

Fundraisers, Axe-Wielders, and Star Witnesses

Women on both sides of the Great Vancouver Island Coal Miners' Strike, 1912–1914

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Extension mines

Located in Snuneymuxw First Nation territory, Extension was a coal mining community 10 kilometres south of downtown Nanaimo. The Extension mines were established by the influential and wealthy Dunsmuir family to replace the declining Wellington mines in Nanaimo. The first coal mined was transported by rail to nearby Ladysmith Harbour. Due to disputes with landowners, the Dunsmuir family, known for their poor treatment of employees, soon required the coal miners to move to Ladysmith—20 kilometres away on land owned by the Dunsmuirs—or risk being fired, but many families resisted. At the community's peak, an estimated 1,200 people lived in Extension. Hotels, stores, and fraternal societies served diverse communities including Chinese Canadians and people from across Europe, Australia, and the United States. The population dwindled after the mines closed in 1931 but a close-knit community remains to this day.

Women played essential roles as activists in a divided community during the Great Vancouver Island Coal Miners' Strike. Their activism during the 1912–1914 strike and the 1913 riots had unjust consequences that rippled through the community for generations.

The strike centred on miners' rights, particularly the struggle for unionization, along with demands for safer working conditions and higher wages. Just three years earlier, a deadly explosion at the Extension mine had claimed 32 lives. In September 1912, Oscar Mottishaw was fired from the Cumberland mine by Canadian Collieries (Dunsmuir) Ltd., which had purchased the Dunsmuir-owned mines a few years earlier, targeted because he was a union organizer for the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA).¹ In protest, Cumberland miners walked off the job and Extension miners followed suit the next day. A bitter strike was on, backed by the UMWA.

The women who supported the strike over its two-year duration were mostly wives of striking miners. They gave newspaper interviews, organized fundraisers, and were active participants in public protests, including rioting. On the other side, wives of strikebreakers were key witnesses in dozens of court trials in the aftermath of the 1913 riots.

In February 1913, MLA Parker Williams observed in an impassioned speech, "This is a fight, not primarily for a living, but for the right to live. This is a fight against the undertaker and the morgue and the department of mines more than against Canadian Colliery."² By the spring of 1913, other mines in the Nanaimo area had joined the strike in solidarity.

Wives of striking miners publicly showed their support and shared their heart-wrenching perspectives on the impact of mine safety on families and the community. An unnamed woman in Ladysmith told a reporter for the *Vancouver Sun*, "Up there is the burying ground watching and waiting, saying ... who's coming next? And you never know who it is going to be. Maybe it's my boy she is waiting for. She got my husband."³ Another woman, labelled "the suffragette" by her enemies, asked, "Who wouldn't fight if there were laws made for the safety of the miner and they were not enforced, how'd you like to go into the bowels of the earth if you wasn't sure at what minute an explosion might come. Of course, they say the mine is safe."⁴

“You don’t forget when you see thirty graves all new dug in a row waiting to be filled with men you’ve known all your life... but wouldn’t you fight, and starve, if need be, if when your man left the house you didn’t know how he was coming back? Way back in your mind, while you were tending and mending to keep your children tidy, you couldn’t tell whether their father was coming back on a shutter to die.”⁵



Mass funeral after the Extension mine explosion in 1909. Nearly 30 funerals took place in Ladysmith after the disaster. At least 7 hearses can be seen in this photo.

Photo: Nanaimo Museum

Women coordinated fundraising efforts such as concerts and dances to boost morale among the strikers and help families who experienced financial hardship due to the strike.⁶ The UMWA Women’s Auxiliary became a significant force in the Great Vancouver Island Coal Miners’ Strike with branches in striking communities. They organized social gatherings, fundraisers, weekly strategy meetings, protests, and demonstrations.⁷

Women faced unjustly harsh penalties when they protested. In June 1913, “a number of women” were arrested when they “turned out to serenade some of the bosses” who were working in the Nanaimo mine.⁸ These men were fire bosses who checked the mines for hazards like gases, and their continued work raised the ire of strike supporters.

