

Rod Mickleburgh [00:00:28] Welcome to yet another edition of On The Line, the podcast with a heart that tells stories of workers and unions from BC's rich labour heritage. I'm your affable host, Rod Mickleburgh. In this episode, we bring you the long lost story of the industrious women who worked on Vancouver streetcars during World War II, when so many men were overseas fighting fascism in Europe. They were known as conductorettes. Much of their story was recounted in the Buzzer blog, which replaced the old printed version of the Buzzer. Long time transit users may remember that informative little publication they could read between stops. The article brought to light long ago interviews with three conductorettes from the 1940s: Pearl Wattum, Vilma Westerholm and Edra McLeod. You will hear from all three of these feisty women. As a special bonus, to get you in the street car flavor, here's a fun song by no less than Stompin' Tom Connors, about driving a streetcar in Toronto.

Music: TTC Skidaddler performed by Stompin' Tom Connors [00:01:40] I've been a street car driver now about eleven years. And I know the old Toronto city well. There's a whole lot of people who wait along the track for the signal from my clangin' trolley bell. I'm a TTC Skidaddler, yah gotta sockit to my big red rattler, Gotta sockit to my red big rattler. Put the pole up on the wire now and open up the switch - It's time to get old rattler sparkin' through. She's red around the bottom and she's yellow on the top. And I drive her like a driver oughta do. I'm a TTC skidaddler, yah gotta sockit to my big red rattler, I gotta sock it to my big red rattler...

Rod Mickleburgh [00:02:26] Streetcars first appeared on the streets of Vancouver in 1890, just four years after the city was wiped out by the great fire. As the city expanded, so did its network of streetcar lines. Some of these lines are still with us today, although the streetcars have long since been replaced by trolley buses. In those days, Vancouver's transit system was privately owned and operated by the BC Electric Company. The streetcar operators belonged to one of the strongest unions in the city, which became the Amalgamated Transit Union. How strong? During the months-long general strike by Vancouver workers, in support of the 1919 Winnipeg general strike, not a street car moved. Threats by the mayor that operators would be fired if they didn't go to work, were simply ignored.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:03:20] When women began to be hired, the union ensured that they had the same rights, privileges and wages as men. The women had responded to ads placed by BC Electric in the Vancouver Sun, calling for women aged 25 to 35 to work as conductors on the streetcars. Their duties included taking fares, collecting tickets, calling out stops and working with the motor operator who drove the street car. According to the ad, applicants would be judged on the basis of their appearance and quote "general intelligence." First preference went to women who were married to men serving overseas. According to Pearl Wattum, hiring practices sometimes strayed into surprising territory. She was hired in 1944, with a good sense of humor.

Pearl Wattum [00:04:15] I don't know if it was one question I was asked or not. You're too young to hear this. But one of the questions that he asked me is your sex drive better in the morning or at night? And I said, anytime. [laughter]

Richard Payment [00:04:32] Why was he asking you that?

Pearl Wattum [00:04:33] I don't know. It was just one of the things to see if I was good for daytime or night time, I guess. I don't know.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:04:42] Vilma Westerholm's hiring interview was also kind of oddball.

Vilma Westerholm [00:04:46] And then one day my husband said, gee, I see girls on the BC Electric. And I said, gee, that sounds interesting, you know. So I thought, well, I'll go in and see what it's all about. So I think it was a Miss Campbell that was in the employment office at the time. Oh my goodness, she says, how about the streetcars? I said streetcars, I don't know anything about streetcars. I love driving. And she says, well, I'll tell you what. She says, this was about Friday. She says over the weekend, you go, how tall are you? I said I was five foot five then. And how much did you weigh? I said I weighed about 115, I guess, at that time. And she says, well, you go home over the weekend, you go and add another couple of inches to your height. And then add another 10 pounds, and then go up to the office on Monday and see Mr. Cottrell, I think it was. And try there, so I thought, oh, wasn't that silly, I mean they're a [unclear], but they did take me in spite of my size.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:06:01] But Edra McLeod said her experience was more straightforward.

