

BC Labour Heritage Centre Oral History Project

Interview with Nick Carr

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Location: Nick's home

Interviewers: Sean Griffin

Videographer: N/A (audio only)

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Key Subjects: BC Federation of Labour; BC Packers; Benefit fund [UFAW]; Boat Clearance Program; Canadian Fishing Company; Communism; Croatia; Drag fleet [fishing by trolling]; Fisheries; Fraser River; Gillnetting [fishing]; Homer Stevens; Ocean Falls [strike]; Organizing; Pacific Gillnetters Association; Picket lines; Reduction herring fishery; Roe herring fishery; Salmon Purse Seiners Union; Seining [fishing]; Solidarity; Strikes; Strike sales (herring, salmon); Trade unionism; Worker's compensation; World War Two [WWII]; United Fishermen and Allied Workers Union [UFAW]; Yugoslavia;

This is an audio-only interview with Nick Carr. Nick was born in Croatia (former Yugoslavia) before moving to Canada as a young boy, where he spent his career as a fisherman. He became President of Local 1 of the United Fishermen and Allied Workers Union, and was a key player in the development of the union's Benefit Fund.

00:00 – 04:10

In the first part of the interview, Nick introduces himself and his personal history. Born Nicholas John Paul Carr (last name has been Anglicized from the Croatian "Car" since he was first enrolled in school in 1938) from the northern coast of Croatia, close to the Italian border (former Yugoslavia). His hometown has always catered to tourists. He came to Canada at age 12 or 13. In Croatia, he lived with his grandmothers, uncle and aunts, who raised him in place of parents – his father was in Canada, and his mother had passed away. As a kid, he describes himself as an "urchin" who would travel between family member's homes, "wherever we could get fed" and was attached to nobody. He even camped out on a local mountain with friends for 4 days, digging potatoes from the ground and stealing fruit for food. When they returned, his friends got beatings from their mothers for running off, but nobody had even noticed that Nick was gone. He was happy with this existence.

04:11 – 06:00

Nick's oldest sister was married around 1932/33. Her husband had already been living in Canada as a fisherman, and met her on a trip back to Croatia, where they were married and returned to Canada as a couple. The war was "imminent", and his sister convinced his father into sending for Nick before the war started. At that time, his father was required

to have \$3000 in the bank before he could apply to bring Nick over, so that the Canadian Government would not have to provide relief once he arrived. It took 2 years to save that money. Nick was on the second or third to last trip from Europe to Canada before the War broke out and borders were closed. Austria was taken over in Feb. 1938, and he came over in May 1938; he recalls seeing an armed Nazi soldier every 50-60 feet as he watched from the train window.

06:01 – 10:10

Nick's father had come to Canada in 1927, less than two years after Nick's mother died of tuberculosis, leaving his children in Croatia, of which Nick was the youngest. Nick has always tested positive for TB, which was common in the "old country". His father worked as a fisherman. Most tradespeople in their hometown were either fishers or stonemasons, often alternating between the two based on the weather or season. His grandfather's brother had a homebuilding business, all made from stone by labourers. Nick says the irony is that to come to Canada, his father had to register as a "farm labourer" in Manitoba, despite the enormous fishing industry on the east and west coasts. When April came around, his father and several others left the farm they were on and walked all the way to Vancouver, following the railroad tracks. It took them almost 4 months total.

10:11 – 11:20

In this section, Nick describes fishing technology. In Croatia, it was mainly seining; he doesn't recall many gillnets at that time, though there must have been some, and he imagines they were likely pulled by hand. His father was one of the few that knew how to mend nets, and would get hired for this skill. After the War, and even in some cases before, Croatians were brought to Canada by friends or family members for the sole purpose of working in the fishing industry.

11:21 – 18:22

Nick attended school in Vancouver, and recalls his first address: 820 Woodland Drive, where he lived with his father, oldest sister, brother-in-law and two borders who were fishermen. There was a dirt basement, and no furnace. The entire house cost \$13/month. Nick spoke no English at first, and was part of an ESL class at Seymour School with Japanese, Chinese, Italian and Ukrainian children. He was only in school for a month before summer holidays arrived, and his sister and brother-in-law bought a house at 641 Slocan St. He recalls the long walk to Seymour School from this new house. He learned enough English within 6 months that he was transferred to Hastings School, and kids laughed whenever he would talk. Despite his difficulty with language, he excelled in other subjects, and was advanced to the sixth grade early, and within 3 months, was advanced again to seventh grade at Templeton School. Once again, after 2 months, Nick was advanced to eighth grade – completing a total of 4 grades in 1 school year.