This case was the first of its kind in the area. In court, two women pleaded guilty to disorderly conduct and expressed remorse at the recommendations of their lawyers, who expected the charges to be dismissed. Neither woman had appeared in court before.⁹

Unexpectedly, the magistrate and real estate agent J.B. Simpson berated the women and noted they “had sunk beyond respect” before fining them \$20 and costs—nearly two weeks’ pay when their husbands were employed. Lawyers declared the sentence “outrageous,” to which the magistrate replied that “he intended to soak all such offenders to the limit.” The *British Columbia Federationist* concluded Simpson levied the harsh fine because he was disgruntled that the housing market was stagnant due to the strike.¹⁰

On August 13, 1913, tensions between strikers and strikebreakers erupted into rioting. In Extension and Ladysmith, women took part in civil disobedience

and lawlessness alongside men.”¹¹ They marched, smashed windows, and verbally abused and assaulted strikebreakers.¹²

A formidable force in the strike and riot was 49-year-old Minnie Axelson. Born Mary McLachlan, in Ontario, she had been widowed before she married Charles Axelson in 1894. The couple lived in Ladysmith and Charles worked at the Extension mine prior to the strike.

On the eve of the riot, Charles Axelson was arrested for following a small group of strike breakers in Ladysmith and singing a strike song. Word of his arrest quickly spread to his wife—president of the UMWA Women’s Auxiliary—and Minnie showed up at the Ladysmith jail, grabbed an axe that was outside for chopping firewood, smashed the jail door, and strode through “awestruck” law enforcement officers to free her husband.¹³ In celebration, the Axelsons led a parade of strikers through Ladysmith.¹⁴

Hours later, rioting broke out in Ladysmith and Extension which resulted in multiple injuries and property damage. In Extension, some women and children sheltered in the woods, joined by a few strikebreakers and the mine manager.¹⁵ The homes of strikebreakers were looted or torched, mine equipment was lit on fire, and the mine manager’s house was reduced to ashes, with only its three chimneys left standing.¹⁶

During the riot, Lempi Guthrie, wife of local union leader Sam Guthrie, witnessed an extraordinary scene in Ladysmith: two Scottish women grabbed dinner pails from two nervous, young strike breakers, pulled jam sandwiches out of the pails, smeared the sandwiches on the men’s faces, and called them “blasted ninnies!”¹⁷

Hundreds of men were arrested after the riots. After refusing to mediate the strike, the provincial government sent 1,500 militia to Vancouver Island in the days following the riots.¹⁸ Authorities threatened to arrest “a large number of women” for causing significant damage during the riots and recorded their names on a waiting list.¹⁹ That no strikebreakers were arrested for their roles in the rioting cast doubt on the fairness of the justice system.²⁰

The men arrested were charged and denied bail and visitors. Their wives and mothers petitioned Attorney General William Bowser for permission to visit, but the provincial government feared the women would plan resistance and riots during visits with jailed family members.²¹ As a result, more confrontations took place between the women and authorities in the strike zone.²² A spy from the Pinkerton Detective Agency hired by the Attorney General to infiltrate the miners described the miners’ wives as “the most outspoken and bitterest of enemies to the soldiers.”²³

Over the coming months, 166 men were tried, many, like Charles Axelson, for unlawful assembly.²⁴ Minnie Axelson appeared as a defence witness. The prosecutor asked Minnie if she led the riot, which she denied, but she admitted to having sung a strike song. The prosecutor asked her to sing a few verses of the song, likely to embarrass her, but her beautiful voice filled the room, and the judge was unable to bring order. Over 60 prisoners stomped their feet on the floor; female spectators stood on their chairs and waved their arms and shouted themselves hoarse. At the end spectators burst into rounds of applause.²⁵

Wives of strikebreakers also testified at the trials. One, Charlotte “Lottie” Maffeo Schivardi, was a young wife and mother when the strike started. She had married August Schivardi in 1909, at 17 years old; before then she and her siblings lived with her maternal uncle and aunt in Extension after the death of their parents. August was a strikebreaker, and their family home in Extension was burned to the ground during the riot.²⁶