Edra McLeod [00:06:06] I went to the company. And we had exams and we were chosen from these IQ tests we took.

Sara Diamond [00:06:18] Were there any kinds of regulations around the kind of women that they wanted to hire at all.

Edra McLeod [00:06:24] In the beginning, they wanted to take on women that were twenty-five and their husbands were overseas but there were many women that had no husbands overseas and some of them were younger. Because they didn't have that much choice really. The workforce was small because of so many men and women by that time overseas too.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:06:47] All told, close to 200 women were taken on as streetcar conductorettes during the war. At the start, they were not given uniforms. As Pearl Wattum soon learned, there was a real need for clothing that was appropriate for the job.

Pearl Wattum [00:07:04] No, you had to have a dark skirt and a coat and a blouse. And imagine the skirt when you had to climb up on top of the streetcar and fix the trolleys.

Richard Payment [00:07:21] Why did you use to climb on top of a streetcar?

Pearl Wattum [00:07:23] Because it was your job.

Richard Payment [00:07:26] To do what?

Pearl Wattum [00:07:27] To fix the trolley. The trolley's the thing that goes up to get the juice you know. And if it came off or anything, you had to climb up on top to put it back on. And going up the side of a streetcar and the wind would blow and your skirt'd come up over your head and oh gawd. [laughter]

Richard Payment [00:07:54] Did you have to? Did you have to ask to get pants or?

Pearl Wattum [00:08:00] No. No. They decided because we screamed so hard.

Richard Payment [00:08:05] So you got them?

Pearl Wattum [00:08:08] Yeah. We said there's no goddamn place for a woman up there with her skirt over her face. Which it wasn't.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:08:16] Pearl did not hesitate to call for improvements in the conductorette's work environment.

Pearl Wattum [00:08:21] Well, I used to have to work nights and then one of the girls in the class, she took day work and she wanted to trade. So I traded with her and from then on I never worked nights again.

Richard Payment [00:08:37] You didn't like nights?

Pearl Wattum [00:08:38] Well, it affected your social life, it affected everything. Because you had to go to work about 4:30. Well, what can you do up to 4:30? It's only after 4:30 that things start to happen. And when she offered to trade, the guy behind the desk, which we call him the supervisor. He said oh no, you can't do that. So we got a book and we wrapped it all up, pretty pretty pretty, "How to Win Friends and Influence People" by Dale Carnegie and we gave it to him. And we got our trade.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:09:28] Once hired as conductorettes, the women were trained in a classroom and then on the job. The streetcar driver was up front. The conductorettes were at the back, looking after the fares and transfers. For the system to work well, the driver and conductor had to be in sync. This did not always go smoothly. Vilma Westerholm:

Vilma Westerholm [00:09:51] Yeah, we worked as a team. Sometimes. There were times when, during the streetcars we had to -- when we came to a railway track, we had to open the doors on the run, sort of, and get off and run in front of the streetcar and take him across, wave him across. That was a sort of safety feature that they had, you know. And then you'd have to go back and jump on there while he was going across. And some of them forgot about us, so they kept going and just left us there. And we'd have, we'd have to thumb a ride with the next car that came along to catch up.

Richard Payment [00:10:33] That happened?

Vilma Westerholm [00:10:34] Oh yeah, it happened quite often. [laughter] But that was just, you know, fun, you now? Sometimes they did it for fun, I think. Sometimes they just really forgot.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:10:44] Other than sometimes being left behind, the women reported in general, however, that they got along fine with their male colleagues. Edra McLeod was asked if the men resented women being hired to work with them, particularly when some later became drivers, like herself.

