

## Ep. 28: Union Women in the Fishing Industry.mp3

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:00:08] Welcome to another edition of On the Line, a podcast that shines a light on BC's rich labour heritage. I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh. In our last episode, we brought you stories from women who worked in the province's once numerous canneries and fish processing plants. For some of these shoreworkers, this was a stepping stone to working on the fish boats themselves. Today, in the second of our two part series on women in the BC fishing industry, we hear from Barbara Stevens, daughter of the legendary Homer Stevens, who spent more than 30 years as an organizer and leader of the United Fishermen and Allied Workers Union. Barbara Stevens was an experienced hand in the fishing industry and an activist in her own right. She was interviewed for this podcast by Patricia Wejr. Also featured is longtime Prince Rupert resident Joy Thorkelson, who held many positions in the UFAWU over the years, including President. The interview with Joy was done by myself and Donna Sacuta in 2019. But first, Barbara Stevens. She was born in the historic community of Port Guichon, which is now part of Ladner. Patricia asked her about the influence of her dad on her own activism and love of fishing.

**Barbara Stevens** [00:01:33] Well, I guess he was a part of that. But really it was where I grew up -- my community, my mum, my aunts and uncles and cousins that lived there that introduced it to me. It was right in my front door across the river -- we lived across the street from the Fraser River. So I was, you know, from my kitchen window I could see all the boats out there. That and we lived in a community of immigrants, a lot of them from what is now Croatia and Greeks and First Nations who are involved in the industry and occupy that area of the stretch of the river. So that was my community and I felt very much a part of it. I mean, I grew up with my cousins who lived next door and their parents were also involved in the fishing industry. So that was really my introduction to it. And I guess my dad gave more of a political insight. You know, when my dad went to jail.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:02:50] In those days, the UFAWU had a strong women's auxiliary. These women-only organizations, separate from the main union, are frowned upon today, but they often provided a springboard into union activism. That's what happened for Barbara Stevens.

**Barbara Stevens** [00:03:08] What introduced me to the politics of the union was the Women's Auxiliary. Because my mum was a member and they used to have meetings in our house. And I don't know, I guess it's not normal for kids, but I used to like to sit in those meetings, partly because they served really good cookies, but also because I learned so much and a lot of the campaigns that they were involved in, some of them were, you know, political. Like at that time, when I was a kid, it wasn't about NAFTA, but a lot of it was about safety, like I mentioned, coverage, you know, from Worker's Compensation. But also about environmental stuff like the Moran Dam, you know, and they wanted to dam the river, the Fraser River and things like that. And I would learn about those things. And I became an environmentalist at a very young age. And yeah, the Women's Auxiliary was taking on a lot of these things and the way they would campaign was really to go out to the organizations in their community, whether it was the church groups or other women's groups, you know, the Chamber of Commerce, whoever, and ask to speak to their meetings and explain to them about these issues. And they were part of the core group -- it wasn't just the union, it was the Women's Auxiliary as well that did a lot of that legwork and did a lot of that organizing. And, you know, that's how people learned. And at that time they were able to make a difference because even though there was some media bias against the union, mostly they weren't focused on these issues, right. And so when they talked to people face to face like that, then they were able to, you know, put forward the

union's positions and explain why it was important not to build a dam on the Fraser River or other things that at that time -- I guess it was the Social Credit -- was talking about, one more super project, you know.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:05:21] After this example of community solidarity, Barbara's relatives helped get her started in the fishing industry.

**Patricia Wejr** [00:05:28] Was that right in the Ladner area?

**Barbara Stevens** [00:05:30] In Ladner, yeah. And it was a small independent - I think it was called Harbour Fisheries. And they were bringing in frozen herring from the States. Yeah, it was kind of a weird setup. So yeah, I did probably a couple of months there on the hiring, my first job. They were freezing it and bringing it up and then thawing it. And then we were working on it as it thawed and for the most part it wasn't too bad, but it was very cold, like really cold. And yeah, like especially at the end, they were really pushing us to get the last of it done and it wasn't really well thawed. And I remember just, you know, coming home every day and my hands would just be numb.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:06:22] After that work on shore, Barbara was ready to start fishing at the relatively young age of 19.

**Barbara Stevens** [00:06:29] So I'd already done a few other jobs and I'd gone out fishing with my dad actually when he retired and did a couple years gillnetting with him and did a year trolling with somebody up in Port Hardy and yeah, so I finally was lucky enough to get my brother to hire me because he had an opening on his boat. So, yeah.

**Patricia Wejr** [00:06:59] And was that a gillnetter?

**Barbara Stevens** [00:07:01] That was a seiner. So they had a larger crew.

**Patricia Wejr** [00:07:08] So what was your job on that seine boat?

**Barbara Stevens** [00:07:12] Well, the first ever had was cook/engineer. It was a small boat. So there was instead of a five person crew, it was only four. So I had two jobs, cook and engineer. So that meant I cooked. But it also meant I was on deck running the drum, you know, that brings in the net. So yeah, it was on the go 20 hours a day.

