



Smelter workers at Butler Park in Trail for strike rally and vote, 1917.

Photo: Trail Historical Society

Discovering Ginger Goodwin

By Wayne Norton

Labour history is difficult to access. Essentially, the story of working people is the story of their day-to-day work. Only when there is a departure from daily routine—perhaps loss of life, a bitter strike—will newspapers and other media typically turn their attention to working people. Just as typically, historians will be attracted to the same exceptional events. Even then, source material will rarely include letters or memoirs or biographies of the individuals involved. Such letters and memoirs may have been lost (or, more likely, were not created), so memoirs and biographies simply were not written. It becomes important, therefore, that surviving records of any kind are reliable. If they are not, an event or a historical figure in labour history can become even more out of focus and difficult to assess.

Albert “Ginger” Goodwin is a case in point. He is perhaps the best-known figure in British Columbia’s labour history, yet surprisingly little is known about him. We have some newspaper references, his few letters and articles, but no memoir. In a splendid biography derived from such fragmentary evidence, historian Roger Stonehouse assembles the details of Goodwin’s life and leaves readers to draw their own conclusions about the circumstances surrounding his death. It is the post-mortem fragments of information about Goodwin that can still muddy the waters.

Although students of BC history are familiar with

Goodwin, most people are not students of BC history. Anyone driving the Inland Island Highway between the Courtenay/Cumberland exit and Campbell River will notice a section of the road that has been designated the Ginger Goodwin Way. Drivers may wonder if this Goodwin fellow once made an historic journey of some sort along this twelve-kilometre stretch. Let us suppose a curious visitor decides to find out more about this notable local lad by heading into Cumberland. Let us also imagine our curious driver—Robert Brandt, a travelling salesman from Vancouver—stops to make an enquiry of a local individual encountered on Dunsmuir Avenue. Advised that the museum is not yet open for the day, Robert accepts the suggestion he should first head to the cemetery.

There, he will soon locate the gravesite of Ginger Goodwin. Robert will not be aware that the date of death is off by a day but will clearly see that Goodwin is remembered as a working-class figure who met a violent end. The clutter of mementos and the generally tatty appearance of the headstone—just a rock, it would seem—may disconcert our visitor, but the engraved hammer and sickle will make clear the political affiliations of this famous local man. Robert suspects the coins and ribbons, the dead bouquet of flowers, and the fresh single rose would all have been left by party members.

Convinced Goodwin was a Communist Party



Zinc plant crew in the early years of Trail Zinc Operations. Left to right: Dave Chalmers, W. Cook, Harold Evans, James Weir, and Ike Tyson. 1917.

Photo: Trail Historical Society

member, Robert returns to Cumberland. Welcomed as the museum's first visitor of the day, he is invited to look around and then stop by the office afterward. He finds that Goodwin was not a member of the Communist Party, but the gravestone was commissioned and installed in the 1930s by people who were. No doubt impressed by the devotion with which the museum portrays Goodwin, Robert accepts the invitation to stop by the office. As luck would have it, the archivist is preparing a new display on local sports. A small medal with the inscription "Albert Goodwin, Soccer, Crows Nest Pass" is on her desk. The archivist explains that Goodwin won the medal just before he moved to Cumberland in 1910, when he was a member of the champion Michel Football Club of the Crow's Nest Pass Football League. The archivist says the inscription must have been added years later, after "soccer" had replaced "football" in Canada to identify the game. The medal was donated to the Cumberland Museum in 1984 by a donor who prefers to remain anonymous.

Thinking he might read one of the books recommended by the archivist, Robert leaves the museum having satisfied his curiosity about Ginger Goodwin. But he is also wondering about smaller details. Of course, the wishes of anyone generous enough to donate to local museums must always be honoured, but the football medal is intriguing. It was in Goodwin's possession at the time of his death, so where was it for the next 60-odd years and who had it inscribed? The headstone at the cemetery is also on his mind. It is said gravestones can speak. If so, this one sends a confusing message. It seems one historical era obscures another. The motivation for its installation may be clear, but why

has it been left unaltered for so long if it leaves misleading impressions? Is it not time for something more factually accurate and politically correct?

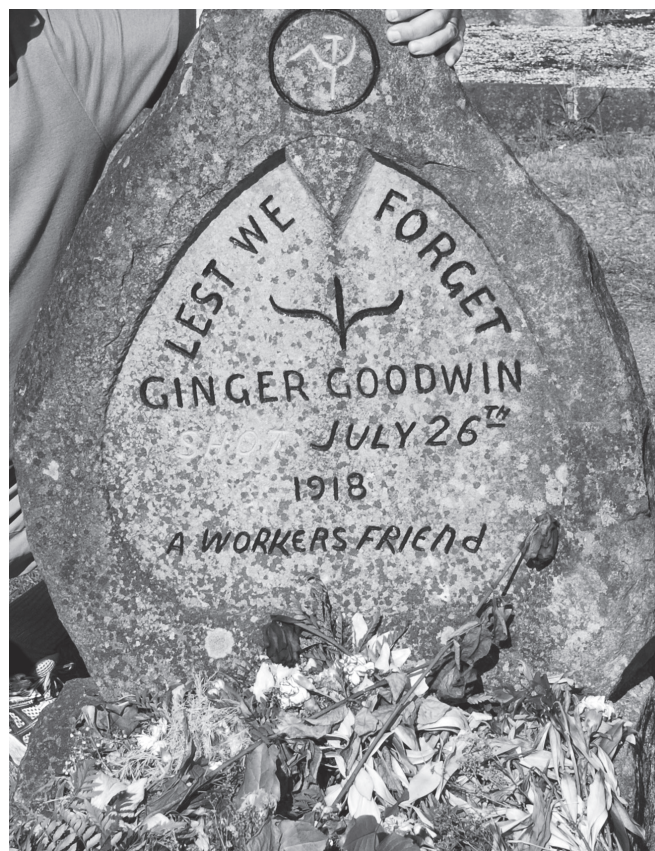
Hesitating over that last troublesome term and struggling to remember more than the title line of John Lennon's "Working Class Hero," Robert notices the local brewery is now open. The Goodwin quest has taken all morning! Perhaps there is a Ginger Pale Ale on offer, or maybe an Albert Goodwin lager. There's just time for a quick lunch before resuming the journey along the highway and over any other road that may invite a traveller to explore local history. 🍷

Further Reading

Laura Ellyn, *Ginger Goodwin: A Worker's Friend* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2016).

Susan Mayse, *Ginger: The Life and Death of Albert Goodwin* (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour, 1990; revised 2023).

Roger Stonebanks, *Fighting for Dignity: The Ginger Goodwin Story* (Athabasca, AB: AU Press, 2004).



Grave of Ginger Goodwin, Cumberland Cemetery.

Photo: Ron Verzuh



Wayne Norton is an author, historian, and executive member of the Victoria Historical Society. His article "Three Glimpses of Ginger" is included in his most recent book, *Beneath the Coal Dust: Historical Journeys through the Elk Valley and Crowsnest Pass* (Caitlin, 2022).