

Apple Box Belles Podcast V1.mp3

Transcribed by Patricia Wejr

Rod Mickleburgh [00:00:19] Welcome to another edition of On the Line, the podcast that shines a light on the rich labour heritage of British Columbia. I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh. Today we journey to the interior of the province to bring you the story of the women who worked in the fruit packing plants of B.C.'s Okanagan Valley from the 1920s right through to the 1970s. A lot of different fruit was picked and packed in the Okanagan, but these hard-working women were universally known as the Apple Box Belles. Listen up! Women were first hired to work in the fruit packing industry during World War I, as men left their packing jobs to fight overseas. It wasn't an easy job. Apples had to be sorted, wrapped and individually packed at high speed. But women excelled at the task, and not just in the Okanagan. Believe it or not, there used to be international apple packing competitions. In 1937, a fruit packing worker from Kelowna, with the wonderful name of Isabel Stillingfleet, travelled to England to take part. Not only that, Isabel finished first, returning home with the title Apple Queen of the British Empire.

Music: Apple Box Belles written by Bruce Coughlin and performed by Tiller's Folly [00:01:39] Well, the packers took pride in the speed of their work and a world competition arose. In 1937, those brisk Okanagan girls proved they were quicker than most. When a "Belle" Isabel, left for Birmingham, England, a world-wide contest to try. There she proved the best of the Apple Box Belles, Apple Queen of the British Empire! Sing me your song, you Lake Country girls, Those stories you cast like a spell Let your voice ring, let everyone sing a song for the Apple Box Belles...

Rod Mickleburgh [00:02:31] In this podcast we once again draw on interviews by Sara Diamond in 1979. You will hear from Alma Faulds, who moved to Oliver from the Prairies with her husband just after World War II. Already an activist and a member of the CCF, she became a strong union member as soon as the packinghouses were organized. All told, she spent 20 years on the union executive, serving as business agent of local 1572 of the Fruit and Vegetable Workers from 1959 to 1973. We'll also hear from Lydia Bastian. Lydia left Saskatchewan for the Okanagan with her husband and sister in 1937. It was the depression and jobs were scarce. But she was finally hired at a packinghouse in Oliver in 1939. She recalled the hard times and the realities of toiling in a non-union workplace.

Lydia Bastian [00:03:31] And we just had to, you know, in order to eat, there was a little rent to pay. We just had to work. And when I finally got on there at the packinghouse, well, then I put in 35 seasons, but I did work 10 and 12 hours a day. And I worked Sundays. Every time I was told to come, two girls were told to come on Sunday. Well, we were all told to come on Sunday. The two Russian girls didn't show up Sunday. Come Monday morning, they were working right by me, so I know all about it. The boss come up and fired them. This was before the union was in. He said, you were told to be at work on Sunday, you didn't come yesterday, so we don't need you today. But as I say, we were, the most of us, we would work 10, 12 hours a day, whichever hours they wanted us to, and it was at that time, I started at two bits an hour. And I had to work for 25 cents an hour for two weeks. Then they gave me 35 cents an hour, which later on, I think they sort of got away from that a bit. That they sort of started more at the regular wages, you know.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:05:05] It was tough, no matter how skilled the women. Long hours, constant pressure to keep up the pace, and usually a chilly workplace where gloves were forbidden because the companies thought they would slow the women down. The nature of the work often led to repetitive strain injuries, and the constant noise created hearing

problems. We hear first from Lydia Bastian, and then Alma Faulds on the workplace hazards they faced.

Lydia Bastian [00:05:35] Well, let's face it, I've had an operation over that, over that packinghouse. And the neurologist never knew me from Adam, and he said to me, he examined me in Vancouver, he said, you've been working for many years with your arms going like this. And I said, are you a mind reader? I said exactly. He says, well, what have you been doing? I said sorting fruit most of the time, like this. And those years, we were taught you didn't go like this, put one apple on and rest this hand and put on. You have to pick up two apples and put them on, like this like a machine all day.

