs were the elite Winnipeg team at the time, and for the young Icelander it was a validation of his emerging abilities as a player. Cully went back to the Falcons for the 1911 season, but the pro scouts were out and about on the Prairies, and he'd been noticed. It was time to move on.

Cully officially joined the pro ranks in 1912 when he signed with the Toronto Blueshirts. They belonged to the National Hockey Association, an eastern league that included the Montreal Canadiens, Montreal Wanderers, Ottawa Senators, and Quebec Bulldogs. The NHA was Canada's recognized professional league at the time and teams competed for the Stanley Cup. Cully scored 12 goals in 19 games in his debut, and though the Blueshirts did well during the season, the Bulldogs won the Cup.

For 21-year-old Cully, the next season was a dream come true. The Blueshirts finished at the top of the standings along with the Canadiens. Neither team had ever competed for the championship before and spirits were high as the series opened in Montreal. The Canadiens had a powerhouse team that included Newsy Lalonde and the legendary Georges Vezina in goal, and Montreal came away with a 2-0 home ice victory. The teams then travelled to Toronto for game two and the first Stanley Cup final ever played on artificial ice at the Arena Gardens. On March 14, 1914, the Blueshirts whipped the Canadiens 6-0, taking the NHA and Stanley Cup championship based on the two-game total point series.

Now depending on the source, there's been some confusion as to who



In 1912 Cully joined the Toronto Blueshirts (seen here in 1914).

the Toronto Blueshirts met in the 1914 Stanley Cup final. Some statistics show Victoria of the Pacific Coast Hockey Association meeting Toronto for the championship. The PCHA was a new league that had been formed on the West Coast in 1912 by Frank and Lester Patrick, and during the 1913/1914 season Victoria had come out on top. Within a few days of Toronto beating Montreal, the Victoria team headed east with the purpose of facing off against the NHA champs.

However, Victoria had not formally submitted a challenge and the NHA trustees didn't recognize the legitimacy of a series against Toronto. In sportsmanlike fashion, the two teams decided to play anyway and the Blueshirts ultimately swept a best-of-five series. It was an historic matchup in a number of ways. Not only was it the first time the top teams from the two leagues met, but it also began a process that would include PCHA teams competing against the NHA for the Stanley Cup. It was also the start of an east-west rivalry that helped spread hockey's popularity across the country and into the United States.

These were exciting times for the sport. Hockey was evolving, and Cully was in the thick of it.

During the next season, the Blueshirts struggled and ended up in fourth place with an 8-12 record. On the scoring front, though, it was a great year for Cully, who led the team with

22 goals. He also amassed an incredible 138 minutes in penalties that year, quite a feat considering the team's 20-game schedule. The 1914/1915 season was Cully's last with the Blueshirts. In three years with the team, he had a respectable 43 goals to his credit and had also gained notoriety in another area. Cully's hard-hitting style and penchant for a good mix-up had earned him a total of 216 minutes in the penalty box. He was quickly gaining a reputation as the bad boy of hockey.

Out on the West Coast, the Patrick brothers were introducing hockey to a whole new audience. At various times the Pacific Coast Hockey Association included teams from Victoria, Vancouver, New Westminster, Spokane, Washington and Portland, Oregon. But in 1915, a brand new team was added that would make hockey history.

With the Seattle Metropolitans, the Patricks were determined to make hockey a success in the west, and they began raiding the eastern NHA of its best players. The Toronto Blueshirts were a favorite target, and in 1915 Cully found himself in Seattle along with four other Blueshirt players that included fellow forwards Bernie Morris and Frank Foyston, and goalie Harry "Hap" Holmes. Moving to the West Coast proved to be one of the most important decisions Cully ever made. In spite of where hockey took him in following years, Seattle would be home for the rest of his life.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JEFF OBERMEYER

Top: Harry Holmes, Bobby Rowe, Ed Carpenter, Jack Walker. Middle: Frank Foyston, Pete Muldoon, Manager. Bottom: Bernie Morris, Cully Wilson, Roy Rickey, Jim Riley.

