

Ep 16 The Union Archives That Almost Didn't Make It

Transcript by Patricia Wejr

Rod Mickleburgh [00:00:00] Welcome to another edition of On the Line, a podcast that aims to shine a light on BC's rich labour heritage. I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh. Today we are focusing on something a little different. Rather than a union battle or significant labour breakthrough, we take a look at some special people who helped make it possible to tell all those stories, stories that might otherwise remain unknown to the public. That's the goal of the BC Labour Heritage Centre, which produces this podcast to preserve and make BC's valuable labour history accessible. One way to do that is by creating union archives that can be used by academics, teachers, journalists and so on. A good archive is invaluable and that's what we have in Lake Cowichan, where the Kaatza Historical Society has collaborated with some former members of the International Woodworkers of America, now part of the Steelworkers, to build the IWA Annex Archive. Don't be fooled by the rather nondescript title. It's one of the best labour archives in BC, if not the best. This is their story. The founding convention of the IWA took place in Tacoma, Washington, in July of 1937. The new union's first president was Harold Pritchett from the Fraser Valley, the first Canadian to lead an international union. Under his leadership, the BC IWA became the most powerful union in the province with 25,000 newly organized members. But Pritchett and other leaders were also Communists, and the IWA became caught up in a nasty political fight that was won by the anti-communists or so-called White Block. But the bitter struggle has made it difficult to access documents that tell the full story of the union. Luckily, there were a number of IWA leaders and activists who recognized the importance of keeping and sharing the union's history. Thanks to their efforts, we now have the IWA Annex Archive located appropriately in the Cowichan Valley that was home to the very first IWA local in BC. John Mountain began working in sawmills in 1977. A strong trade unionist, he was a shop steward, a project leader in his local. And then in 1998 he moved to the IWA's Head Office in Vancouver, where he managed the rate determination and job evaluation program. When declining membership caused the union to move to cheaper offices in Burnaby, the union's archives almost didn't make it. John Mountain.

John Mountain [00:03:35] So to make that move, the office downtown had to pack a lot of stuff up. And I think the story that you're referring to is a story about -- and I didn't really know that much about archives -- I mean, I always liked history. But there was one evening that I was working late, as I always did there, and Norm Garcia was working late. And we noticed that somebody earlier in the day had gone into the library and just dumped a whole mess of stuff in the middle of the library floor. And if that had been left overnight, the janitors would have cleaned that up and it would have been in the dumpster. So, Norm, he started well, you know, let's get some boxes. We've got to rescue this stuff because there's some good stuff in here. So he started in honour and I helped him in a way. And we put it back in boxes and left it to the one side. And that material ended up, it's here now. Not all of it, but it was some of it. So when we moved to Burnaby, we took quite a bit of stuff with us. We really didn't have a large piece of real estate. There was a couple areas where Norman, you know, he hid the stuff away. He had one room, it was quite impressive. It was something like our archives, you know, had shelves and boxes and there was enough material that the union actually hired offsite storage. So there was two locations which the rest of the boxes went to. When the Commercial Street office of Local 1-217, which is the Vancouver Local, when it closed on Commercial Street, they needed a place to put what they had and they ended up bringing it out to our office in Burnaby. And the only room that we could find was a room in the parkade. So concrete all the way around, concrete floor and the stuff was piled up in there on the concrete floor. Well, they had a flood. So any box that was on the bottom was kind of mush. I guess someone

whoever was managing building at that time, had actually offered that space to someone else in the building. So we had to get rid of it. And rather than throw it out, I managed to find a space for it, in the bunker we called it, which was basically a large storage area underneath the front sidewalk of the building. And because I was kind of the guy who looked after the building, maintenance-wise, I kind of knew where all these hiding spots were. So I spent a couple of evenings with a dolly, and I went through all this stuff. There was paintings and all sorts of like real artifacts, not just paper. And I managed to get it all up underneath there. And that's where it stayed until 2014.

Music: 'Talking IWA' performed by Joe Glazer [00:06:57] Wood for pulp and wood for doors, wood for your homes, your furniture, your floors, wood is everywhere. And some place along the way it was touched by a member of the IWA, a mighty fine union. Men and women working under pretty fair conditions. But it hasn't been easy because we've been a long time marching down the union road.