Alma Faulds [00:06:17] There was an apple in each hand and bot hands on the belt. That's the way, that's the way it was.

Sara Diamond [00:06:24] So what was, did a lot of women suffer from occupational diseases like that?

Lydia Bastian [00:06:31] Oh, I hear, but you see, the neurologist had said to me, now, did you ever report this in the packinghouse, you know? And I said no. At one time, I had five big apple boxes of fruit dumped in the lower back, on my back. And that was, this fellow was fooling around, you know. And he dumped all this in my back. But it wasn't that he hit me at the top here where I had the operation, you see. But the neurologist knew he said, had you gone to the first aid and mentioned that, you know, he said you'd be drawing compensation for the rest of your life but since I didn't, I didn't get anything. I got two weeks' compensation for this leg. I fell on a, slipped on a rotten apple and I was standing up about that high I fell off, slipped from there and I hit a piece of machinery. What would you call it, it's some kind of wheel what you call a gear. And I thought my elbow broke. This leg was so bad. And they gave me two weeks' compensation. And my leg is still bad to this day.

Sara Diamond [00:07:54] Were those kinds of accidents common?

Lydia Bastian [00:07:56] Well, we didn't have too many. The ones sometimes, there was different ones, had their fingers taken off or things like that. But it didn't happen too often.

Sara Diamond [00:08:06] How did that happen?

Lydia Bastian [00:08:07] With going, picking up, you know they had the skids and then lifting up the gateway to go through. And the chains would becoming along running. And Elle Norton, remember, she got her finger taken off. It's been a few accidents like that. But another time I got this breast squashed in between two apple boxes, kerplunk like that. Well, we had that young, oh he was so shy, what the heck was his name now, I'll think of it. He was the first aid man. And was he ever shy. [laughter] Well, he wouldn't do it. He just said, well, you better go up to the doctor, you know. [laughter] See, somebody was supposed to be turning the boxes for me. And as the fruit was coming so slow, they didn't give me a helper. So I'd have to, the boxes would come like that, like this, you see. And they'd have be turned so I could label them.

Sara Diamond [00:09:09] They'd be coming down a belt towards you?

Lydia Bastian [00:09:12] Yeah. So I'd have to reach across to shut the skid off with so many boxes and turn them before I put the labels on. And I reached across like that and I was really big and kerplunk, you know, well I never lived it down.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:09:27] There are also serious occupational health risks. Elma Faulds.

Alma Faulds [00:09:32] We had a chap that would come around and inspect the packing house from the Workers' Compensation. But, you know, at one time it was very pro-management oriented. So we finally got a safety committee going. You know, and we would go around with management, point out this is wrong and this is wrong and this is dangerous. In addition to Lydia getting trapped, there were all kinds of other hazards in the packinghouse, and we would get all kinds of rashes, you know, and they had propane. When the packinghouse mechanized then they had propane trucks and we didn't realize but the trucks should have had shields on them. But they didn't have shields and the women would get headaches, and they would complain, and so on and so forth. And management would say, it's all in your imagination. And finally, we got Dr. Clark from Kelowna down here. And then he got Dr. Smart from Vernon involved, from Public Health. And I was at a meeting in Osoyoos. I was, at one time, Business Agent for the union. And by this time, we were alerting people and saying, look, we think there's something wrong with these propane trucks. We think there is something wrong with the blue cardboard that we have to use. It can't all be imagination that all these women are getting these rashes. There was an article in the Financial Post that Norm Levy brought over to me and said, Alma, I think you might find this very interesting. They'd done a survey about this darn blue cardboard, and we found out that there was an irritant in the blue cardboard that we were using for tray packs. But also, we had several instances of carbon monoxide poisoning. We had a man in Keremeos that just managed, as he was going out the door of the cold storage, just managed to pass out as he was going out the door instead of inside the door. He had carbon monoxide poisoning. We had another man, Frank Kushner in Oyama, that twice had carbon-monoxide poisoning, and we weren't getting anywhere, and I was at a meeting in Osoyoos, and I was sounding off about this. So Dr. Clark came down, Dr. Smart came down and they tested the air and then they wrote a letter to all the packinghouses with a copy to us and said you have X number of hours and we'll be back on such and such a day and we will test the air again and if there's no improvement we'll close the packinghouses. And that was it. Then suddenly every packinghouse could afford to put a shield on their propane motor.

