

Joe Naylor: Man of Principle

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In death, Joe Naylor appeared as a footnote to his best friend and protégé, Albert (Ginger) Goodwin.

A small metal plaque - Joe Naylor, 1872-1946 - was all that marked his grave until this summer, when a rock marker with a brass plaque and poem was dedicated at the annual Miners Memorial Day.

He is buried beside Goodwin whose headstone, erected 19 years after his death in 1918, dominates Cumberland Cemetery. Goodwin's controversial shooting death at 31, at the hands of a policeman while evading conscription, ensured his place in history. Naylor lived on until he was 74 when he died of prostate cancer.

Yet for a decade or so in the turbulent history of the early years of this century, Naylor was the most radical union leader on Vancouver Island and one of the most prominent labor militants in B.C.

For 10 years, Canadian Collieries (Dunsmuir) Limited considered Naylor so dangerous that it blacklisted him. Police regularly spied on him. His name appears on a list of "chief agitators in Canada" compiled by the Public Safety Branch of the federal Department of Justice in 1918, described as "anti-conscriptionist" and "socialist" (neither of which was an offence).

It was a long way from Wigan, a grim Industrial Revolution coal mining town in Lancashire, immortalized in 1937 by George Orwell in *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Naylor began work in the coal mines as a boy, emigrated to North America, worked in Montana and Nanaimo, and arrived in Cumberland in 1909.

Used to union representation for miners in Britain, he found the Cumberland mines were non-union and set about changing that. He was elected president of Local 2299 of the United Mine Workers of America which was organizing at the coal mines of Vancouver Island.

Naylor was also active in the Socialist Party of Canada and served as recording secretary for Cumberland Local 70 which offered, "Economic classes twice a week; propaganda meeting every Sunday."

The party, always small, contained a core of left-wing union leaders. The party believed in building a new society free from private ownership of the means of production. It supported production for use, not for profit, and believed in achieving its goals through parliamentary elections. It held the balance of power in the B.C. legislature in 1904 and achieved the first workers' compensation legislation, the eight-hour day for coal miners and improved safety conditions in the mines.

As leader of the Cumberland coal miners, Naylor was intimately involved in the Vancouver Island strike of 1912-14. It began when Cumberland miners walked out after a fellow worker, Oscar Mottishaw, was dismissed.

When a royal commission looked into labor conditions in B.C. after the strike began, Naylor testified that four committees went to see the company after Mottishaw's dismissal but, "they would not recognize us. That's the reason they gave." Finally, Mottishaw himself "went to the office to inquire the reason why he was discharged and was informed by the superintendent they did not have to give any reason, they reserved the right to hire and fire and discharge unquestioned."

In those days, there was no such thing as mandatory recognition of a union by a company nor any obligation to meet a union. Said Naylor: "If the company had done business with us, it would not have been necessary to have a one-day holiday. We just did it as a protest."

The company, however, saw it as a wildcat strike by an unrecognized union and ordered the miners to remove their tools. This, said the union, was a lockout. Strike or lockout, it quickly became a long, bitter battle for recognition of the UMWA as bargaining agent for the miners. Descendants still remember which side families were on long ago.

Naylor complained to the royal commission that striking (or locked out) miners had contributed \$4,000 to the Medical Fund for medical and hospital care, medicines and a \$1 a day benefit when injured. But now the strikers were denied benefits - which were being given, instead, to strikebreakers. He and John McAllister, secretary of UMWA District 28, complained to the Medical Fund and were told to wait for the annual meeting but it was never called.

Miners at Canadian Collieries' other mines at Extension, near Ladysmith, joined the strike two days after Cumberland miners walked out. Two weeks later, company general manager William Coulson asked his general superintendent in Cumberland, J.R. Lockard, to forward "the full names of the worst agitators who advocated the suspension of work." Naylor, who worked at No. 7 mine in Bevan, was the second employee on the list after fellow miner McAllister.

Eighty families were evicted from company housing in Cumberland, and more in nearby Bevan, forcing miners to set up tents and build shacks at what came to be known as Strikers Beach at Royston and along Comox Lake.

Chinese and Japanese miners went back to work after a month, followed by a trickle of white miners. New miners were recruited in B.C., the Prairies, the U.S. and Britain. The strike spread to the Nanaimo coalfields and other companies. A disturbance in Cumberland on 1913 (followed by serious riots at other places) saw Naylor among several men in his city arrested for unlawful assembly.

He received a suspended sentence but spent several months in prison. All attempts to get the companies to negotiate (except for one small company), including an effort by the Vancouver Board of Trade, were unsuccessful.