18:23 – 26:46

Nick started working in grade 9, in the late summer of 1942. As a “youngster” in the old country, his aunt’s family had a couple of skiffs and gillnets, and during off times, Nick would borrow the boats and learned to row. His second cousin needed a skiff man to row on a 3-week seining trip along the Fraser River. He learned to row standing up, and made almost \$450, even though he later learned this wasn’t a full share of the trip’s profits. His father and sister were incredibly happy with this money, and Nick thought, “This is what I’m going to do- I’m going to be a fisherman!”. He finished grade nine and attended half a year of grade ten, before looking for another fishing job. In 1943, he went fishing for a full season, seining salmon, and didn’t make as much money as he had on one trip the year prior - only \$350 for the year. He went fishing over the winter, “towing off” for the Canadian Fishing Company, seining herring. BC Packers had the first power blocks on seiners, which came in around 1954. They were rope-driven, rather than hydraulic-driven. These reduced crew numbers. Nick was in his first full season of fishing herring in 1943 when the Army called him.

26:47 – 39:30

Nick encountered the union as soon as he entered the industry in 1942. Even though unions weren’t “popular”, his father insisted that he join the Salmon Purse Seiners Union before he went fishing. In 1943, Nick was enlisted in the Army, and when he returned at the end of 1946, this membership allowed him to be discharged right away since he had a job waiting for him. Nick was conscripted under the National Reserves Mobilization Act [NRMA], and as a fisherman, tried to join the Navy. However, he was denied because he was born in former Yugoslavia, and sent to serve in the Army overseas as infantry. He was selected for RADAR operator training before leaving Halifax and received Corporal stripes upon completion. After completing further training in England, he was posted in France and later Germany. When the War ended, they wanted volunteers to go fight against the Japanese, where battles continued. Nick volunteered, but was denied since he was conscripted in the first place. He then voluntarily joined the Army, was sent on a month leave in Canada with \$120 leave pay (\$100 from the Canadian Government and \$20 from the Queen of England for his service overseas), and was sent to Winnipeg for further arms training. By the time he was stationed in Fort Worth, Texas, the war in Japan had ended, and he returned to Canada. He recalls when the Atomic Bombs were dropped.

39:31 – 42:45

Nick returned to fishing salmon and herring, 8-10 months out of the year, 4-5 days a week. He compares this to the 2-3 day weeks common in the industry today. Nick was fortunate enough to get a job mending nets for 4-5 years, which he had learned from a man he worked with. His father and brother-in-law refused to teach him and wanted him

to learn on the job. Nick's main role on ships was a skiff man. It was traditional with Croatian and former Yugoslavian fishing crews to make the youngest do "the dirty work" regardless of how much he knew. The old-timers would tell him how they used to make the youngest run for hot coals from the fire to light their pipes with.

42:46 – 52:48

In 1942-43, there were no boat delegates for the union on vessels; someone from the union would come on the boat and sign people up, or fisherman would walk into the hall on Cordova themselves to sign up. In the late 40's, boat delegates began to appear, after the UFAW (United Fisherman & Allied Workers Union) was founded in 1945. They amalgamated with gillnetters and shore workers and became a united union. Nick's introduction to the union beyond membership came from fellow fishermen Martin Car, Joe Miharia and Mike Canic, who were involved themselves. There was a strike around 1952, and Mike was convinced to work for the union for 7-8 years. Mike was Croatian-Yugoslavian himself and would use this to recruit fellow Croatians to the union. He sparked Nick's interest in the union and convinced him to sit on various committees. Nick found he enjoyed this, and he used his leadership skills learned from the Army. Nick married his wife and found he was spending a lot of unpaid time at the union hall because he enjoyed it so much. In 1963, during another strike, Mike Canic was sent to Ocean Falls to deal a seining fleet of over 100 boats. Ted Ford was leaving his post at Prince Rupert, and Mike was then transferred to take his place. Homer Stevens sent Nick to take Mike's place in Ocean Falls, as President of Local 1 and new organizer of the strike. His first order of business was to hold a secondary strike vote in Bella Bella – historic to this day, as the result was a 100% rejection of the company's offer [Nick provided a copy of a letter acknowledging this, digitally archived with the BCLHC]. He recalls working class demonstrations in his home country and the creation of the Fraternal Union political party, which influenced his motivation to help the working class.

52:49 – 54:15

Nick once made a speech to Local 1 saying the two most important things in his life were his family and his union. There was often tension caused by splitting his life between the two; his wife was angry and opposed to his involvement during the Ocean Falls strike of 1963, because while Nick was working hard to organize during those 3 weeks, his friends and fellow fishermen were going to the beach and enjoying time with their family during the strike from work. His children became accustomed to their father's role in the union.