John Mountain [00:07:22] You know, in 2012, Norm Garcia and I, we'd started talking about that we need to do something with this stuff. And we'd explored some leads with a couple of universities in the Lower Mainland, UBC and Simon Fraser, and at that time UBC already had some of the IWA material. I didn't know what it was, I've never seen it. Also, there was a university in Eugene, Oregon, had some of the American artifacts in there. UBC, they were nice enough to write back and tell us that they'll take some of the stuff, but we have to have a commitment of money to go towards hiring another person to look after it. And that wasn't high enough on our priority in our office. So what we did is we just said thanks, but no thanks. And we started looking around for another place that this could go.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:08:23] It ended up, as we have said, in Lake Cowichan, thanks in part to the timeless work of renowned Valley photographer Wilmer Gold. His vivid, vintage photographs depicted so much of the region's past, including the logging industry.

John Mountain [00:08:40] Jack Munro died, I think, in 2012, 2013, and when we had the memorial over in the the new Convention Centre, it was Alan Lundgren and Norman and I, we kind of talked about maybe we should take this a little bit further and do something about it. At that time as well, we were using some of Wilmer Gold's photos and by the way, our office, the office in Burnaby, magnificent Wilmer Gold, big like three by four feet, big paintings blown up. We had them all over our office. It was really amazing. So when we would have a convention or a safety conference, our guests would receive a Wilmer Gold photo framed and with a citation on the back. And the the first photos came from the Kaatza Museum. Barb Simpkins was the curator up here at that time, and we had an arrangement that she would create the photos, have them printed, give them to us and we would frame them and give them to our guests. Well, I live in Chemainus. So rather than Barb boxing these up and couriering them over to Vancouver, she came up to my place in Chemainus and we'd do an exchange in the driveway. And it was at that time that I said, Barb, we got this archive. We're looking for a place. Would you guys be interested in it at all? Maybe, you know, you might be able to do something with it. She thought it was a great idea. She went back and talked to the Board of Directors here in the Kaatza Historical Society and basically that's what got the ball rolling.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:10:32] Pat Foster is president of the Kaatza Historical Society. It looks after both the Kaatza Station Museum and the IWA Annex. Pat grew up in the nearby former logging town of Youbou. She got bit by the local history bug when she attended a play at her kid's school about a local character named Henry March. Later, as a Lake Cowichan town councillor, she was appointed to the Kaatza Historical Society and

has remained active ever since. The Society's first IWA material came from the union's former Duncan Local, but there was more to come from the provincial office.

Pat Foster [00:11:12] And then John Mountain brought them over on November the 15th - - no, November of 2015. He came with a cube van, all the way from Vancouver, full of boxes, 350 plus boxes, plus all the artifacts that go with it. And we stored them in the vault of our school, because we didn't have this edition then. So we stored them in the Bell Tower School. We had boxes lining all the walls and the class -- we have a little model classroom over there. And the little classroom was full with boxes. We had boxes everywhere. So after that, we thought, wow, we got to do something about how we're gonna house this and do it. So we came up with the idea to build the addition.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:11:59] After years of raising money, the Historical Society was ready to start building. But they also needed volunteers. Terry Inglis stepped forward in a big way. The retired trade unionist had worked in industry and the construction trades all his life. He put that experience and knowledge to work.

Terry Ingles [00:12:20] They had the vision. They had raised the money or were raising the money. And when it came time for construction is when I became involved in that and kind of just watched the contractors come in, do the excavation, put the foundation in, and then frame and take the annex to lock up. Once it was at lock up, then I became more involved. The concrete was poured, the building, the frame of the building -- that's the walls and the outside were up and the doors were on, the windows were in. It was at lock up, but inside it was open framing. It still had to be wired, insulated, drywalled. A local fellow, Duncan Brown, a certified electrician, he drew the permit. I assisted him in doing the wiring. Once the wiring was done, then I went to work with the help of a couple of the other fellows. We insulated it and then put up the gyprock on the walls and a couple of local fellows, brothers, the Skramstad boys. And I can't remember their names. They came in and did the drywall taping and filling. Once they had finished that, we painted it. And then, basically, here we are. The archive is operational. So it was about a year and a half from when they started digging the hole in the ground until we had the room completed to the point where we could start putting archival material in it.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:14:28] The IWA Annex opened in May of 2019. It was a remarkable achievement and a proud moment for all those who worked so hard to make it happen. Pat Foster.

Pat Foster [00:14:40] It's such an important history of our region. So we're really proud of it. We're proud to have it and honoured to have that collection here.

