

Ep. 9 – Indigenous Longshoremen and the I.W.W.

Transcribed by Patricia Wejr

Rod Mickleburgh [00:00:21] Welcome to another edition of On the Line, a podcast that aims to shine light on British Columbia's rich labour heritage. I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh. June is Indigenous History Month in Canada, and this year the country has been rocked by the discovery of hundreds of unmarked graves of Indigenous children who attended residential schools over the decades. This edition of On the Line takes note of Indigenous History Month with a different aspect of BC's Indigenous history, one that is not tragic and not very well known. We examine the contribution of Indigenous workers to operations of the Port of Vancouver, particularly in the first half of the 20th century. We will hear from some of those who worked on the waterfront, and it's a union story, too.

Music: 'There is Power in a Union performed by Joe Glazer and Bill Friedland

[00:01:13] If you like sluggers to beat off your head, then don't organize, all unions despise. If you want nothing before you are dead, shake hands with your boss and look wise. There is power, there is power in a band of working men, when they stand hand-in-hand. That's a power, that's a power that must rule in every land....

Rod Mickleburgh [00:01:35] I think it's safe to say that not many British Columbians are aware that until the last years of the 19th century, when they began to be forced out by growing numbers of incoming white settlers, a large part of BC's early workforce was Indigenous. They were miners, loggers, sawmill workers, agricultural labourers, cannery workers and, of course, commercial salmon fishermen. Yet their role in building BC's early economy has been written out of the history books. Indigenous workers also excelled on the waterfront, the backbreaking physical work of loading and unloading ships. In the days before machines and automation, members of the Squamish and Tsleil-waututh Nations became particularly adept at loading lumber, a job that required both skill and muscle power. In the words of Ed Long, who began longshoring early in the 20th century, they were the greatest men that ever worked the lumber. Waterfront jobs often stayed within Indigenous families, passed on from father to son. Red Baker was among a group of retired Indigenous longshore workers who were interviewed by Joulene Parent in 2017 for the Docker podcast. His father, Chief Simon Baker, went right back to the days of sail.

Red Baker [00:03:00] He used to tell me the first ships he loaded was three-mast sailing ships, and he says he used to pass the lumber one piece at a time, down into the hatch, and they'd fill it up and the sailing ship'd go off to England, Europe [coughing]. When you think about it, right? I never knew the sailing ships took lumber like that. Yeah. And then if there was any lumber left over, he would take it and he would walk from the railway in North Van, because we lived underneath the bridge, Lions Gate Bridge here. And he would save the lumber up and he finally had enough lumber and he built another new home, up on Marine Drive. We were the first family in Capilano to move away from underneath the bridge.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:03:54] The father of Sam George was another pioneer dockworker.

Sam George [00:03:59] My dad was logging somewhere here in North Van. And he had the name of Flossie. Everybody on the waterfront knew him as Flossie, but they needed a winch driver, and my dad was up around here somewhere logging. He knew how to drive the steam winch. What did they call it? Bull winch over here, when they did that in the logging camp? And they went and got him and that's how he ended up a longshoreman. And I guess the money in them days attracted like myself and everybody else. It was the

money that attracted me. But, seen things change, lots of changes today, right from -- I hit the tail end of everything. I remember my dad would come home and my older brother Ross, I think he worked with you guys. He started, probably started around the same time. And they would come home and they would be really tired. I know that. Almost like seven or eight o'clock they'd go to bed. But, you know, it was a lot of bull work, you know and I was lucky I hit the end of it all. I mean, I did it.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:05:15] Those early Indigenous longshoremen stood up for each other. In 1906, they formed one of the first unions on the Vancouver waterfront. Not only that, their Lumber Handler's Union was one of the first unions in B.C. to join the newly formed Industrial Workers of the World. The IWW or Wobblies, as they were often called, were the most militant, radical union organization North America had ever seen. Their goal was to overthrow capitalism and replace it with egalitarian socialism, where workers would no longer be wage slaves. Their songs raise the spirits of many a worker over the years.