Lottie was the star female witness for the prosecution during the Extension riot trials.²⁷ She was respected in the courtroom for her bravery, and she was described in the media as a “non-union Joan of Arc” after she admitted to giving a gun to a strikebreaker during the riot. Her treatment was in stark contrast to Minnie Axelson, who was vilified for her role in the riot.²⁸

The judge was reluctant to charge women for their roles in the riot; instead, he increased their husbands’ jail sentences. Charles Axelson was among the men who had their jail sentences extended. During eight months of trials, 55 men received prison sentences.²⁹

The strike collapsed in August 1914. There were a few wins, but most men returned to work in ununionized mines. And communities remained divided. In Extension, the bitterness lasted for generations; everyone remembered which side of the strike each family had supported.

Women were integral to the drive for justice—on both sides of the strike. Sharing their identities, perspectives, and experiences reveals the impact of the mine and strike on the community. My great-grandfather Jay Greenaway (1886–1957) was an Extension coal miner, and I grew up in the community surrounded by other descendants of miners. I see the strong-willed and resourceful women from the Great Vancouver Island Coal Miners’ Strike reflected in many women who were—and are—important to this tight-knit community. ■

Endnotes

1. John R. Hinde, *When Coal Was King: Ladysmith and the Coal-Mining Industry on Vancouver Island* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003), 148–151.
2. “Parker Williams Is Making Fight for the Right of Miners to Exist,” *Vancouver Sun*, February 12, 1913, 26.
3. “Parker Williams,” 26.
4. “Parker Williams,” 26.
5. “Parker Williams,” 26. A shutter was similar to a stretcher.
6. “Parker Williams,” 26.
7. John R. Hinde, “Stout Ladies and Amazons’: Women in the British Columbia Coal-Mining Community of Ladysmith, 1912–14,” *BC Studies*, no. 114 (Summer 1997): 44.
8. “This Strike Will Be Settled by the Men,” *British Columbia Federationist*, June 27, 1913, 1.
9. “Brief Mention,” *Nanaimo Free Press*, June 23, 1913.
10. “This Strike Will Be Settled by the Men,” 1.
11. “Will Arrest Women for Alleged Share in Riots at Nanaimo,” *Vancouver Sun*, September 1, 1913, 1.
12. Hinde, “Stout Ladies and Amazons,” 49.
13. “Only One Man Is Shot in Extension Riot Last Night,” *Vancouver Province*, August 14, 1913, 14; Lynne Bowen, *Boss Whistle: The Coal Miners of Vancouver Island Remember* (Nanaimo, BC: Rocky Point Books, 2002), 131.
14. Hinde, *When Coal Was King*, 180.
15. Hinde, “Stout Ladies and Amazons,” 48.
16. “Will Arrest Women for Alleged Share in Riots at Nanaimo,” 1; Bowen, *Boss Whistle*, 160.
17. Bowen, *Boss Whistle*, 134.
18. Hinde, “Stout Ladies and Amazons,” 33.
19. “Will Arrest Women for Alleged Share in Riots at Nanaimo,” 1.
20. Hinde, “Stout Ladies and Amazons,” 50.
21. “Will Operate the Mine despite the Strike,” *Vancouver Sun*, August 25, 1913, 1–2.
22. Hinde, “Stout Ladies and Amazons,” 51.
23. “Pinkerton Reports,” August 15, 1913, Box 19, GR-0429, BC Archives.
24. Hinde, “Stout Ladies and Amazons,” 33.
25. “Sang the Strikers’ Battle Cry in Court,” *Vancouver Province*, September 3, 1913, 4; “Woman Sings in Court,” *Nanaimo Free Press*, September 3, 1913, 1.
26. “Angelo Case Is in Hands of Jury,” *Nanaimo Free Press*, January 7, 1914.
27. “Desire to Impeach Judge Is Answered in Court at Assize,” *Vancouver Sun*, January 31, 1913, 2.
28. “Judge’s Charge in Michek Trial,” *Nanaimo Free Press*, February 2, 1914, 1; Hinde, *When Coal Was King*, 200; Hinde, “Stout Ladies and Amazons,” 33–34.
29. Hind, “Stout Ladies and Amazons,” 33–34.