Lydia Bastian [00:13:03] When you came in the packinghouse in the morning, it would smell just like if somebody was wearing running shoes without socks, you know, day in and day out. That's how rotten, when they weren't even running, the motors weren't running. That's the stink.

Alma Faulds [00:13:19] We knew there was a problem, but we had no way of proving that there was a problem. You know, suddenly all kinds of hysterical women can't get headaches from imagination. We also knew that there were something wrong with the blue dye in the tray packs. And one woman was going around with a gas mask, you know, but still they were desperate enough to work. We all had rashes. But how are you going to prove that this is something that shouldn't be happening to you? And we weren't that sophisticated. We didn't know how much right we had. We didn't know how to be good complainers. We didn't know where to go for help.

Music: Apple Box Belles written by Bruce Coughlin and performed by Tiller's Folly

[00:14:25] It was in the Lake Country 'round 19 and 10 when the first crops of apples appeared. With good soil and sun it didn't take long there were hundreds of thousands of trees. On packinghouse floors the box makers toiled, nailing shook into 40 pound crates. So the sorters and graders and packers would labour their way through the late summer days. Sing me your songs, you Lake Country girls, those stories you cast like a spell. Let your voice ring let everyone sing a song for the Apple Box Belles, sing song for the Apple Box Belles...

Rod Mickleburgh [00:15:20] Although much has been written about the Okanagan fruit-growing co-ops, their early union history has been barely mentioned. Alma Faulds recalled some of this history and gave a spirited account of early organizer Bill Sands and how he achieved the first union certification. Bill Sands later became Deputy Minister of Labour under Social Credit Premier W.A.C. Bennett. When Dave Barrett and the NDP came to power in 1972, one of the first acts by Bill King, the new Labour Minister, was to fire Bill Sands. As you can tell by Alma Fauld's account, he was no lefty, with little time for left-wing unions.

Alma Faulds [00:16:02] There were five packinghouses here in the Oliver area. At that time there was the Southern, the Oliver Co-op, Haynes, B.C. Shippers, and Mac & Fitz. And they were all organized. They were organized by Bill Sands, who was put on the payroll of Packinghouse Workers. And he very busily organized the plant. At that time, the labour law said that it had to be the majority of workers. They were organized in the midst of winter. There were three men working there, and two of them agreed to sign the union. The plant was organized. So, there was a lot of resentment. Because a lot of people were organized unwillingly. When the spring came, when the cherries started, suddenly we were having \$2 union dues deducted because two of the men in the packinghouse had agreed that we should be organized. I think it would be very interesting for you to interview the United Packinghouse Workers and also Bill Sands, because according to the UPWA, they paid Bill Sands to organize for them. According to Bill Sands, he saw the light and realized that he was being had, and therefore he organized them into a totally different union. The United Packinghouse Workers were very resentful of Bill Sands, because they felt he was betraying them. Bill Sands felt he was justified, because this was a rabid, socialist outfit. You know, UPWA has always been socialistic. And therefore, he felt he was justified in organizing his own union. I would certainly give him the benefit of the doubt. I would certainly think that because basically he was liberal, because basically the UPWA was inclined to be CCF supporters, that Bill Sands, when he opted for the job, might really have believed that he could do a job in organizing, and might really believe that the UPWA was too radical. On the other hand, the UPWA always felt they were betrayed because he accepted pay for doing what he was doing and then used it to his own benefit. You know, I might have a very biased point of view. You know, because I've been indoctrinated by the UPWA, and I believe that unions should be political. So I might not even be fair to Bill Sands.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:19:29] After that first certification, the drive began to bring more workers under the union umbrella.