1915 was also one of the most important years in the history of hockey, when the PCHA reached an agreement with the NHA to compete annually for the Stanley Cup. This truly began the process of making hockey a North American game. But it also presented a number of challenges. Up to that point, hockey had been inventing itself as it went along, and the two leagues were proof of that. The most important difference was that the NHA iced the six positions we're familiar with today and had two substitute players. The PCHA featured six players on the ice plus a freewheeling rover. One substitute was allowed on the bench. Over the next couple of years it was one of the dilemmas that had to be dealt with and worked out each time the two league's top teams met for the Championship.

The Seattle Metropolitans debuted on home ice on December 8, 1915 beating Victoria by a score of 3-2. Many of the people who crammed into the arena that night had never experienced hock-

ey before. The next day, a local sports reporter described the heady atmosphere: "A lot of local folks had never seen the game before, but the game had not been in progress long before they were calling the Seattle players by their names and shouting advice to them as they rushed and swerved and slammed and kicked and bucked and blocked with the equally strong and active Victoria men."

Cully's debut with the team was noted when the reporter added, "It was a real fight all the way. Cully Wilson, the energetic right wing of Seattle, is the Johnny Evers [Boston Red Sox baseball player] of hockey, for every time there is trouble he is there or thereabouts. He is a little fellow but is built all in a bundle. He is a fast skater and absolutely fearless in a mix-up and the way he went crashing into the big fellows on the Victoria team had the crowd yipping with delight and yelling his name."

It's also worth noting that during

that game, Cully became the first player in Seattle franchise history to be penalized and the first to be ejected.

In many ways, the new Metropolitans were a dream team, and every player was a talent to be reckoned with. Three players from that debut season, Frank Foyston, Harry Holmes and Jack Walker, would eventually be inducted into the NHL Hall of Fame. It wasn't long before manager Pete Muldoon had his men playing like champions.

Cully enjoyed four exciting years with the Metropolitans that included winning his second Stanley Cup in 1917 against the Montreal Canadiens. As always, there's an interesting story behind the story. Although the two leagues had already agreed to compete for the Stanley Cup, some of the movers and shakers in the NHA were disturbed by the addition of an American team. What if the NHA were to actually lose to a team south of the border? By the time the Metropolitans and Montreal were set to meet for the Cup in

1917, the uproar and mistrust were so great that Seattle wouldn't take on the Canadiens without a formal written acceptance. Simply put, the Mets wanted a guarantee that if they won the series, the Cup would be sent south of the border. In fact, the series started without the Cup and it didn't arrive in Seattle until three months after the playoff was over, and only after a \$500 bond was put up for its safe return.

The first game of the 1917 playoff saw Seattle lose 8-4 to the Habs. In an amazing turnaround, Seattle fought back, allowing only three goals in the next three games. Center Bernie Morris had the series of his life when he scored an amazing 14 goals. It was all over for the Canadiens, and the NHA's concerns proved correct as the Stanley Cup left Canadian soil for the first time. It was a watershed moment in hockey's history.

As Cully and the rest of the Metropolitans entered the 1917/1918 season, a new organization was formed to oversee professional hockey. The National Hockey League (NHL) replaced the east's old NHA but continued to include the PCHA in competition for the Stanley Cup. Once again it looked like Seattle was going to have another shot at the Cup, but their hopes were dashed in the final game of the season when the Vancouver Millionaires beat them 1-0. Vancouver then headed east to meet the Toronto Arenas (formerly the Blueshirts), but lost the series.

As the 1918/1919 season progressed, the Seattle Metropolitans enjoyed a very successful season and ended up on top of the PCHA standings. Once again, they would compete for the Stanley Cup against the Montreal Canadiens. This series would prove to be both historic and tragic as it was the only time in the Stanley Cup's history (until this year) that no team would be awarded the Cup. The cause was the dreaded Spanish flu pandemic that had affected many parts of the world and was brought to North America in part by soldiers returning from the Great War.

