



### Ocean Falls

**Film Summary:** The story of company towns and their unique role and legacy in the economic and social fabric of the province...with a specific focus on the west coast town of Ocean Falls.

**Curriculum Application:**  
Social Studies 10

**The Essential Question:** What is the enduring legacy of company towns in the province of BC? Is it the story of corporate control and capitalist greed that took advantage, or the vibrant and hard-working workers and families that created community and still live on in the hearts of those who experienced the “company town”?

### Summary of the Lesson Activities

1. **Focus questions** for the vignette provide a short lesson option. (20-30 minutes)
2. **Discussion** following the questions on the existence of company towns and the incredibly vibrant communities they gave birth to. This might also take the form of a **debate**, revolving around the stark contrast between company priorities and community heartbeat...which is the enduring legacy?
3. **Then and Now;** dwell on a series of images depicting Ocean Falls then, and the same or similar scene today. What powerful role does this kind of reflection serve?
4. **Compare and Contrast research project;** journey through the story of another company town, and then compare that to the story of Ocean Falls.

### Learning Standards

1. To explore and unpack the story of Ocean Falls, its rise and fall as a quintessential “company town” in the extractive primary industry enterprises of BC. **Continuity and Change**
2. Assess the varying perspectives of the contributions and importance of company towns in the development of British Columbia. **Significance.**
3. Compare and contrast the underlying conditions and actions that influenced the development and demise of Ocean Falls with another company town in British Columbia. **Cause and Consequence.**
4. Assess the justification for competing accounts of Company towns after investigating points of contention, reliability of sources, and adequacy of evidence, including data (**Evidence**)

### Materials and Resources Provided

- [“Ocean Falls” Episode #- Working People-A History of Labour in British Columbia](#)
- Document 1: Company Towns
- Document 2: A Brief History of Ocean Falls -BC Archives
- Lesson Activity 1: Then and Now
- Lesson Activity 2: Further Investigations

### Additional Suggested Materials

- [Not Dead Yet, The Wet Beauty of Ocean Falls](#)
- [Ocean Falls Museum](#)
- [Ocean Falls: After the Whistle -A conversation with Brian McDaniel](#)
- [Welcome to Ocean Falls Book - After the Whistle](#) (substantial “glimpses” into the chapters are offered)

### Vignette Questions

1. Why was such a remote location as Ocean Falls chosen as a site for a pulp and paper mill?
2. What challenges would the company face in getting the mill into production?
3. Why would workers and their families chose to locate in such an isolated place?
4. What amenities did the company provide in the town to make life more enjoyable?
5. What prompted Crown Zellerbach to close the mill in 1973?
6. How did the closure impact the workers and their families in Ocean Falls?

### Lesson Activities

1. View the vignette, **Ocean Falls** with your class and assign the six vignette questions to be answered following the vignette. The questions could be answered individually or in small groups. End the exercise with a class discussion; emphasis is suggested on question 6. For additional information either backgrounder on Ocean Falls found in Document 1 or 2 could be used to support this activity.
2. Photocopy the 2 pages of **Lesson Activity 1, Then and Now** and have the students complete the responses individually and then in pairs or small groups discuss their responses. Have each group share a summary of their responses with the rest of the class. How might past residents of Ocean Falls recollect their experiences of the community at a reunion?
3. For further investigations into Ocean Falls, select questions from **Lesson Activity 2: Further Investigations** for your class. The questions could be investigated in pairs and reported back to the class. This assignment will require further studies beyond the vignette and resource materials provided. The [Ocean Falls museum](#) site is a good place to start your inquiry into any one of these 10 questions.
4. There are many other company towns in BC that could be investigated for comparison to Ocean Falls. Select a format for presentation such as a gallery walk, poster board, power point and create some common subjects to be reported on in the student’s final presentation. Suggested topics: origins, early development; life in the town, connections to the outside world, contemporary economic challenges, labour-management relations. Some suggestions are: Powell River, Britannia, Cumberland, Trail, Gold River, Tumbler Ridge, Kitimat, Maillardville, Anyox, and Kitsault.