**Patricia Wejr** [00:07:41] Wow. And did your brother teach you how to run the drum?

**Barbara Stevens** [00:07:46] Oh yeah. No, I mean, I learned that pretty quick. And he was on deck, too. So it was like I said, it was the small boat. He was instructing me, you know, how to bring it in according to the tide and stuff like that. So he had to teach me how to yell loud enough so he could hear me. The first time that we were getting a backlash and I was on the boat, which means the net gets caught up and it doesn't flow freely as they're letting it out. And I was trying to tell him, I was like Bruce. And he's like, no, you have to yell, I can't hear you.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:08:24] After about five or six years, Barbara stopped fishing when she began a family. After that, she was hired by the UFAWU as Assistant Director for its union benefit plans. Her job also involved WCB appeals and safety issues. She worked hard in the fight for safety regulations, which was a huge win for fishermen. And then there were strikes.

**Barbara Stevens** [00:08:50] Yeah, there were a few strikes. I guess one of the memorable ones was, I guess in the '80s and that was on the herring. And I was packing that herring season and we were on Vancouver Island. We tied up in Tofino, but the season was basically called off. We missed the herring. They don't last very long. And then going to Victoria, there was a lot going on there to try and keep our jobs in Canada, right, instead of just sending everything across the line. And, you know, we had what we called a flying picket squad based out of Nanaimo where we were just basically gathering information. There wasn't really a whole lot going on but we knew that there were some operations going on in some of the non-union plants and we were just trying to, you know, like I said, gather information. So we thought, well, I wonder what they're doing with some of their effluent. Maybe we should check out one of the facilities, the municipal facility for I guess, processing effluent or whatever, anyways. So me and a couple of other union members decided to go down there and just check it out, right. And so we had, you know, a couple of picket signs with us and driving my little Rambler. Anyway, so we're outside of this place, and we're just sitting in the car playing cards, waiting, see what was going to happen. And there was a big truck that pulled in at the end of the street and we could see it was coming towards us. And we thought, well, let's take a look. So we got out of the car. There's three of us. None of them are any taller than I am. I'm like five eight, so none of us is over six feet anyway. So we're just standing there looking at them and the truck stopped and then just backed out and left. Well, that was weird. Okay, so then we hear on the radio that night, that there were a bunch of thugs waiting for them and made them turn back when they were delivering some of this effluent or whatever. And I just thought, wow, nobody's ever called me that before!

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:11:30] Now retired and living on Gabriola Island, Barbara Stephens has fond memories of her life in the BC fishing industry.

**Barbara Stevens** [00:11:38] Well, I have to say, when I worked I loved seining. I really did. And what I loved most about it -- not just seining -- but any of the jobs on the boat was navigating. I loved running the boat at night and just. Yeah, I mean I loved going up and down the coast, revisiting all those, you know, little villages that I'd never been to before. And some of them at that time were even being abandoned. But, you know, Namu and places like that, that at that time were still running, still operating, you know. And the sort of social aspect of it. Fishermen that would you know, my dad would always introduce me to them. And you'd meet them, I'd meet them later in the union hall or whatever. So that social aspect I really enjoyed. And later on in my career, working for the benefit fund, I just really like giving cheques to people that needed it. I always found that gratifying.

**Music: 'What Can One Woman Do' by Bob Bossin, performed by String Band**

[00:12:52] I'm talking about the journey of many miles. It starts with a single step. The mountains that loom so high... Fa la la la la, they flatten themselves. It's funny how a mountain can move. What can one woman do? She can tell another woman. And that's already two or three or four or a hundred or more. You gotta look out when this woman starts to move. I said, look out when this woman starts to move. Look out when this woman starts to move...

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:13:41] When Joy Thorkelson was a young woman, she thought she might like to work on a fish boat, so she headed north to Prince Rupert. But first she managed to get a job in a fish plant, filleting groundfish.

**Joy Thorkelson** [00:13:54] Well, I worked for five years at that plant. Some of those years I went back to university. And some of these years I stayed. And then in 1978, I decided that I didn't want to go back to university. I tried some law school courses and I found out that it wasn't for me. And I also wanted to run a boat. And so when I came back to Prince Rupert after school ended in 1978, I had no intentions of going back to university. And so what I did is I talked one of the plant managers into promising to lease me a rental boat for the following summer. So I went back to work in a fish plant with a promise that the following summer I'd be able to rent a boat. The company used to have all these rental gillnetters. So I got one of the Canadian Fish managers to agree to put me on as the first -- I think there was somebody at BC Packers who was a woman who was already running a gillnetter, but I would be the first woman that they would lease a gillnetter to at Canadian Fish. So he said but you have to take some courses. So I took net mending courses and I took some navigational course offered by the Coast Guard at the college. And this guy had some people lined up to tell me how to fish and how to -- you know, one guy, one week, another guy. All summer these guys were supposed to come on my boat and show me how to fish and where to fish and everything. And I was all excited and then I got a call in I don't know, January, February saying - well probably in January saying, do you want to work for the UFAWU?