Unaware of what lay ahead, the hometown fans got primed and ready for what promised to be a hard fought series. The Seattle Arena management worked diligently to make sure every-



The Seattle Arena was the Metropolitans' home ground for many years.

thing would be perfect. One of the interesting decisions made before the series started was that there would be no smoking allowed in the arena. It wasn't for health reasons though. When the weather was mild, a fog often hung over the ice and it was feared that smoking would only add to the problem and make it difficult for both players and fans to see during the games.

As the championship series opened, Harry Holmes was invincible in the Seattle net, and the Mets blanked Montreal 7-0. But Montreal fought back in the second game to tie the series. Unimpressed, Seattle trounced the Canadiens in game three by a score of 7-2. Game four, a 0-0 draw, was brutally tough on the teams as they fought it out for 80 minutes. Seattle came very close to possibly winning the Cup when at the end of the first period, Cully took a pass and fired the puck past goalie Georges Vezina. But he was a half-second late as the whistle had already blown to end the period.

Montreal tied it up again in game five but the effects of the fast-paced and tremendously physical series had taken its toll on both teams. A good number of players were nursing painful injuries, and as the game progressed some fell to the ice from weakness and exhaustion.

In a 1975 story about the ill-fated series, Royal Brougham of the Seattle *Post-Intelligencer* described the incredible difficulties the players were experiencing. Cully's physical state was typical. "Cully Wilson, like many players of that era, who had a body built of scrap iron and a never-give-up spirit, limped to the bench and hung helpless over the railing. He was carried to the

locker room incoherently protesting that he was able to continue. Manager Pete Muldoon looked for a replacement but there was no one. The bench was empty."

When you consider that players from that era toughed it out for the whole game with one line and a few substitutions, the 1919 Stanley Cup final was arguably the toughest ever played. And the sniffles and coughs heard on the Montreal team were an ominous portent of things to come.

Within hours, the Spanish flu spread quickly and hit the Canadiens particularly hard. Montreal's stalwart man on defense, "Bad" Joe Hall, developed a dangerously high fever of 106. As the virus advanced to members of the Metropolitans, it soon became apparent that neither team would have enough men to play a final game. The Seattle Board of Health stepped in and it was decided that the series should end. Sadly, "Bad" Joe Hall died a few days later.

Prior to the tragic final with Montreal, Cully had gotten into serious trouble with the PCHA. During a regular season game against the Vancouver Millionaires, Cully and Vancouver forward Mickey MacKay whacked furiously away at the puck for possession. Sticks were everywhere, and Cully's connected with MacKay's face so hard that it fractured the young star's jaw. The injury put MacKay out for the rest of the season, and Cully was immediately suspended by league president Frank Patrick. That created an uproar with the Seattle players, who vowed they wouldn't step on the ice for another game without Cully. Patrick relented, somewhat. He fined Cully fifty dollars and allowed him

to finish the season. After that, Patrick suspended him from the PCHA.

In the ensuing debate, players agreed there was too much violence in the game but that most of it was born out of frustration. Their biggest beef was with the officiating. At the time, only one official oversaw each game and with fourteen players on the ice there was no way that every indiscretion could be seen or managed. The players had asked for more officials but the league wouldn't spend the money to get them.

The Metropolitans also felt they were unfairly penalized more than other teams, and that Cully was a favorite target. The support he had from his teammates was evident in a *Seattle Times* article at the time of the incident. "To a man they are all agreed that Cully Wilson is the most abused player in hockey today. Every player of each opposing team is out to do something to get him off the ice. He is playing the best and cleanest hockey he has ever played. He is a little dervish on skates when he is in action and they don't want him out there."