Credit: Teaching Activities and Lesson Plan developed by Gerry Hanlon and Wayne Axford

# Working People: A History of Labour in BC

---

Document 1: Ocean Falls

Backgrounder Pt. 1

## Company Towns: Ocean Falls

Google presents a definition of company towns as...

“a place where practically all stores and housing are owned by the one company that is also the main employer. Company towns are often planned with a suite of amenities such as stores, houses of worship, schools, markets and recreation facilities”

Wikipedia lists more than 30 such towns in Canada...

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_company\\_towns\\_in\\_Canada](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_company_towns_in_Canada)

Company towns and the story of British Columbia were synonymous for well over one hundred years. Due to the vast dense coastline of BC--well over 20,000 kms of rugged coastal geography--and relatively mild climate, marine life was rich and diverse. This combination in turn facilitated access to abundant and luxurious natural resources that were irresistible to enterprising individuals bent on building an economic empire. The hunger for wealth gave rise to predominantly single company, single industry ventures that in turn gave birth to arguably the most colourful labour legacy of BC's story: Company Towns. Typically, a company town is isolated from neighbors and centered around an extractive commodity such as coal, timber, or precious metals. The citizens of the town either work in the mine or mill, or work in one of the smaller businesses that services the main enterprise. While residents had personal freedoms and a measure of autonomy, the company was a controlling influence in all corners of town life...employment, housing, and much social life. If the enterprise was thriving, the town did the same...however if the market forces changed, as was the case for many, the economic effect on the company town was devastating, and usually led to the wholesale death of the town and the end of a once vibrant community.

There have been no shortage of these enterprises in BC...and their demise certainly opens the door to the dark story of capitalism with the principal characters of control and greed. However, there is a parallel story here, one that swells the imagination and touches the heart. When you peel back the layers left behind and linger in the voices, you find a paradox; these towns lived and died according to the bottom line of the capitalist enterprise, but behind the company control was and still is a vibrant legacy of community and culture. And so, in conclusion a question lingers whenever one steps back into the shadowed story of these company towns...which story is the most important to tell?

After viewing the vignette, I had the unique opportunity to visit the now abandoned pulp mill town of Ocean Falls several years ago and came away with an intimate glimpse of company towns and their unique place in BC history.

Written by Gerry Hanlon

## Document 2: Ocean Falls

## Backgrounder Pt.2

### A Brief History of Ocean Falls

The community of Ocean Falls is located at the head of Cousins Inlet, near Bella Bella. The first known inhabitants of the area were the Kwakwa (Kwakiutl) and the Nuxalk (Bella Coola), and their seasonal village at the base of the falls was called "Liak" meaning falls.

The site has always been known for its overabundance of rainfall (172 inches annually), and it was the potential for easy access to large amounts of fresh water that prompted the first commercial interests to concentrate on the area. In 1903, the Bella Coola Pulp and Paper Company was surveying the area for timber and was impressed by the site. Inexpensive power could be generated from the enormous waterfall at the head of Cousins Inlet, and the water in the lake (Link Lake) above the falls was pure enough to be used in pulp making without filtration. The Company acquired the rights to 260 acres of land extending from Cousins Inlet to Link Lake and obtained the necessary leases from the provincial government.

In 1906 a crew of 25 men arrived by steamer, and began clearing the land for a townsite. By 1909, Ocean Falls was starting to take shape. A sawmill was in production, a store was built, school classes for 10 pupils were being held on the second floor of the store, and a one-bed hospital operated out of a small building on Front Street. By 1910, a bridge had been built over the river, rough roads were in place, a number of houses had been put up, and a hotel was being built. Construction of a pulp mill and a dam at the head of the falls was also underway. In 1911 the whole province, including Ocean Falls, was enjoying an economic boom.