54:16 – 01:03:45

In this section, Nick describes the labour movement in BC at that time (1940/1950) as well as the structure of the UFAW. There was "always, always" a sense of a broader union movement and Nick made a point to participate in other organization's demonstrations. He recalls volunteering to support Building Trades pickets on the New Westminster

waterfront, opposing the “scab labour”. The Fishermen’s Union was unique in their organizing structure because rather than having members “check-off”, the Union had to go out and sign up members every year. Most members and union staff accepted it as part of the job. Minimum price agreements came in the late ‘40s and early ‘50s, before which the company dictated the price of stock. Old timers like Nick’s second cousin recalled dropping off their fish every night to a packer’s dock in the 1930s, unloading salmon for 1 cent a piece, while a rival boat would be unloading at the same dock for a cent and a half. There was no equality and it was all based on personal verbal agreements with the vessel’s skipper. It was common for workers to do personal labour and bring gifts for their skipper, vessel owner, or the skipper’s wife to keep their job on a vessel – things like painting the house or clearing the yard. This became less common after unionization, but it still happened behind the scenes. The first price agreement Nick can remember was the late 50’s to early 60’s; he recalls a strike around 1963 which brought a minimum price of 3 and a half cents per pound for “pinks”. The agreement stated the crew should be paid for 2 weeks or 10 working days of employment after the season ended in exchange for repairing nets and returning the boat to original working conditions.

01:03:46 – 01:11:44

Nick discusses strikes further. He says while fishermen often threatened strikes and took strike votes, the frequency of actual strikes in those days was overstated and exaggerated. Most of the time, the Union would agree to less than they had demanded, and the company would increase their original offer. In over 50 years of fishing, he only recalls 2 or 3 seasons which were lost to a strike. During strikes, the Union would have salmon strike sales to cover lost wages and other expenses. Nick had a strike sale in Ocean Falls which raised 150 dollars. The first distinct strike he recalls is 1952, where he was sent on picket duty in Port Kells. Peter Cordoni was a gillnetter there, who served Nick a cup of coffee from the water of the Fraser River. As Nick recalls, “we took a beating” and they lost most of the fishing season to the strike, but gained increases in the years following.

01:11:45 – 01:13:24

The UFAW faced conflict over the years, from organizations such as the Pacific Gillnetters Association, employers and others. Nick recalls trying to organize trollers, which was largely unsuccessful, as they were paid higher for their stock than other fishers and justified this by comparing their fish to “steak” and others to “hamburger”. While some joined, most trolling fishermen were not part of the union.

01:13:25 – 01:16:23

Nick describes the 1967 strike in which several union leaders were jailed. It was a “drag fleet” (trollers) at the heart of the strike, rather than the usual seiners, and they were requesting a specific price for bottom fish, which companies would not support. The

company demanded the union administration take a vote on every offer made, which the Union refused, as repetitive votes often caused fatigue and weaker results.

01:16:24 – 01:20:00

The UFAW was often described as a “radical Communist labour union” over the years. Some leaders, such as Homer Stevens, were open and public about their Communist leanings, which some fishermen resented. Nick says, “the companies loved it”, because they would use this against the Union and try to convince fishermen to leave as a result. While members continued to support the union, Nick says it was often a topic they faced at dinners with families and friends, where they were accused of following a Communist. Nick himself identifies as a CCF/NDP supporter, and never found his union membership to be a conflict with his own political beliefs. He always felt that if the needs of working people are supported, it didn’t matter what party was taking the lead. He would challenge those that questioned him and the UFAW with, “How am I wrong by demanding certain things for the working man?”, and was often disliked for proving their notions wrong.

01:20:01 – 01:22:11

Croatian immigrants were both fishermen and vessel owners in BC. Nick describes the tension in the community between those who were organizing workers versus those who were negotiating alongside the companies. Nick stopped attending the local Croatian Catholic Church because of fights and arguments that would break out, due in part to what he describes as “dogmatic” thinking, where they saw his political Socialism as an equivalent to Communism.

01:22:12 – 01:26:45

Nick describes various campaigns led by the UFAW, such as the campaign for Worker’s Compensation coverage. He recalls several “battles” over the issue. Compensation was won for herring fishermen, under what was called “Sick Mariners”, but only if they signed up during their first trip of the year and agreed to fish at least 3 miles from shore. Compensation was later introduced for the salmon seining fleet. Health and Safety was a common theme at Conventions, and lobbies were sent to the Legislature and to the Federal Government in Ottawa.

01:26:46 – 01:33:15

Nick was first elected President of Local 1 in 1956, the second time he ran, at the urging of the Union President, Steve Stavenes. Cliff Cook was the Local President before him for 3-4 years. Nick held that position for the rest of his career, and never technically stepped down, so he jokes that he is a “lifetime President” to this day. He continued to pay his full dues of \$250 for a few years after he stopped working, until his wife made him stop. Number 1 was the largest local, with close to 2000 members at one time. It included seiners, trollers, gillnetters and net workers. Nick did not mind facing criticism in his role.