Music: 'There is Power in a Union performed by Joe Glazer and Bill Friedland

[00:05:58] Come all ye workers from every land, come join in the grand industrial band. Then we our share of this earth shall demand. Come on, do your share like a man. For there is power, there is power in the band of working men. When they stand, hand in hand. That's a power. That's a power that must rule in every land. One industrial union grand. One industrial union grand.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:06:33] The Independent Lumber Handlers Union was IWW Local 526. Most of its 50 or 60 members were Indigenous. Union meetings took place at their community hall in North Vancouver. While there is no record showing why the lumber handlers joined the IWW, it is probably safe to assume that they were drawn to its policy of racial equality. Most unions in those days closed the door to non-white workers, believing that the lower wages they usually received undercut their own wages. But the IWW was open to all workers regardless of race. Class was the enemy, the Wobblies proclaimed, not race. The union quickly became known on the docks as the Bows and Arrows. The name was not pejorative. It was recognition of the distinct status that Indigenous longshoremen held among their fellow workers. They embraced the name too. IWW Local 526 disappeared from the waterfront a year or two later after losing a strike. But a few years later, there was a new organization of lumber handlers also dominated by Indigenous members. They established themselves as a local within the International Longshoremen's Association. Longtime dockworker William Nahanee and his son Edward, were president and vice president. It was also known as the Bows and Arrows. However, in 1923, a disastrous strike wiped out unionization on the waterfront. Most strikers were blacklisted, including Indigenous workers. Yet a number eventually found themselves back on the job and the Bows and Arrows appeared once again as the International Lumber Handlers Association. The union maintained a three-story building on Cordova Street in East Vancouver with a store on the ground floor, a bar and recreation area on the second floor, and the union hall on the third floor. During this time, the Bows and Arrows pioneered the use of waterfront gangs. They were fondly thought of by those who came after them. John Cordocedo spent 44 years on the waterfront, including time as president of the ILWU's Vancouver Local.

John Cordocedo [00:08:54] When we had the Bow and Arrow gangs, we're talking about the main subject here, the gangs. Of the 35 regular gangs we had on the waterfront, and we'll start at the top and you can add to it. The first one would be, like the hereditary chief of the Squamish Nation was Chief Moses Joseph, right? Are we all in agreement on that? Mm hmm. And he had the gang. He had a gang. And he was number one, and they even

go down, Si had his gang. Red, Kenny's dad had their gang, Si's gang. And he had Alfred Jacobs as a winch driver. And he had Norm Walter's dad as another winch driver. There was two winch drivers in a gang then when I first started, 13-men gangs. Now there's nobody.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:09:49] But the depression, mergers and the bitter six-month waterfront strike in 1935 brought an end to the wonderful Bows and Arrows. In an interview in 2013, Delbert Guerin, retired longshoreman, fisherman and a former chief of the Musqueam, looked back to those times.

Delbert Guerin [00:10:09] And the Bows and Arrows really worked the North Shore. And in the early days, the word longshoreman from the Burrard Reserve or, Tsleil-Waututh, as they call themselves, to the end of the Dollarton highway. As a matter of fact, Dan George longshored for a while. And his younger brother John and his older brother Henry. I don't know exactly how many of them were from there, about ten of them, I think. I can't think of all their names. I was just a kid when they, before they - they did quit by the time I started.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:10:45] Still, the waterfront continued to employ large numbers of Indigenous workers well into the 1950s John Cordocero:

John Cordocero [00:10:54] I'd work with the First Nations people. All of them were great to work with. They all had gangs and they were always a happy bunch. You didn't get a cranky bunch and they went through the -I just touched the surface of how many there were. Of the thirty-five gangs, there must have been close to a third of them were all Squamish. Well, they not were only Squamish. You take George Madden and George, yeah, that was his name, George Madden. He was in Jerome's gang right from the start. He was a Blackfoot from where, Alberta or something like that. [fellow longshoremen responding, yeah] And there was, oh, there was all kinds of people. We even brought the, well, the union encompassing these four fellows here, three fellows here, we brought the First Nations people down from up north, from Prince Rupert.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:11:50] Sam George:

Sam George [00:11:52] Solidarity. That's one thing I noticed when I started down in the hull. Everybody's - probably still today - but the thing that struck me was how everybody stuck together. You know, there was a safety issue, that whole dock shut down. Like the world just spread, you know, like the moccasin telegraph. Okay, we're going to walk off, okay, we're going to stop work. And everybody just did it. You know, maybe it's still the same today, I couldn't say. But it was the same with, like, the ship. If we had a beef or like the gear or something, it was unsafe. Okay, gonna shut it down. And that was it. The ship just stopped and the lift truck drivers quit serving and the slingmen quit hooking up the loads and the winch drivers quit running the winches. But, you know, that was solidarity. We all had, we were all on the same page. It seemed like it. And I know when I left there I was bitchin a lot, but, you know, one of the best things. The only thing I ever hung on to was longshoring. All those wives and cars and [laughter] everything changed.

Joulene Parent [00:13:11] Everything changed but longshoring was consistent.