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:15:57] The call came from Mike Darnell, well known in the area as the union's Northern Representative. Joy took on the task of Northern Organizer. It was a giant step up for someone who knew almost nothing about unions when she first arrived in Prince Rupert.

**Joy Thorkelson** [00:16:14] When I was a, you know, middle class kid from Vancouver, wet behind the ears, came and called everybody Mrs. Like, I never called an adult woman or an adult man by their first name ever until I went in the fish plants. And then I could barely say anybody's name because it was all first name basis, even the boss, right. And that just frightened me. And the first day that I started working, the women who I was totally afraid of, told me to get up to the lunchroom. So I went up to the lunchroom. They sat me down, they gave me the card and they gave me an initiation card and a pen and said, sign there. You're signing the UFAWU and don't you ever, as a student think that you can undercut those of us who are regular workers are earning here. You have to vote and support the union all the time. So I just signed the paper and I thought 'holy shit, this is really cool'. And I believed in the working class. I love the class aspect of it, yeah, for sure. That and it was exciting. The fishermen, there was lots of money coming to town, you know, and lots of excitement in that time period, real people. And as I got to know all the shoreworkers better and better and more and more. You know, it was dominated by women. So I really liked that and it was dominated by strong women. The shop stewards were strong women. Most of them were First Nations. And I was so lucky to have people like Emily Brown and Thelma Peterson, who took me under their their wing and we had lots of fun together. You know, they'd tell me stories and as I got to know them better, you know, they would tell me more and more stories and stuff. And then on the fishing side, you know, there was people like Henry van der Wiel and and Leonard Reece, who's passed away now, and Herb Hughan and Glen Doane and Frank Miskenak and Jimmy Atkins who explained things to me, right. And it was this dangerous thing of going out to sea and fishing and how it went on their boats. And they drew me pictures and took me down and showed me things and it was just this fascinating life of a fisherman who would go out to sea and battle the elements and bring a valuable food source back. And then I was one of the people who was responsible to make sure that they got a good enough price that they made a living for themselves and their families. I mean, what a responsibility for a 20 year old kid, right?

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:18:57] A big responsibility for sure. And as Joy mentioned, fishing is a dangerous industry, so much so that she never wanted anyone from her family to work on a fish boat. She remembers many friends lost over the years.

**Joy Thorkelson** [00:19:14] Well, I just went to a funeral on Saturday of another fisherman who died. He got pulled over the end of his boat with his -- and was wrapped in his net and caught in his net, pulled over the boat. My understanding is that the net got caught in the wheel, pulled him under. Fishermen were there and tried to pull him out, couldn't get him out in time, and when they got him out they tried to work on him while he was going to shore. And of course, it's always in a remote area where they're fishing. So, I mean, that was very sad for very, very many people because he was a well-liked Vietnamese Canadian fisherman and he was a leader of one of the Vietnamese fishermen that fish for a Canadian fishing company. And so it was very, very, very, very sad.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:20:10] You must have been to more than one in the past.

**Joy Thorkelson** [00:20:12] Oh, I have been to many... and when a boat goes down like a seine boat, you don't just lose one friend, you lose, you know, five friends. When a trawler goes down, you lose six or seven friends, right? I've had way too many friends die. And I think everybody in the fishing industry can say that... boats blow up, people die in horrible fires. They fall overboard, never to be seen again. Not missed for an hour or two on deck of the boat. They get crunched by doors or gear or a drum or a boat and hauled over by their nets, they fall overboard and their boat just keeps on going and they're left behind. They fall in and get too weak. They can't climb out of the water on to their boat because even if they have a buoy that they can hang on to, they just don't have the strength because cold water just robs you of your strength right away. So, you know, many of my friends have died and boats have sunk and they've died.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:21:23] So an indictment here of the industry or just just part of the hazards of fishing?