The Company relied heavily on handloggers to supply them with logs. These men often worked alone, sometimes in pairs, felling trees in the woods and getting them down to the water for transport to the mill. Over time, skids, horses, a mechanical engine called a "donkey engine", and logging "railways" were all used get the logs out of the forest, but it was tough and dangerous work.

The pulp mill went into production in 1912, but by this time a recession was beginning. The timber holdings held by the Company turned out to be unsuitable for large scale operations, and in March 1913, Ocean Falls Company Limited went into receivership. In 1915, a new company, Pacific Mills Limited took over the operation. A large amount of equipment had already been brought in for existing mill, but the new Company was planning a state-of-the-art million dollar operation, and it sought access to large amounts of timber from the provincial government.

## Working People: A History of Labour in BC

---

In 1916, the community needed improvements to support the people living there. A doctor was brought to the town, and a 25 bed hospital was built, and staffed with two nurses. The Company paid 50% of the cost for medical treatment for employees and their families. The school, closed in 1913, re-opened and a principal was appointed. By 1917, the face of the town had changed dramatically. A new fire hall, post office, customs building, and dock warehouse had been built. In order to house the new workers and their families, additional bunkhouses and apartments had been built by the Company.

World War One, created demand for strong but lightweight wood for the construction of airplanes. The sitka spruce of British Columbia's north coast was well suited for this purpose, and all available sawmills went into full production to meet the need. Work continued feverishly to get the new pulp mill into production. The first paper making machine, No. 3, was fired up on June 1st, 1917, and the newsprint began to roll out at a rate of 600 feet per minute. The war also created labour shortages, and Chinese, Japanese, and East Indian workers were brought into Ocean Falls to meet the demand.

By 1918, the celebration of Dominion Day demonstrated the strong sense of community that had already developed in Ocean Falls. Dominion Day would remain an important social event for the town. Also in 1918, the effects of the world-wide flu epidemic were minimized in Oceans Falls in part due to the isolation of the community, but also due to the Emergency Fund that was established to care for those individuals on the sick list.

Church services were initially held in the basement of the schoolhouse, and everyone was welcome to attend. The first church was built in 1921.

A wide range of social activities developed, and clubs of all sorts were formed. Band concerts and theatrical productions were given, and sports were popular, particularly baseball. Ocean Falls also had one of the finest swimming pools in British Columbia, and the town sent many champion swimmers to compete for Canada in the British Empire Games, the Pan-American Games, and the Olympics.

Through the depression years of the 1930s the mill fought for survival by cutting operating costs and wages, focusing on "efficiency" measures, and reducing overall production. By the late 1930s unions started to form at the mill. However, the Second World War brought increased demand for sitka spruce, which led to labour shortages since two hundred employees were serving in the Canadian armed forces. The mill also employed a large number of Japanese workers, who were now uprooted from their homes and jobs at Ocean Falls and sent to "internment" camps in the interior of the province.

## Working People: A History of Labour in BC

---

The 1950s and 1960s saw continued growth and expansion in the community. This growth was interrupted by three major events; an industry-wide strike in 1957, and two disastrous landslides caused by rainfall that was excessive even for rainy Ocean Falls.

By the 1970s, the mill facilities at Ocean Falls were old, and the isolation of the site added to the costs of running the mill. In a move to cut costs and increase profits at other mills, the mill owner (now Crown Zellerbach), announced that the operations at Ocean Falls would be phased out by March of 1973. As operations gradually wound down, the community itself also started to erode. Jobs were being lost, people were moving away, and shops and businesses began to close.

