

Lesson : Miners vs. Dunsmuirs

Document 4 : Source Materials

Excerpts from the Research Notes of Neil Vokey, Researcher

Miners / Dunsmuirs Story

- Coal was discovered on Northern Vancouver Island in 1835, and the Hudson Bay Company established Fort Rupert in 1849 – importing experienced Scottish coal miners. Robert Dunsmuir was one of those men, immigrating in 1851.
- By 1852, the coalmines at Fort Rupert had ceased production due to poor quality coal, labour unrest, and a hostile native population. HBC moved their coal mining operations to Nanaimo.
- The Vancouver Coal and Land Company eventually bought off HBC's coal assets. Robert Dunsmuir, as a coal entrepreneur, went on to discover and build mining settlements in Wellington (south of Nanaimo) and in the Comox Valley (Cumberland).
- Vancouver Island coal was in primarily exported to San Francisco and to the Royal Navy.
- Coal Mining was the Island's largest industry before Forestry. Peak production of the Nanaimo coal fields was 1,400,000 tons in 1922. The last mine in Nanaimo closed in 1968.
- Vancouver Island Coal mines were considered among the most dangerous in the world at the time with a significantly higher death toll average than the rest of the British Empire.
- "Deaths per one thousand persons employed in coal mining: 1.29 for the British Empire, 3.38 for Nova Scotia, 4.15 for British Columbia *"

*1902 World Mining Statistics from Builders of British Columbia by William Bennett

Wellington Coal Mine Strike – 1877

- In July 1876, Dunsmuir unexpectedly lost his shipping contract, meaning the company was over-producing coal. With no unions to instill solidarity, the elder Dunsmuir left the workers no choice but to accept a pay cut – from \$1.20 per ton of coal dug, to \$1.00 per ton
- If the workers did not want large scale layoffs they initially accepted the layoffs. Seventy were laid off, while thirty six continued under the old rate of pay, but by August the primitive delegations of workers had caved to Dunsmuir's pay cut.

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- At exactly this time in August, 1876, James Dunsmuir was appointed superintendent of Wellington Mine by his father Robert. Workers were now more determined than ever to get the pay they deserved, but by November of that year suspicions began to arise that the scales were measuring the coal carts inaccurately. After months of denial, and the firing of one employee who insisted the scales were rigged, James finally had the scales properly inspected. It was found that the plates began to press against each other when anything over 400 lbs. was placed on it. To settle the controversy, Robert Dunsmuir told the workers to put in a claim for how much they thought was owed to them. This did not settle it – to many miners, this sounded more like a hand-outs than honest pay. The miners met, and decided to insist Dunsmuir re-instate the old wage. Dunsmuir refused and on February 5, 1877, one hundred miners went on strike.
- From the beginning to the end of the strike, Robert Dunsmuir issued a number of public statements denouncing the miners' actions, and private letters to politician in Victoria demanding the province force the strike come to an end, insinuating the peaceful strikers were threatening the peace.
- One such letter was drafted and signed with two other parties – John Bryden of the Vancouver Coal and Land Company, who was married to Dunsmuir's daughter Elizabeth, and Capt. Warner Spalding, who was Nanaimo's magistrate, but also the legal representative of a major investor in Dunsmuir Diggle Ltd.

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Living Conditions of Miners and their Families

- While the Vancouver Coal and Land Company's (VCLC) mines were as dangerous as Dunsmuir's, their management style contrasted his greatly:
- In the wake of two major mining accidents, the VCLC let miners' widows and their families have free housing and food for as long as needed, whereas Dunsmuir would be known to evict families almost immediately following workplace deaths.
- The town site of Nanaimo was divided into private properties for miners to buy, with the VCLC donating parkland, etc. giving its workers vested interest in the community. Dunsmuir followed HBC's model of company stores and housing, offering primitive condition (no running water), with little to no alternatives in the isolated communities.
- The VCLC brought in experienced miners from Britain who would be unlikely to affect the status quo, and officially recognized workers' unions by the 1890's. Dunsmuir brought inexperienced, and often non-English speaking labour (largely from Asia), who would work for lower wages.