Edra McLeod [00:11:02] It wasn't so much the men saying this as the people that got on your streetcar and had things to say to you. You didn't really find out how the men felt. You knew individually how, whether any of them accepted you or not. The girls were very good. We had to be, we had to be better than them. We worked hard. We could load and the idea was how fast you could get to the end of the line, you know. And there were girls that were well-known for the guy didn't even have to stop his streetcar. The people just jumped right on and away you went. And there was - this was how you were judged, you know how you gave them but you had to be better or you didn't make it. You worked. You worked for it. For instance when I started driving and I got on this Oak Street car which had from 16th Avenue on Oak right down to Marpole was a single track. And had switches that you went 15 blocks and you went into the switch and you waited for this guy to come from town now or whether you're going the other way coming from Marpole. And you'd exchange these staffs. And the first time I showed up on one of those as a driver, the looks I got. Oh my god, there goes the old Oak Street line. You know, it's buggered now, there's a woman on it. And I worked to make sure that nobody ever had to wait for me. You just had to be better in those days. There was no other way out.

Music: The Trolley Song performed by Judy Garland [00:12:50] Clang, clang, clang went the trolley! Ding, ding, ding went the bell! Zing, zing, zing went my heartstrings as we started for Huntington Dell. Chug, chug, chug went the motor. Bump, bump, bump went the brakes. Thump, thump, thrump, went my heartstrings as we glided by Huntington Lake. The day was bright, the air was sweet, the smell of honeysuckle charmed me off my feet. I tried to sing, but couldn't squeak, in fact I felt so good I couldn't even speak. Buzz, buzz, buzz, went the buzzer. Time for all to disembark! As we got off at Huntington Park...

Rod Mickleburgh [00:13:52] Passengers sometimes criticized the women for doing a man's job. But they could take that in their stride. Dealing with unruly riders was much more of a challenge. For Vilma Westerholm, that took a quick wit and every now and then, a bit of brawn.

Vilma Westerholm [00:14:09] Actually, I found the people very nice. I really did. Very seldom that there was -- oh, you'd get the odd drunk, you know. I usually handled them and some of them would be drinking on the buses. And be in a real mood, you know, so you didn't know just what to do. So I always said didn't you ask me that you were going to transfer at Main and Broadway or whatever it happened to be? He mumbled something. I says, gee, look it, your car's waiting right there. If you hurry, you'll catch it. So they'd tumble off, you know, and away they'd go. [laughter] It was one way of getting rid of them without starting -- yeah, it worked without starting anything. I remember once I was on the streetcars and this man came along, and he was so insulting, using foul language and everything else, and he came along and he had two big jars of honey like this under his arm. And he was so insulting. I said, look, I said if you don't get off my streetcar, I'll really hit you with this. And I picked up the switch iron, which you use to pry the tracks, you know, to change tracks with, change switches.

Richard Payment [00:15:23] Move the switch.

Vilma Westerholm [00:15:24] Yeah, move the switch, that's right. And he really got scared and he jumped off the bus and me, I stopped the streetcar, or rather the streetcar, I'm getting mixed up, I stopped the streetcar and I ran after him, I was so mad, I ran after him and this was at 33rd and Main. And he ran across the street. This was at night, late at night and he ran right across the street and then he fell on the curb and he bust all his honey jars, so I thought he had enough punishment. [laughter] But that's the only time I think I ever got mad at anybody.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:16:00] Pearl Wattum also gave no quarter with troublesome passengers.

Pearl Wattum [00:16:04] Well, I'll never forget this one time, I had a drunk trying to get on. And there was a soldier standing at the back. As you know, the streetcars, they had the one door there and one door there, this one opened and they could come around this way or this one opened and come that way. Well, he was standing at the back. And this drunk came on. And he started to show me a bad time and I upped and popped him. And knocked him out. The soldier got one arm, I got the other. We put him beside the telephone pole, we got back in, gave a bell and away we went and never knew what happened to the guy. [laughter] He could still be sitting there, I don't know. But oh, the words he used was, you'd have popped him too. All the four letter words in the deck.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:16:59] Most of the women had limited knowledge of unions. But they quickly became union supporters. Pearl Wattum became a job steward.