However, two weeks before the impending closure of the mill, the provincial government stepped in and bought the entire town for a reported \$1 million, and set up the Ocean Falls Corporation. No provision was made to secure a supply of timber for the mill through timber grants, so the new corporation was forced to buy logs on the open market adding to the costs. Though production remained high, profits decreased for various reasons including weak markets, rising cost of materials, machinery problems, labour unrest, and high interest loans. In early March of 1980, the government was forced to announce that the entire mill was to be closed within three months. On May 31, 1980 the mill at Ocean Falls was closed and the last employee left.

As the Ocean Falls Corporation was being dismantled, the equipment auctioned off, and buildings demolished, the community itself began to take more direct control over its future. Although there were just 50 residents, the Ocean Falls Improvement District was established. The community worked with the government to save 60% of the buildings in recognition of their historical value. By 1996 the number of residents had increased to 150 people; many attracted by the charm of the small town, its quiet atmosphere, and unique heritage.

Sourced from the former BC Archives Time  
Machine <http://www.bcarchives.gov.bc.ca/index.htm>







# Working People: A History of Labour in BC

## Lesson Activity 1: Ocean Falls

## Then and Now

**Then and Now:** Compare and contrast a series of images depicting Ocean Falls in the past and in the present

Write down descriptive words that come to mind when viewing the images on the left and right. Reflect/Compare these words by writing down your thoughts and feelings in the summary section. What emotional response does the story of Ocean Falls evoke?

Ocean Falls: Then	Ocean Falls: Now
 <p data-bbox="435 932 565 949">BC Archives I-50586</p> <p data-bbox="305 974 695 995">Image I-50586 courtesy of Royal BC Museum</p>	 <p data-bbox="971 932 1269 949"><a href="http://www.oceanfallsmuseum.com/images/">http://www.oceanfallsmuseum.com/images/</a></p>
 <p data-bbox="321 1633 682 1675">Vancouver Archives: AM1545-53-: CVA 586-580 (1941) City of Vancouver Archive</p>	 <p data-bbox="1032 1633 1211 1650">Photo Credit: Gerry Hanlon</p>

# Working People: A History of Labour in BC



CVA 586-95.02 - Martin Hotel, interior [showing fireplace], Ocean Falls  
[City of Vancouver Archives](#)



Photo Credits: Gerry Hanlon



BC Archives: BCA-I-50588-Swimming-Pool-ca1940-NIS

Image I-50588 courtesy of Royal BC Museum



Photo Credits: Gerry Hanlon

Summary response: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_



### Lesson Activity 2: Ocean Falls

### Further Investigations

1. From a capitalist perspective, what was the equation that made towns like Ocean Falls a success for so many years?
2. If corporate control of Ocean Falls was total, why did so many men and their families voluntarily show up at Cousins Inlet in the first half of the century to carve out an existence?
3. Reflect on what life might have been like in a town where the company controlled everything. What did this mean when shopping, enjoying leisure time or purchasing a home etc.
4. Given that most industrial work in the first half of the 20th century was done by men, what might it have been like as a woman living in Ocean Falls? What kinds of roles or niches did women fill in a company town like Ocean Falls?
5. Describe the changes unionization brought to the town...was the working vibe radically different? Was there now a sense of 'us against them'...workers vs management type of tension, or was this transition civil and cooperative?
6. Did the advent of organized labour and workers rights play a role in the Crown Zellerbach shut down in 1973 that essentially killed the community?
7. What do you think were the possible reasons behind the mill closing in Ocean Falls? How would commodity prices affect a place like Ocean Falls?
8. Why did the town disappear once the pulp and paper mill closed? What does this tell us about the stability of towns based around the primary / resource sector?
9. Does the company in a town like Ocean Falls owe the people of the town anything when the mill is closed? Do they have a responsibility to find them new work, or compensate them, or are these people responsible for their own situation? What about the government – do they have a responsibility to these people?
10. Fifty years after the demise of the town, what is the legacy of Ocean Falls? Does it revolve around labour and the imbalance between worker's rights and corporate accountability? Or should the enduring story be the personal and heartwarming stories of a thriving community and lives lived?