After the aborted series with Montreal, it was over for Cully in Seattle. In his four years with the Metropolitans, Cully had been a solid contributor to the team's success and a fan favourite. He scored 52 goals, 8 of them in one PCHA All-Star game alone, and assisted on 23 others. On the penalty side he chalked up a hefty 198 minutes in 68 games. The camaraderie and friendship he enjoyed with his teammates coupled with the fierce loyalty of the fans had made his four years in Seattle one of the happiest times in his career.

Cully headed back east to Toronto and immediately signed a contract with his old team. A lot had changed in four years. The Blueshirts had briefly become the Toronto Arenas in a controversial ownership showdown as the NHL was being formed. Then after the NHL took control of the NHA in 1917, the team had been renamed the Toronto St. Patricks.

The 1919/1920 season with the St. Pats was a bona fide success. Cully scored 20 goals in 23 games and had six assists to his credit. He also served 86 minutes in penalties. It was obvious that even with all the trouble he'd gotten



into the season before, he wasn't about to change his rough-and-tumble style. What happened the following season didn't do anything to change his temperament either.

On January 21st, 1921, Toronto made a deal to "loan" Cully to the Montreal Canadiens. What was behind this decision is unknown. In any case, Cully was very upset and felt slighted by his team. However, he reported to the Canadiens, scored six goals for them, and when recalled by Toronto three weeks later, refused to rejoin the team. As a result, Toronto suspended him for the remainder of the 1920-21 season. Strangely, through all of this, Cully remained under the control of the Canadiens, and just before the start of the 1921/1922 season he was one of five players involved in the NHL's first multi-player trade. Cully and two other Montrealers went to Hamilton in exchange for the Tigers' Sprague Cleghorn and Billy Coult.

The Hamilton Tigers were essentially the old Quebec Bulldogs team who had been relocated and renamed by the NHL. Cully spent two seasons with the Tigers, but the new team floundered at the bottom of the standings. During his second year, Cully made the NHL's top ten scoring list, but was unhappy and had hopes of returning out west to play. Hamilton gave him the opportunity when they traded him to the Calgary Tigers of the Western Canada Hockey League at the start of the 1923 season.

It proved to be a very eventful year all around. The WCHL had an interlocking schedule with the Pacific Coast Hockey Association who agreed to officially reinstate Cully after the Mickey Mackay incident four years earlier. With that problem resolved, Cully seemed revitalized and went on to score 16 goals with 17 assists, and established a WCHL record when he scored three goals in 61 seconds during a regular league game. By the end of the season, Calgary was at the top of the WCHL standings and had won the right to compete for the Stanley Cup in one of the most convoluted playoffs formats in pro hockey's ever-evolving history. Once again, Cully would face off against the NHL champion Montreal Canadiens.

The Habs travelled west with a typically strong team that included rookie Howie Morenz. They beat Calgary, then headed to the coast where they overwhelmed the PCHA's top team, the Vancouver Maroons. It was a very strange playoff indeed. The Tigers would compete under the WCHL banner for one more year before the team was relegated to semi-professional status in the Western Hockey League. Cully played with Calgary for three full seasons. In that time he scored a respectable 41 goals and, not surprisingly, accumulated 120 minutes in the penalty box.

Although he was now in his early thirties, Cully remained fearless on the ice. For a man who barely weighed one hundred and fifty pounds, he had proven himself in a decade of pro hockey to be one of the toughest and scrappiest players to ever play the game. But that doesn't tell the whole story. Cully was also one of the fastest and most adept skaters of his era, and although his fisti-

cuffs and stick-swinging duels made the headlines, and he wouldn't back down from any of the biggest players, his goals and assists won many a game.

Throughout his career, sports reporters loved describing Cully's exploits on the ice. If you were a hometown reporter, the slant was mostly positive, no matter what the infraction. But out-of-town reporters weren't always so sympathetic to the feisty Icelander. Here's an example. This poem was written by a sports reporter for the *Edmonton Journal* and published on February 27, 1924 when Cully was playing in his first season with the Calgary Tigers.

Cully The Carver!