01:33:16 – 01:37:20

Nick has been a delegate at BC Federation of Labour Conventions and other labour conventions. He was opposed to the sale of the Maritime Labour Centre and is critical of recent spending decisions of the Union. There is current discussion of selling the Fishermen's Centre in Prince Rupert which Nick disagrees with, as he feels that once it is sold and the money is spent, there are no assets left for the Union. Nick would like to see more money spent on organizing.

01:37:21 – 01:52:10

Nick was a pioneer in the establishment of the benefit fund and the UFAW herring sale. In 1947, members discussed the need for remuneration of lost earnings in case of sickness, injury, or loss of life that resulted in missed work that could be paid to their families. This was established for close to 10 years, with separate funds for herring and salmon fishermen, but the fund would often "run dry" for salmon as it was so minimal and there were so many fishermen drawing payment. These two funds were amalgamated, which many including Nick resisted, as they were concerned that one would be overdrawing funds from the other. The new fund did manage to "stand on two feet" after a few years. He tells the story of a son trying to collect his father's benefits. If you were only fishing salmon, you would only get paid from that fund, whereas those who fished both salmon and herring collected from both. This was changed after a few years. These Union benefits were extended by Bert Ogden to include things like dental work, which put further strain on the fund. A limit of 39 weeks benefit pay per member was added after almost \$750 000 was paid out in benefits in one year, when Homer Stevens was still in the Union leadership. There was a \$20 000 death benefit paid out to herring fishermen, but not for salmon, until changes were made. The updated death benefit was \$5000 paid from each fund. Nick is still a Trustee for the benefit fund to this day, a position he has held since the late 1970s.

1:52:11 – 02:00:54

In this section, Nick describes the origins of the UFAW herring sale. The Union was in negotiations with companies at the time, who refused to pay \$8/ton for reduction herring. It was union member Howard Nelson, fishing with Charlie Clark and Norman Gunderson, who came up with the idea of selling herring to the public from the New Westminster docks for 25 cents per bucket, around 1945 or 46. The public had to bring their own buckets. Howard recruited Nick to help with the sale, and the money raised (around \$250) went to the CKNW Orphan's Fund. From then on, CKNW would provide advertising for the yearly sale (around October or November). Nick only missed 1 or 2 sales in his career. The Union also helped pay for a children's study centre at the Vancouver Aquarium under Homer Steven's leadership, and the funds from the herring

sale were split between this educational centre and the orphan's fund. After the centre at the Aquarium was built, the money went to other agencies, such as the Buck Suzuki Foundation. In later years, the sale made upwards of 30-40 000 dollars.

02:00:55 – 02:08:02

In this section, Nick discusses the boat clearance program, which was broken with the 1989 strike. He explains that the union policy was that crew members had to attend 50% of meetings held during reduction herring negotiations, or else face fines of \$10 per member, per meeting under the clearance program. Meetings were held at Queen Elizabeth Theatre and later the Pacific National Exhibition, because there would be 700-800 members in attendance. The program started to break down in the 1960's when the fishery was closed. Boat clearance fines were never in place for salmon or other fish. In 1989, a significant number of seiners and gillnetters went out fishing during the strike – not in defiance of the boat clearance program, simply to earn money. Boat owners and companies convinced many that the cost of the strike was not worth it, and those that did fish during the strike made good money. Nick admits he has a hard time forgiving and forgetting workers who “scabbed” during these strikes. He says his family would have to be starving before he'd break a strike.

02:08:03 – 02:10:19

In this section, Nick reflects on the strength of the trade union movement today – he says that unions were so strong in the 1950's and 60's that new members did not have to fight to receive benefits and improved working conditions, and the older generation that had fought so hard either got tired or relaxed and backed off – “the fight wasn't there”. He says, “we should resurrect Homer Stevens and bring him out and get the fishing industry organized again”. Nick feels it only took 3-5 years before these victories were taken as “a matter of fact” and organization was slowly eroded in the decades since. He feels young people no longer see the connection between trade unionism and the working benefits and improvements they receive.

02:10:20 – 02:17:43

In the final section, the interview is wrapped up. In total, Nick fished in Canada from 1942 until around 2002. His (adult) children were the ones who urged him to quit once he reached his 70s, and eventually talked him into retirement. He was also facing hereditary issues with his hands which required surgeries to straighten out his fingers, which were curling slowly. He tells the story of his father, who had the same condition, getting his finger caught in a net and losing it. Nick wanted to return to fishing after his surgery, but his children begged him not to.