Music: 'Talking IWA' performed by Joe Glazer [00:14:49] One Big Union in wood. Gonna roll and go with the CIO, gonna roll the union on. Lumber workers had tried many times before, but year after year they were crushed to the floor. Company spies and company towns, injunctions, vigilantes kept the lumberjack down. He worked all winter 'til his bones would freeze. Slept in the bunkhouse with the bedbugs and fleas, he ate a slop from a greasy old plate. Worked from early in the morning 'til late. He carried his blanket on his back. The homeless vocalist lumberjack, a timber beast. A bent old stiff. A blanket bum, he sure needed a union.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:15:32] But these aren't the only heroes of the piece. Before there was John Mountain, Terry Inglis, Pat Foster and others at the Kaatza Historical Society, there were people like Al Lundgren, the late Roger Stanyer and the treasure of Wilmer

Gold's photos. Al Lundgren takes up the story of how Duncan Local 1-80 managed to save so much of its own archives.

Al Lundgren [00:15:56] Well, it was interesting with me because as a kid growing up, I had no idea the background of my neighbours or parent's neighbours. My dad originally bought the chicken coop and backyard of Owen and Edna Brown. Owen was the second president of Local 1-80. Edna, of course, had been the head of the women's auxiliaries. And then kitty- corner to us was [unclear] Bergren and Hjalmar Bergren and Myrtle. And these were all neighbours and I just assumed that they were just who they were. And I had no idea that they had this tremendous background. There was a house that the Gustafsons owned, and that was the strike headquarters for the 1934 strike. And the area was called a picket camp. I just thought it was because of the fences. I didn't know.

Al Lundgren [00:16:51] Two of those early organizers spoke to Howie Smith way back in the 1970s. Hjalmar Bergren talked of the dangerous conditions that were the norm before the IWA and other BC unions finally won the right to union recognition.

Hjalmar Bergren [00:17:05] Of course it was dangerous. And up until the union was established, if somebody got killed, well that didn't stop anybody from working. No, you'd just throw them to the side, that's all, and kept on working. You took them out when you had time.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:17:25] Ernie Dalskog recalled being met at the logging camps by superintendents wielding pick handles and once, even a shotgun, as he tried to organize the loggers.

Ernie Dalskog [00:17:37] We didn't get recognition of the union nor recognition of camp committees. But we did put the fear of God into the employer.

Music: 'Talking IWA' performed by Joe Glazer [00:17:47] We're fallers and buckers and choker setters, sawyers, mechanics, IWA go-getters. Men are on bulldozers. Men are on cranes. We run the sanders. We run the planes. Chipper men, glue mixers, electricians, shingle packers, log stackers and weird sounding positions like green chain off bearer, shake makers, rigging slinger. Crazy sounding jobs.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:18:15] Al Lundgren worked many years as an IWA faller, but he was also a skilled artist who had attended the Vancouver School of Art. He used this talent to illustrate a number of safety pamphlets for the WCB, serving many years as a safety advocate. But he was keenly interested in preserving IWA history as well.

Al Lundgren [00:18:37] Roger Stanyer was elected president of Local 1-80. I can't remember the date now. 1974, I think it was up 'til 1990. And during his tenure, he had a real interest in the history of the industry. And so he asked the membership if they would be kind enough to donate pictures to start an archive. And they did. And there were all kinds of pictures that arrived. Some were pretty terrible. Some of them were really good. Well, eventually there was a well known photographer in the area by the name of Wilmer Gold, who let the world know that his pictures are going to come up for sale. And he immediately jumped on it and thought, we have to get this for the local. So he brought it to the membership meeting. And, of course, you know, you get a membership meeting in those years are interested in other things. And when Roger said, well, I want to spend a considerable amount of money to get these images, you know, you're just getting a bunch of pictures for it. I mean, what's the value of that? So it took a lot of talking before he finally

was successful. And thank God he was. But then at the same time, he was fortunate in that Local 1-80 ran its own local newspaper. They hired an editor by the name of Ken McEwan. And Ken ended up being the caretaker of the archive and it kept continuing to grow. Well, when Ken left, then I came on the scene and inherited it. And it was so much fun at that time because it was a busy, busy archive. Everything from a family member wanting a picture of Uncle Joe to hang on the wall to anthropologists coming into look at the First Nations pictures, other museums contacting, authors and researchers. I don't know how many books have been published using Gold's pictures, but there's quite a number. And it was great fun working with them because they would arrive with a particular picture in mind and I'd listen to them and I'd think, gee, you know, I think I got something better. And then we'd go through the catalogues. And it was great fun. It was a good experience.