It's always struck me kind of queer that accidents abound,
and men get sliced from toe to ear
when Cully is around.
It can't be that he's bold or rough, the
Tigers ne'er were that.
And yet we always find such stuff
wherever Wilson's at.

It's funny when upon home ice his stick
so soft and meek,
is knocked aside and takes a slice from
some poor beggar's cheek.
It's funny too when harmlessly he's
catting all about.
He slips, shoots out a sudden knee, and
lays a fellow out.

These accidents are funny things,
they're most of them "repeats."
Yet little Cully never swings upon Iron
Duke Keats.
And little Cully is not loved in other
leagues he's known,
for from them he's been gently shoved
— Cowtown loves him alone.

We don't despise a man who's tough
and let the whole world know
we don't despise a man who's rough if
he will stand the show.
We like a man who smiles and sticks
despite each razzing yell.
But God we'll never like those tricks
that Cully knows so well.

Whether one looks at this poem as good press or bad, it proved to be better than no press at all. Cully took a solid hip check with the ode but it endeared

him to the Calgary hometown fans more than ever.

After his third season with the Tigers, who were now a regional team under the WHA, Cully decided to move on. He wanted another shot at the pros and he found it in the Windy City. The NHL had been looking further afield for a new franchise and decided to base it in Chicago. When the 1926/1927 season opened, Cully was a member of the brand new Black Hawks. Unfortunately, it was a disappointing year for Cully with only 8 goals and 4 assists. It would be his last year in the NHL, but it wasn't the end of his career in hockey.

In 1927, at the age of 35, Chicago traded Cully to the St. Paul Saints of the American Hockey Association (AHA). He spent three years with the Saints, the last two as both a player and Head



Coach. In 1930, he split the season between the San Francisco Tigers of the Cal-Pro League and the Duluth Hornets of the AHA. The 1931/1932 season with the Kansas City Pla-Mors would be Cully's last. At age 40, it was time to hang up the skates.

When all was said and done, Cully Wilson enjoyed a storied career in hockey. Starting in 1909 with the Winnipeg Vikings to his retirement in 1932 with the Kansas City Pla-Mors, he devoted 23 years of his life to the game. Although he was never a candidate for the Hall of Fame, Cully's accomplishments were considerable. He had the unique opportunity to play professional hockey during its formative years in North America and he witnessed and was part of many firsts in the game. He also had

the honour of playing alongside some of the greatest legends of the game.

Although Cully was widely renowned for an aggressive style that put him in the record books as the most penalized NHL player during the 1919/1920 season, he also made two top ten scoring leader lists. The first was in 1919/1920 with the Toronto St. Pats and the second in 1922/1923 with the Hamilton Tigers. Best of all, there were two Stanley Cups.

Cully had always maintained a home in Seattle, and during many off-seasons he worked for Northwest Steamship Lines. After leaving the game, he worked as an Embarking Checker for the company until his retirement. Cully took great pride in his home and yard, and over the years he became a skilled amateur horticulturist. The hands that laid many an opponent low in the heat of the game now sculpted beautiful backyard gardens. Roses were his specialty.

Cully wed twice. His first marriage was to Sarah Jones and they had two children, John and Margaret. They divorced in 1921. Several years later, Cully married Violet Thomson who was originally from St. Catherines, Ontario, and became the stepfather to her two children from a previous marriage.

Carol "Cully" Wilson passed away on July 6, 1962 and is buried in Seattle. After his death, Violet donated his skates to the City of Seattle. At the time of her donation she said, "You might be interested in my husband's skates. He played for the Metropolitans in 1917." Violet Wilson was justly proud of her husband's accomplishments — and so are we.

Wes and Elma are the children of Frank and Laura Wilson who farmed in Vidir, Manitoba. Frank's father, Johannes "Albert" and his wife Johanna Goodman, homesteaded there in 1910. Laura's parents were Bjorn and Lara Sigvaldason of Arbog, Manitoba.

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