Alma Faulds [00:19:37] In 1952, there was an agreement signed with all the packinghouses in the valley. And what the Act said at that time, if the majority of the packinghouses and the majority of the employees, with the consent of the government, formed a union, then we could form a poly-party certification. So the poly-party certification

came into being in 1952. It meant that there was a blanket agreement covering all of us. And we were under automatic dues check-off.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:20:17] Once the packinghouses were organized, there were periodic work slowdowns and an occasional brief walkout, but only one all-out strike. That took place in August of 1955. Not only did the workers want a pay raise, they wanted an end to long-standing wage discrimination in the workforce. Male workers earned a dollar five an hour, while the hourly rate for women was just 80 cents. Packers, meanwhile, received a paltry 3 cents per pack, a rate that had hardly changed since the 1920s. Alma Faulds talked about what led up to the strike.

Alma Faulds [00:20:56] So we had an executive council meeting, and we were talking about the strike, and the paid employee, who was Bryan Cooney at that time, kept saying, we'll give the strike to the Oliver-Osoyoos area at the height of peaches, and it's only going to last three days. It wasn't just the Oliver Local, it wasn't the Osoyoos people. It went all the way from Vernon, Kelowna, Oyama, Naramata, Penticton and all the rest of it. There were about 28 packinghouses involved. But they, at the convention, they had elected an Executive Council. And after I first got into it, then I was elected at the next convention. And the Executive was the decision-making body. But the convention had decided we would tie ourselves to the slogan '10 cents or bust'. It was left up to the Executive to decide when and where the strike would come off. We had the meeting in Kelowna, and Bryan Cooney said, it's got to come off at the height of peaches, and it's gotta come off in Oliver-Osoyoos, because peaches are the crucial crop down here. Peaches won't keep.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:22:26] As a union supporter, but also a peach grower, Alma's brother-in-law was torn over the strike, but he gave his sister-in law some good advice.

Alma Faulds [00:22:36] I still don't know whether I'm going to be with you or against you, but I want to give you some advice. He said, I think -- I told him that the general consensus of opinion was that the strike would only last three days-- and he felt that he wouldn't bet on it, and he said if I were you, I would make sure that they get at least the equivalent of Unemployment Insurance, as strike pay. Because he said the first time somebody is 50 cents short of going to the grocery store, they will start thinking about crossing the picket line. And he said, I think you should insist on at least the equivalent of Unemployment Insurance. So anyway, we went to the meeting, I brought this bright idea up. Brian Cooney was absolutely sure that this was, you know, a lot of nonsense, what are we worrying about, the strike is going to be over in three days, they can't pack the peaches and they got to pack the peaches, and the whole thing was turned down. And I was really very upset. And then Clarence Holmes said, I think we should give some regard to the sister from the south, who seemed so very concerned about the strike pay. Well, we're under Robert's rules of order. You know, an emotion to reconsider has to be posted, and all the rest of it. And they had a great deal of kerfuffle, how to get this back on the floor again. But they did manage to get it back on the floor, and it was agreed that we would pay 25 cents an hour strike pay.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:24:26] For the packinghouse women, going on strike was a totally new experience. Alma Faulds gives us a vivid picture of what it was like, the good and the bad.