In a province where racism was rampant (and unions were no exception), Naylor stood out by refusing to adopt anti-Chinese sentiments. At the 1914 convention of the B.C. Federation of Labor, Thomas Jordan of Nanaimo Local 2824 of the UMWA successfully proposed a resolution for "the total exclusion of

Asiatics from this dominion." Jordan did not object to them because of color or creed but because they were serious competition to white labor.

Naylor opposed Jordan and said Chinese and Japanese miners in Cumberland were forced to return to work by 200 special policemen. "They would not have gone to work until the white men had gone if they had been left to themselves," he said.

Referring to white strikebreakers, Naylor said it was not the Chinese and Japanese who "are the curse of B.C., it is the white men, and especially the men who have come from the same country as myself, and that is England, that are the real curse in this province, it isn't the Asiatics at all."

After two years, with the mines operating at sufficient production during a general depression and the UMWA burdened by the cost of strikes elsewhere, the strike was called off. The union had spent a phenomenal \$1.5 million. The mines remained non-union.

While the companies agreed not to discriminate against miners because of their union affiliation, Naylor (and others) could not get back to work while others were hired. Naylor was to spend the next 10 years trying to get re-employed.

Always a bachelor, Naylor lived a spartan life, renting or sharing a room at a boarding house. Somehow he scraped by in Cumberland, probably from odd jobs and the generosity of friends. By 1917, he was elected president of the B.C. Federation of Labor where he was active in the anti-conscription movement. His friend Goodwin, forced to leave Cumberland in 1915 because he, too, could not get back to work in the mines, was a vice-president from Trail. Naylor was appointed a part-time organizer in 1917 for the UMWA. Without that job, he said, he would have been compelled to leave Vancouver Island because he still could not get work in the mines.

With the controversial death in 1918 of his friend Goodwin, shot once through the neck by a policeman rounding up conscription evaders, Naylor was one of the three main speakers at a huge funeral attended by 3,000 mourners. The same day, a one-day general strike to protest Goodwin's killing was called in Vancouver, the first in B.C.

Goodwin and others had hidden out in the mountains near Cumberland and friends supplied them with food. After Goodwin's death, Naylor was charged with supplying food to the fugitives. A grand jury threw out the charge and Justice Denis Murphy of B.C. Supreme Court said it was "the slimmest case" he had seen.

Still, everyone in Cumberland believes to this day, and probably correctly, that Naylor did supply food to the draft dodgers. The Crown simply couldn't prove it.

As the war years drew to an end, labor militancy rose amid rapid inflation. The radical One Big Union was created in 1919 and sought to organize all wage workers on an industrial basis regardless of craft. Naylor was one of five men on the union's General Executive Board. He was also secretary of the OBU's Vancouver Island Unit.

His organizing activities (and those of others) drew constant attention from the Royal North-West Mounted Police in 1919 and 1920 as a series of reports made clear. One "secret and confidential monthly report" by Supt. Frank Horrigan to headquarters said Naylor "is well known in these parts, and I am of the opinion that his removal sometime would have a most beneficial effect."

Seen as a "Bolshevik plot" by B.C. Premier John Oliver, the OBU specifically rejected overthrowing the government by violence. While concerned with the everyday fight over wages and hours, politically the OBU advocated production for use, not profit. Instead of a fair day's pay for a fair day's work, the OBU declared "that the worker should receive the full product of his toil."

The OBU enjoyed spectacular success, recruiting 41,150 members in Western Canada in its first year, 19,064 of them in B.C. But opposed by mainstream unions, employers and governments, and riven by internal dissension, it fell apart within a few years.

Naylor remained in Cumberland and finally was able to get work again in the mines in the mid-1920s. He lived simply in a sparse cabin on the shore of Comox Lake. He did not drift into either the Communist Party or the Co-Operative Commonwealth Federation when the first Socialist Party of Canada disintegrated in the mid-1920s, replaced by another a few years later. He did live to see the coal mines of Vancouver Island unionized in 1937 by the United Mine Workers of America and worked under a union contract until he retired in 1943 at the age of 71.

William (Bronco) Moncrief, now in his 26th year as mayor of Cumberland, recalls when he was 15 years old delivering the Vancouver Sun to Naylor in 1942. "I knew nothing of labor problems or history," said Moncrief.

"He was just a great old fellow. In my book, his heart was pure as gold. He was a big, powerful man and rowed a 16-foot boat. My eyes popped out when he offered me stew and dumplings, warmed up from the day before, for breakfast."

The late Karl Coe of Cumberland described Naylor as "a plain, big old Englishman. I sat by his side when he died in 1946. He lived in several different places and then the cabin at the lake. He left no letters or diaries. He was a very pleasant man."

Naylor died 51 years ago, on Oct. 5, 1946. Fittingly, his graveside service two days later was conducted by Cumberland Local 7293, United Mine Workers of America, with the tribute given by local president John Cameron.