Pearl Wattum [00:17:09] Because the union had such a big say. All your troubles went through the union, regardless of who you were. And the union was supposed to have a smart man in there. He'd take it to the company and you'd get your own way. And one time, I thought, well, I might as well be a shop steward and take the people's troubles. If I can't settle 'em we'll take it to him. And this one time, after the war's over, this girl got pregnant. And so they fired her. And so I went up to the union and I said just because she had an accident is no saying you have to fire her. He says, but she's pregnant. I said, after 14 years of married life, if that isn't an accident, I don't know what it is. [laughter]

Richard Payment [00:18:14] What happened?

Pearl Wattum [00:18:15] She got back on. The only thing the union insisted was we join the union. No scabs. That is the only thing, and I'm glad that we did.

Richard Payment [00:18:32] Why?

Pearl Wattum [00:18:32] Well, I would hate to be labelled a scab. And I'm sure all the rest of the girls felt the same way. If we hadn't had joined the union, we would have been scabs. So, it's just that simple.

Richard Payment [00:18:49] Did you have strikes?

Pearl Wattum [00:18:50] One. Yes, one and I was cook for the strikers.

Richard Payment [00:18:56] Was that on buses or streetcars?

Pearl Wattum [00:18:58] Streetcars. And margarine in those days was white. And so they always had a little bit of yellow to mix in with it, and my job was to mix it yellow. [laughter] And gee, I'd just stir up and give her hell, and that's the way it came out nice and yellow. And we'd make the sandwiches, and the men thought it was butter.

Richard Payment [00:19:29] What was the food for, the men who were on strike?

Pearl Wattum [00:19:34] Yeah.

Richard Payment [00:19:35] How long did the strike last?

Pearl Wattum [00:19:36] Thirty days. But we got what we wanted. Because there was no transportation at all when the buses were on strike. People didn't have cars in those days. They were just stymied.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:19:51] There was constant pressure to keep the streetcars moving and on schedule. That meant making sure passengers entered and exited quickly. Company supervisors

were stationed along the route. They kept a sharp eye on the clock. If a streetcar did not arrive on time, supervisors were not happy. This close supervision continued even after new streetcars called 400s came online. There was now only the operator on board, who both drove the streetcar and collected fares. The same was true, of course, when buses replaced the streetcars. Vilma Westerholm, then a driver, recalled a close call with one supervisor.

Vilma Westerholm [00:20:35] But finally they got rid of the streetcars. And I had to ask if I could start on the buses and, no, on the new streetcars. They had the 400s. I wanted to drive them. And they said, no, we're going to phase them all out so it's kind of late for that. But I did drive one, and I would have got fired if they knew about it because we used to take streetcars from one barn on Main Street, Main and 12th, to Kitsilano at night, you know, we used to change different cars, take them in different, into different barns, as they called them then. And Bill Green said to me, he says, would you like to drive one of these, you know, this 400? And I said, oh, I'd love to. He says, okay. And he was taking my -- we had used my car to get over there, so we'd left it there while we were changing cars back and taking cars back and forth. And then on the last trip, he says, I'll take your car and you take this 400. And he told me where all the switches were. That was from Kitsilano up Granville Street and along Granville, along Broadway. And he showed me what to do for the switch at Oak Street, but he forgot to tell me about Cambie. So here I am, my mouth was all set to go straight ahead, you know, to Main Street, and about half, I don't know, I just couldn't believe it, but I was halfway down, down Cambie Street, before I realized that the car, you know, the car hadn't been switched. Gone down, gone gone down Cambie instead because I didn't know that, he hadn't told me about changing switches, you know.

Richard Payment [00:22:30] You can control the switches from the streetcar?

Vilma Westerholm [00:22:31] Yeah, but with your foot on the pedal. And he had forgotten to tell me that. So here I am going down Cambie Street and I had to cross over Cambie Bridge and there was one of the supervisors, Big Mac, they used to call him. He used to be out night and day, I'm sure he spent all his life going around seeing if we were on time or if we were late or what have you. And I knew darn well that there was very few girls that would be out that late, you know. So I thought if he sees me on I'll be fired because I had no business driving that 400. So I thought, oh my gosh, what do I do? I don't want to be fired. I like my job. So I put my hair underneath my cap and I got my eyebrow pencil and I put the mustache on and I thought gee, they'll think it's a man and they won't notice me then. So I finally got through. I went around Main Street. He used to stand on the steps of the library, the old library, you know, the one at Main and Hastings. He used to stand there all the time and watch the cars go by. And, so I snuck right by him and he looked and he looked but he didn't come out or stop me anywhere. So I got to the barn all right, but I'd have been fired right there and then if they'd known I was driving. [laughter] Oh, I had a lot of fun.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:24:03] Pearl Wattum also remembered the stresses of running on time and being monitored by the dreaded supervisors.