Alma Faulds [00:24:37] OK, I just want to tell you, 27 years later it's hard to realize how dumb we were. I didn't know exactly how -- my brother-in-law had some experience in the IWA, my brothers had some experiences about being on strike, but I really didn't how you

went about it, but I'd seen pictures of people carrying sandwich boards. And so, we rented the Oddfellows lower hall, and I bought a whole bunch of cardboard, and I got some black felt pens, and I made a lot of these signs - our men work for a dollar five an hour. And we got some string and tied them together. I wrote a letter to Charlie Hamilton, who was the labour relations officer in Kelowna, and said, you know, what do you do when you're on a picket line and what is the procedure and please tell me. I didn't know that he was not the person that I should have written to. However, good old Charlie went and took the letter to Bryan Cooney and Bryan Cooney, who was the Business Agent, and hadn't bothered to tell us anything about how you act on a strike, blew his stack and was furious and phoned down and told me. So at seven o'clock Monday morning. Well no, on the Friday, management was stringing up a PA system in the packinghouse and the PA system didn't work and then we were called to the end of the grader and told to report to the lady's room, the lady's lunch room. And we were going to have a talk. And it was on company time so everybody went up to the lady's lunch room to listen to this little talk. And it's a fair sized room and we're all standing around and then the manager gives us this tremendous pep talk. And he talks about loyalty and how the packinghouse has to keep operating and you know what's going to happen to the fruit and what's going to happen to the farmers.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:27:06] What happened next was pure raw emotion, as Alma stepped up and spoke from the heart.

Alma Faulds [00:27:13] I looked at Milton Hallman, who was the president of the union, and he sort of looked away. And I looked to John Susoeff, who was the chief shop steward. He looked away, and I looked around and it appeared that nobody was going to say anything. And we'd done a lot of talking in the lunchroom. And I looked at people like Mrs. Foster, you know, who basically didn't know should she or shouldn't she, and there was Mrs. Weedy, the elementary school principal's wife, there was the bus driver's wife. And I look at all these undecided faces and I thought somebody's got to say something, you know, or else they'll all come in on Monday. And who's going to say it? Well, it appeared that Milton wasn't going to say anything. It appeared that Johnny Susoeff wasn't going to anything. And so, when you're desperate enough, you say something, you know. And I started out with a very faltering voice. Mr. Morgan's wife was one of my best friends. You know, it made it really very tough, in a small town, when there is a friendship relationship based on church and our ideas, and they'd been to our place for supper, I'd been to their place for a supper. Suddenly we're in a very formal situation, and I started out stammering and stuttering. Mr. Morgan, you've talked a great deal about loyalty. I want to tell you we're very loyal. We're also very desperate. We're going to be out on strike. We've tried everything, you know, and I go through, I think in my dreams, I must have rehearsed the whole damn speech. I go through the whole thing. What happened at our appearances in front of the arbitration board, what happened in the biased news releases, and that Mr. L.R. Stephens, who is your representative, recently said in a news report that he would venture to say that when we argued that a lot of the fruit is sold on roadside stands, he said he would venture to say there were not more than three dozen roadside stands in all of the Okanagan and the Kootenays. And then, by this time I'm yelling, you know, I've lost my head anyway, so what the hell? I'm yelling, and I said, and the other night my husband and I went on a car ride to Osoyoos, and we counted 44 open roadside stands between Oliver and Osoyoos, a distance of 13 miles. One was closed. And I'm going on and on and on and I don't really remember all the things I said, but I remember ending up saying, Mr. Morgan, we want you to know we're loyal, but at eight o'clock on Monday morning, we're going to be on the picket line. And with that, I walked out the door and I'm bawling, going down the stairs. Gee. And two men are following me and I can hear one say to the other one, watch her, we're going need her. But I just didn't want anyone to see me bawling, and

I rushed down and we had very elaborate washroom facilities at the co-op upstairs, but nobody ever hardly used them. And we had two little measly toilets for the women downstairs and a place for the men, and there was a wash basin in between. So I'm rushing for the wash basin. I've got to wash my face. I can't let the world see that I'm bawling. And that was it. You know, and with that we walked out of the packing house.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:31:46] Despite enormous pressure from the companies, the rookie strikers held firm for 16 days, even to the point of setting up a floating picket line to prevent non-union fruit from being shipped out by water. The settlement provided modest wage increases from the tight fisted fruit packers. Hourly paid workers won an across the board increase of five cents an hour, while female piecework employees received a boost of five percent. Although women workers still learned less than their male counterparts, the strike paved the way for eventual wage equality. The strike ended on September 9th, leaving just enough time to pack the year's bountiful crop of peaches.