**Joy Thorkelson** [00:21:28] Well, I mean, I think, you know, there's been a great deal of -- there's Fish Safe. There's you know, we used to have a committee that just dealt with safety, with our Safety Standing Committee on navigational aids and safety. And as we became smaller and the industry became more aware and we started working with WCB and they started stealing our organizers, we became more aware, really. I think the NDP government, during the Clark government, they, you know, WCB expanded its tentacles into the fishing industry and hasn't really looked back since then. And so there are certainly -- I don't want to say boats are safer because I don't believe boats are safer now. I believe there's way more -- and the reason I don't think boats are safer now is because nobody has any money to spend on their boats. So they spend a lot of time jury-rigging stuff on the smaller boats. The boats that have to go through steamship inspection are probably -- the bigger boats are probably safer than they were before. But, you know, there's drills on the bigger boats. Not on the smaller boats that I'm aware of, you know, a guy drills himself on what he's going to do if his boat catches on fire, right? You know, I think though that WCB and Fish Safe have both done a very, very good job in raising awareness of safety and what you need to do for personal safety, right. And boats all have blowers and sniffers on them now. There's sniffers and blowers on them now. They didn't when I first started in the industry, which meant that a lot of boats blew up because the guys didn't have something on that told them that there was some fuel in the bilge, no sniffer and there's no blower, which which is blowing out your bilge fumes before you start

your engine. So those kinds of accidents are very rare now. But what is -- you can't deal with the weather. And guys think that the weather's going to be different when they take off or a freak wave hits them or their load, no matter how careful with it they are, you know, changes, shifts because they hit a wave or, you know, I mean, I don't know, my friends have died from all sorts of reasons.

**Music: 'Song of the Sockeye' performed by George Hewison [00:24:12]** So, hark to the song or the sockeye, like a siren's call of old. When it gets in your blood, you can't shake it. It's worse than the fever for gold. There's a hole in BC's coastline, Rivers Inlet is the place that I mean, and it's there that you'll find the old timer. Also the fellow that is green. And the boats head for there like the sockeye, some are a joy to the eye, while others are simply abortions. They ought to be left high and dry. So hark to the song of the sockeye, like a siren's call of old. When it gets in your blood you can't shake it. It's worse than the fever for gold.

**Joy Thorkelson [00:25:10]** Every time there's a loss. I mean a big loss of life, right? You know, like the Cap Rouge went down. There was a big Transport Canada -- you know, had a huge look at it. When the dragger Scotia Bay went down there was a lot of people that looked into that. There's a lot of things you can say in the end, but fishing is dangerous. It's just a dangerous job, right. And you know, you can have your survival suit on board, you can have your life jacket on and if you get hooked on some gear that's going down, you're going to go down with the gear, right, no matter if you have a life jacket on or not. And most of the guys are fishing with a smaller and smaller crew because they're paying quota payments. And so they want a smaller crew so they can make some money.

**Rod Mickleburgh [00:26:11]** Are there any women who fish?

**Joy Thorkelson [00:26:15]** Oh yes, there's women that fish. And there's...

**Rod Mickleburgh [00:26:17]** As skippers?

**Joy Thorkelson [00:26:20]** I don't know any women right now that are seine skippers, but I probably could think of one or two in the past. But certainly for gillnetters and trollers, there there were women. Now there are, you would find women mostly, you know, a handful of women run their own gillnetters. You'll mostly find women on the decks of seine boats.

**Rod Mickleburgh [00:26:49]** When Joy Thorkelson was interviewed in 2019, the union had about 300 gillnetters, 300 seiners and ten trollers. She said it was still possible to make a living by fishing more than one species. Joining the union helped.

**Joy Thorkelson [00:27:05]** The gillnetters joined because of the access issues. They still have huge access issues and they also joined because they know it's better to talk to each other and work out problems to their access issues so they're speaking with one voice, not 20 voices, right? And then northern gillnetters can talk to southern gillnetters. So there's sort of this community of interest. And, you know, what we've been saying to fishermen is, you know, there is no boss. There is nobody who sits at the top, certainly not me, and tells fishermen what to do. You know, you guys have to get together and make your own decisions. And this is a place if you pay money to, that can facilitate, but nobody can facilitate this without cash, right? So you have to put some cash on the barrelhead to have somebody that can organize your meetings so that you can direct staff what to do. And

that is what a union is, when membership tell the staff what to do, not the staff tell the membership what to do.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:28:06] By this time, however, the once mighty UFAWU was a shadow of its former self. It reached the end of the road as a stand-alone union, becoming part of the Canadian Autoworkers Union, now known as Unifor. Barbara Stevens and Joy Thorkelson, two strong women in a sea of men, have left an important legacy. Their stories and those of other women in the fishing industry deserve to be told. We're glad we could do our part. [theme]

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:28:45] Thanks to the other members of the podcast crew, Donna Sacuta, Patricia Wejr, who interviewed Barb Stevens and helped shape the script, and John Mabbott, who put it all together. The song 'What Can One Woman Do?' was written by my old friend Bob Bossin. It was performed by the much loved group Stringband. I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh. We'll see you next time, On the Line.

**Theme music: 'Hold the Fort'** [00:29:22]