Pearl Wattum [00:24:14] You'd get so calloused, cause you'd say oh to hell with it. And anyone that let those things bother them, they don't last very long. They're gone. I'll never forget. I was working on MacDonald Street. And it was buses. And it was the last line that the new guys would be on before they'd have to go up for their exam. And this guy, he had his hands... Let me take the wheel and I'll show you how to relax. So I took the wheel and I got back on time. When they got to the end of the line, we were still three minutes late. So I said, I'll drive down to Broadway and you can take over. When I got down to Broadway, I was three minutes ahead of time, and the supervisor runs out and held up his hand. God, I had a notion to run over him. But I didn't. And he says, you're three minutes ahead. I said, we were three minutes late going up. I said, give us credit. No, I'm going to report you. I says, you report me and you've had your last report, and I drove on. Well, he did report me. And I went up to the head office and they said, how about this? And I told them all my little story. And he says, that's alright, we'll drag him in here and give him for what. So I guess I did.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:25:58] The conductorettes weren't the only women taken on by BC Electric during the war. The transit system became so busy, the company also hired women street guides. They took out newspaper ads to prepare transit riders for their appearance. "Mr. and Mrs. General Public", the ads proclaimed, "may we introduce the new BC Electric guides, uniformed and well-trained girls available to give information, sell city streetcar tickets and make change". The guides were located on busy street corners, with the aim of easing the workload of the conductorettes. The one-person streetcars and trolleybuses had put an end to the need for conductorettes. And over time, BC Electric stopped hiring women drivers as well. By the early 1970s, there were only three left. One of those still behind the wheel was Edra McLeod, who had both seniority and experience. That was a huge asset after the 1972 election of Dave Barrett and the NDP. They poured money into public transit. And scores of young new drivers were hired. Ms. McLeod was there to help them out. She also played a role in the union, even though she herself never ran for office.

Edra McLeod [00:27:19] I think if I had run, I would have got in, but it would have been a personality thing, rather than knowing and I hadn't become involved that much in the union activity. Just that I did appreciate and I fought and I talked mostly to the men and made them understand what it was all about. Especially these young people when the NDP came in and hired. For two years, they hired 20 every Monday, so that at one point, there was 75% of the men on the job had less than two years service and I had to do some talking because there was no way that they could know the issues, I feel. And I think a lot of them, through me, realized that history was important. Because of how you got it and why and what the issues were.

Theme song: Hold the Fort [00:28:15]

Rod Mickleburgh [00:28:18] We hope you've enjoyed this look back in time to the age of the streetcar. And the women who helped keep them running during the war and afterwards. The Buzzer blog article about the conductorettes was published in 2009. It was written by Jennifer Pablano. She had assistance from Lisa Codd, then the curator of the Burnaby Village Museum, and Linda Maeve Orr. The interviews with Vilma Westerholm, Edra McLeod and Pearl Wattum were conducted by Richard Payment of the Vancouver Historical Society and by Sara Diamond. The "TTC Scidaddler" was, of course, written and performed by the legendary Stompin' Tom Connors. "The Trolley Song" is from the MGM musical, Meet Me in Vancouver... er, St. Louis. And, as always, thanks to the other members of the podcast collective: Donna Sacuta, Executive Director of the BC Labour Heritage Center, Patricia Wejr, who did most of the research and script writing, and producer John Mabbott, who put it all together. I'm your transit loving host, Rod Mickleburgh. We'll see you next time, On the Line.