Music: Apple Box Belles written by Bruce Coughlin and performed by Tiller's Folly [00:32:29] Then the First World War came, drew off the men, and a great call for labour rang out. And women whose place had once been in the home, rose up in an answering shout. Through the packing house doors by the dozens they poured to take up the place in the line. Racing the clock making three cents a box, one four dollar day at a time. Sing me your songs, you Lake Country girls, those stories you cast like a spell. Let your voice ring, let everyone sing a song for the Apple Box Belles. Sing a song for the Apple Box Belles.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:33:24] After the strike, Alma Faulds continued to speak up as a shop steward, making sure the new collective agreement was followed and workers were respected. None of it came naturally to her, and she didn't go looking for trouble, but when it was a matter of justice, Alma Faulds did not shy away.

Alma Faulds [00:33:43] I'm not that gutsy a person. I only have guts when there's something at stake. You know, I always intended to go through life being very quiet and peaceful. I never argued with anybody. But I think if you belong to a union and if you let the agreement be disregarded, then who knows? You know, if they can disregard the five cents an hour premium for a night shift, the next day they can say, we don't want to pay the wages that are listed here in this agreement. We'll do our own thing. The next thing they can say, we can call you in at five o'clock in the morning if you feel like it. You know? You can't let the agreement be broken. So we did have that kind of relationship, that I could go into management and as shop steward, and in spite of the fact that they were in a court case, and in spite of the fact that the packinghouse was trying to form a company union, I could still talk to them as a trade unionist.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:34:59] There's an interesting postscript to the historic packinghouse strike. After it ended, the Fruit Co-op in Oliver decided they no longer wanted to be part of the poly-party certification that covered all the unionized packinghouses in the Okanagan. They went to court to try to get out of it, and the case went all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada.

Alma Faulds [00:35:22] So it went to court, and in his wisdom, the first judge decided the packinghouse didn't have the right to get out of the poly-party certification. They were tied in. The packinghouse then appealed and it went to the Appeal Court of British Columbia. And they won the second court case. We, as the union, with the help of the Socred government, then appealed to the Supreme Court and Alex MacDonald was our lawyer and it cost us \$3,000 just for the typing and to get the thing to the Supreme Court. And

then Alex MacDonald said to me you realize of course that this is a big thing in labour history. We not only won a majority award but we won a unanimous award that the packinghouse couldn't get out of the poly-party certification. Now at that point, I was not convinced that the poly-party certification was the right thing. I felt that we should be something like the auto workers, you know, balance Ford against General Motors and you know play one against the other. But we were tied into the whole thing, and because I was part of the union, I had to go along with it.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:36:53] Like many long-standing workplaces in those days, however, the Okanagan packinghouses were not immune from technological change. As automation increased, the workforce was gradually reduced. Different unions came into the picture, and the sudden closure of B.C. Tree Fruits last year cost 125 union workers their jobs. But through all the recent tough times, the legacy of the Apple Box Belles remains. Job opportunities for women, fighting for equal pay, and respect in the workplace. All hail.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:37:49] We hope you've enjoyed hearing from these strong women who helped shape the story of the famous Apple Box Belles in the beautiful Okanagan Valley. Thanks to Sara Diamond for the interviews. The Apple Box Belles song was performed by Bruce Coughlan and Tiller's Folley, who have been singing and writing about B.C. history for 30 years. Bruce Coughlan wrote it. And much thanks as always to the podcast collective, Donna Sacuta, Executive Director of the B.C. Labour Heritage Centre, Patricia Wejr, who did most of the heavy lifting with research and the script, and John Mabbott, who put it all together. I'm your non-apple-picking host, Rod Mickleburgh. We'll see you next time, On The Line.