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Could the mine explosions have been prevented?

- High concentrations of methane gas, compressed and trapped underground when coal is formed, were responsible for many explosions and deaths in the coalmines. The explosions could have been prevented through better-designed ventilation systems in the shafts. Gassy mines were commonly referred to as 'firedamp'. Although smoking was forbidden (grounds for dismissal), the miners' lamps often sparked fires and explosions.
- Some mines were endangered by 'blackdamp' – a mixture nitrogen, carbon dioxide and water vapour and limited oxygen.
- Cave-ins from weak timber structures, fires, broken equipment such as rope, all contributed to worker injuries and deaths in the mines – all of them preventable, if management had exercised caution.
- [Speaking of an explosion]: "One of the bodies they brought up was a Chinaman, all he had on was a pair of shoes. It just blew the clothes right off him."
- "It was more carelessness than anything else that would cause a mine disaster,"
- "I always say it was the conditions that formed the union. The men wouldn't have been so anxious to join a union if the conditions were better."

Jim Weir, former coal miner (Cumberland), in an interview with Susan Mayse, 1986.

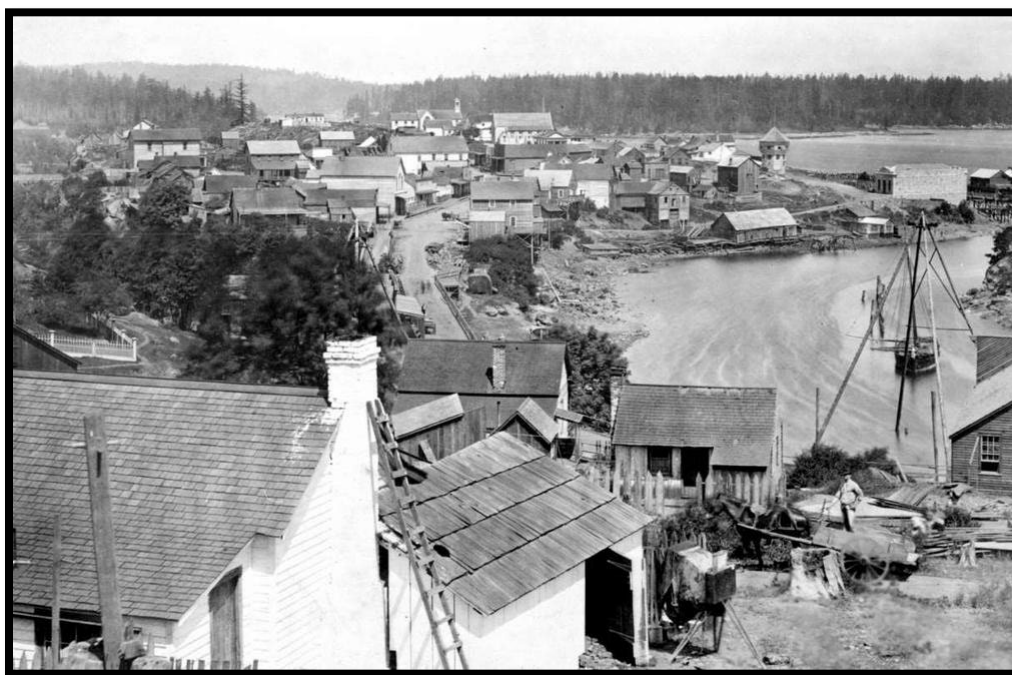


Figure 1 A-04422 Workers home around Nanaimo Harbour 1860's
Image A-04422 courtesy of Royal BC Museum

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Figure 2 A-02123 Dunsmuir Family home; Craigdarroch Castle Victoria BC
Image A-02123 courtesy of Royal BC Museum



Figure 3 B-07609 Aftermath of explosion of powder shed Cumberland 1908-NIS
Image B-07609 courtesy of Royal BC Museum

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