Music: 'Talking IWA' performed by Joe Glazer [00:20:53] The lumber worker tried as hard as he could. Every timber town was stained with his blood. Centralia, Everett, Aberdeen, Louisiana, Newfoundland. The toughest battles labour's ever seen. He organized in Canada, in the USA. He had lots of unions before the IWA but he just couldn't make 'em stick. The International Union of Shingle Workers, the International Union of Timber Workers. The Industrial Workers of the World. The Lumber Workers Industrial Union. The Sawmill and Timber Workers Union. The Federation of Woodworkers. Not to mention a company union with a fancy name of the Loyal Legion of Loggers and Lumbermen.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:21:40] No one has to tell Vic Berar about the real-life value of the IWA Archives. Berar worked only briefly in the woods, but that experience and what he saw of his father's union work shaped his life. Jaswant Singh Berar played a huge role in bringing South Asian woodworkers into Local 1-80.

Vic Berar [00:22:02] Okay. So, Dad being the educated one, and these bunkhouse gentlemen, who Dad would do the letter writing for. So Dad became in the Youbou sawmill, the interpreter. So I remember the union president, Mr. Jubenville, and that's in my era. And like I say, I only spent three years in the union, but I'll come back to that. The union never, ever left me. But Dad being the interpreter, the IWA president of the time, would be at our home on a Saturday evening. And, okay, Jaswant, here's what we're trying to achieve. Here's what we want to do. I want you to explain to all the crew, here's the game plan, the agenda. And we want to have them on side and here's what we'll eventually try to achieve. So Dad would -- and Dad did that all his life. Even after he retired, our home was still a very popular place. So as far as Dad goes, in the land that he acquired and good old Allan Lundgren. I would have forgotten it. But Al Lundgren a few years ago, sends me an email. Then he follows it up with a phone call, and I just, Al, where did you get that? He says, well, you know, my dad's involvement in the IWA. I says, yeah. He says, well, they bought this land from your dad, and we built the IWA Hall on that property. And I just found it going through all the IWA Archives that Allan's still doing to this day. God bless him.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:24:08] God bless him indeed. There are treasures like that in all union archives. Without them, so many stories and so much of what unions did in those long ago days would be lost to the dustbin of history. That would be a tragedy. Al Lundgren was asked point blank, why should unions keep their archives?

Al Lundgren [00:24:30] Oh, it can be so fleeting, you know. You have unions that have done so much work over the years, and so much good for the communities. You know, it's

not just increasing wages or whatever. It's the impact that they have where they're at. And I was constantly after the officers in Local 1-80 to keep track of their notes, write them down. You know you've done something you're proud of, keep it, get a photocopy of it.

Music: 'Talking IWA' performed by Joe Glazer [00:25:01] Well, 40 years ago we got a brand new start. The IWA gave lumber workers heart. We improved the conditions, we raised the pay, won all kinds of benefits with the IWA. Health and welfare, pensions and life insurance, vacations and holiday pay, safety and seniority protection, overtime and travel time. Good eating and sleeping in the lumber camps. Well, it's 40 years later and truth be told, we feel like 21, not 40 years old. We've still got lots of hard work to do. We got to organize and make the job better for you and you and you, wherever you are. Because the IWA isn't run by some labour czar. It's run by you and your buddies in the woods, in the shops. It's too late to look back and it's too early to stop. So we'll just keep moving ahead. Building a union of woodworkers. We may not be the biggest, but let me tell you something, we're one of the best. Let's keep it that way. For the next 40 years.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:26:15] The IWA Annex Archive in Lake Cowichan is a model of what unions can do to preserve their past. We hope we may have inspired some of you to go over there and take a look. We at the BC Labour Heritage Centre salute them. It's the work of angels. We hope you've enjoyed this episode of On the Line. Thanks to Donna Sacuta, Executive Director of the Labour Heritage Centre, and Patricia Wejr of the podcast collective for the interviews with the folks in Lake Cowichan. And thanks to John Mabbott, for putting it all together. I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh. We'll see you next time, On the Line.

Theme Music: 'Hold the Fort' [00:27:11]