Sam George [00:13:13] Yeah, I stuck with it because, because of that solidarity, the money and strong union.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:13:19] And once more, John Cordocero:

John Cordocedo [00:13:21] They were instrumental of me going into the longshore industry, and I owe it to the elders of the Squamish Band. A lot of them were the movers and shakers of why you enjoy a nice home like this. And they all started, they were a militant bunch. Tommy Finlay, Cliff Paul, a lot of the forgotten people. They all did right. And we looked after the people, you know, like some things I couldn't stop. Well, [unclear] Atkinson, when they deregistered him, I did everything I couldn't get, [unclear] his job, eh. He got himself in trouble. But he still got a pension. Harry Newman's son. We got him a pension anyway. [Dan Cole], I don't know how he got to convince the trustees, but the majority of them were fine. They were good longshoremen and they all could work on the boom. They could walk logs and that was the key to it there. But they were great and instrumental in my being working on the waterfront with them. They taught me everything I knew.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:14:37] Solidarity on the docks extended beyond the work day. There were sports teams and social events. Ken Baker weighed in on those good old days:

Ken Baker [00:14:47] We had a hockey team, a longshoremen's hockey team. We had four teams and we used to play every Sunday, out at Coquitlam. And that came just as big as the stupid Canucks. [laughter] We used to have people coming out watching us. My brother Peter, he was a good hockey player. Defenceman. He taught me a lot, but we had that, we had picnics. We had picnics at Second Beach. We had one at Bowen Island. I remember Bowen Island, the picnics. We won the tug of war, all native tug of war? Howie Smith come up and he says, hey, KB, you wanna be a captain? Okay. He says, well get a hold of a tug of war team. So I got a hold of the biggest guys, and toughest guys on the waterfront, that worked on the waterfront, and we beat everybody. It was one tough outfit, was the Western Stevedore. There were all big, great big longshoremen, and we beat them all. [laughter] I never forget that.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:16:03] In another colourful look back, Ken Baker points out that he did a lot more than just physical labour. He also touches on the dangers of the job and how he got into longshoring in the first place.

Ken Baker [00:16:15] Anyways, I was in a Teddy [unclear] gang, native Squamish. Then I moved to the board, dispatchin' every day. From there I went drivin' winch, lift truck, bulldozer, all the machinery you can get a hold of on the waterfront, I did that. I ended up pushing buttons when I retired, computer and ship-loaders and all that high tech equipment. I only got a Grade 8 education so, couldn't go too far. And my dad was down there, my uncles were down there. My uncle got killed on the waterfront. He fell off the gangplank and he was paralyzed for the rest of his life.

Joulene Parent [00:17:14] What's your uncle's name?

Ken Baker [00:17:15] Bobby Baker. He died in his late 80s but he was in the hospital all his life, because of that falling off a gangplank and hitting that fender. Well, it paralyzed his back and all that. And Uncle Joe had a gang. Uncle Joe Baker. That was another Native gang. And that's about all I can say for now. But my dad got me on the waterfront. I'll never forget that day. It was a cold autumn day like today. He's working down CPR on lead or copper ore, or something like that. He was throwin' in these steel skiffs. And I said, if this is longshoring, I'm getting the hell out of here. They give me a shovel and you fill these skips up, take them down below and put them on the sidcars outside, the railway cars. But I

seen my cheque the next week, I says I think I'll go back. [laughter] And I get a good pension, I guess you could say. And I'll be 80 in March so I did a lot better than a lot of my fellow workers.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:18:52] There is a plaque commemorating Indigenous dockworkers and the Bows and Arrows outside the Vancouver Convention Centre. It contains a photo of a gang of Indigenous labourers on the waterfront of Moody Ville in 1889. Joulene Parent reads it out:

Joulene Parent [00:19:10] Native men worked as longshoremen on Burrard Inlet since before Vancouver was incorporated. In many cases, several generations of men from the same family worked on the docks, beginning as young as 13 or 14 years old. Members of several of the families that lived in Stanley Park earned money through longshoring, including William Nahanee, pictured in front holding a bag in this 1889 photo. And that's a photo that's on the waterfront as well. Numerous Indigenous leaders worked as longshoremen, including Andy Paull, Chief Dan George, Chief Simon Baker and Joe Capilano, who used money earned on the waterfront to finance a trip to London to lobby the king for the rights of First Nations in 1906. In the late 19th and 20th century, specialisation on the waterfront roughly followed radical lines, and the work gangs comprised primarily of Indigenous men became known for their skill and efficiency in handling lumber. They were also the first to organize a longshoremen's union in 1906, which was local 526 of the militant Industrial Workers of the World, informally known as the Bows and Arrows. Although 526 lasted less than a year, the Bows and Arrows unions followed until all longshoremen became part of the ILWU, after the World War II.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:20:39] The plaque is well-worth viewing, along with many others along the Convention Centre's outside walkway, that also depict little known chapters of BC labour history. The story of Indigenous waterfront workers and the Bows and Arrows is one of the best. We hope we have done it justice. Thanks to members of the podcast collective, Bailey Garden, who put it all together, and Patricia Wejr, who singled out the wonderful personal reminiscences of the Indigenous longshore workers now retired, who spent so many years on the docks. And thanks to the ILWU Canada podcast, 'The Docker' for allowing us to feature clips from episode 33 of their show. The interviews were conducted by Joulene Parent. The clip from Delbert Guerin is part of the 'Reclaiming the New Westminster Waterfront Collection' at the New Westminster Museum and Archives and Simon Fraser University. I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh. We'll see you next time. On the Line.