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>

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