

Nanaimo Historical Society Fonds

Series 2. Sound Recordings : Tape 11

Interview with Lew Thatcher by unknown interviewers concerning his knowledge and experience of coal mining, 1979

Transcribed by Glenys Wall, November 2003

TAPE BEGINS IN MID-SENTENCE. PERSON SPEAKING IS NOT IDENTIFIED BUT BELIEVE IT IS MR. LEW THATCHER. PERSON HE IS SPEAKING TO IS NOT IDENTIFIED. THERE ARE FREQUENT REFERENCES TO A MAP

Thatcher: ...just down the track about a mile and a half from here. Then the last mine he worked in was the Number 5, that's where the city dump is, that was about 1902 and he worked there. He worked down in Southfield before the turn of the century in around 1880, 1895. And Number 1 was running then, Wellington was running. They were loading sailing vessels in Departure Bay. The Jingle Pot was running and Extension was running and the Alexandria, that's where South Wellington is now. Old Beck sold that and there's a record of it in some of your books. He sold that first in [year?] and the company went broke and Dunsmuir took 'em over. And Dunsmuir ran the Alexandria until about 1903 and the men went on strike and he shut it down. And then, in 1908, the Fiddick Brothers started a mine on their own property in a small way just with waggons coming to haul and the Pacific Coast Company bought him out and they bought the adjacent 160 acres which was Richardson's to the south, the next. Southfield was here, and then the Fiddick property and then the Richardson property, this is going towards South Wellington. Then the old Alexandria was there and I guess it was 1911 or '12. Dunsmuir opened up the property that he owned the Alexandria but he called it Number 5; it was over, over one more section, see. And they went north into the Alexandria with a little short railroad, narrow gauge railroad, and they brought the coal to what they called the Number 5, and they took in a big territory of land there. And they went down the track about 3/4 mile and they sunk another mine and they called that Number 10. And they took all the coal out of the 600 acres of my cousins' and our coal that was under our own farm, under the Thatcher farm and they went right up to what you call the Granby Boundary, that's up by the river, that all came out through Number 10 and they had a little, short railroad, narrow gauge and they processed it at Number 5. And then about [?] the railroad went through there. I worked on the railroad in 1912 and I can't pin it down exactly but it was '17 or '18, but the PCCM [Pacific Coast Coal Mine] opened up another mine called the Morden, that was on the other side of the Thatcher property and they took in practically to Boat Harbour, different farms that they bought. They bought Manson's, and they bought Mrs. [Roads?], and they bought [Admirals?] and they bought [Staggards?] and they bought Mahles and they bought Hemers' and they bought Tom Swan's. Then they built the railroad through to Boat Harbour and they shipped both the PCCM coal and the Morden coal over that same railroad because it was the same company only two different holes! And then along came the Granby Company and they sunk a slope there and they built a fine, little town, modern, everything modern, and it went on for a few years and finally they started killing too many men. The coal was blowouts and the government shut it down and the company went defunct and that was the end of that. They gophered (?) holes around a lot after that and some of them like the Fiddicks, when they bought the Fiddicks and the Richardson's coal they had so many years to take it out, you see, and they took it out before the time expired. But there was

still a lot left in that wasn't profitable for them to mine and both Fiddicks and Richardson had a small, local, coal business going on. And it was the same the other side of Nanaimo; there was the Loudons and Carruthers, they had gopher hole mining and Chambers, another man by the name of Chambers up here at Extension, he did a lot of gopher hole mining. Clayton [unintelligible] you see. And that's about the end of the mining.

All this was mined out before my time but you see right here in Chase River there's Petroglyph Park and there was another mine; there's Petroglyph Park, well there was a mine there and there was another small mine right at the very mouth of Chase River and there were two mines across there from Maki Road and then the other mine was Number 5 and that was the last mine that was in existence. And then the Western Fuels they went over by the Meadows and they called that the Reserve Mine and it was ran on, it run along in..I don't know whether it ran to the '20s or not, I guess it did. But there used to be a railroad go from Nanaimo to Southfield and it turned in here by Butch Mackie's [Maki?], I don't know if you know Butch Mackie's [Maki?] place? You know just before you start up the hill going south here below 14th Street? Well the railroad went south and Alexandria through there, see, the railroad went down there. But that's all defunct now. And Southfield didn't have a fan. They had big furnaces inside the mine on fire and they sucked the air in and that's the way they ventilated in Southfield there. I've been into the furnaces in the Fiddick mine, you see, Southfield went down there. Do you know how the land lays here? Well all the land is 1/4 mile wide and it runs towards the ocean and it runs towards the ocean, I'll show you on the map.

[Someone is talking in the background, unintelligible]

.....that's as far south as it went. Now the E & N got all that free of taxes and as soon as they sold a little bit of it to anybody you had to pay taxes. And the government is fighting this yet! There has been a sale; they sold to the CPR and therefore they should have been paying taxes and they don't pay taxes. That's what they're fighting about this here passenger train that runs along here, they call it the Dayliner; they're trying to take it off. In the agreement it says for gettin' all this timber and coal rights, not precious metals, they got all that and a lot of money besides to build that railroad and that's why they're trying to force them to live up to their contract. That railroad, a lot of people don't know it, but I've had information from conductors on the freight train and this 130 or 140 odd miles from Courtenay to Victoria is the best paying piece of railroad in North America, in Canada. As a package deal it's making money but it's losing money on the passenger train, but the railroad as a package deal is making money, and lots of it. You should see, you should see 80 and 90 cars here two and three trips a day going past here.

Now I can't tell you much more about the coalmines; they all finished one after the other. The Granby got shut down on account of [?] and the others were dug out. Extension closed up because it wasn't profitable anymore, but there's some coal left in it. Now there's no coalmines.

Interviewer: Did you ever work in the mines yourself?

Thatcher: Yes.

Interviewer: At Extension?

Thatcher: No, I worked on the pumps in Granby and I worked on the survey courses in PCCM and I dug coal with Fiddicks. When the Fiddicks was gopher holing.

Interviewer: Which years would that be?

Thatcher: It was in the '30s when they were gopher holing. They used to send 40-ton cars to Vancouver to sell and then they sold locally, truck came and got coal.

Interviewer: How many men would an operation like that, Fiddicks...

Thatcher: PCCM?

Interviewer: Well PCCM, I mean the smaller mines?

Thatcher: Oh well these gopher holes you don't call them mines, they're gopher guys, 4 or 5 or 6 or 7 working. The other mines were hundreds of miners, men worked in Number 1. You'd come at 3 o'clock there the street would be solid with men from Commercial Street where they come off... see they used to come off the scow too; the one bunch went from Nanaimo over to Protection. You see they dug coal right out to Snake Island, 6 miles under the water and they would take the men across on the scow there so they wouldn't have so far to travel underground so it wouldn't take so long to get to work, see.

Interviewer: Were the men paid from the time they got to the face or were they paid from the time they went under?

Thatcher: They were paid from the time they went under until you come out, 8 hours.

Interviewer: So would the company make money by taking the men over by boat?

Thatcher: Sure, less traveling time, see. They took them across on your time on the scow. They went down in the mine then, and if they went down Number 1 they were getting paid. Of course the diggers, they just got paid for what coal they dug, you see, But there was one thing, one thing, that I don't know if they do it yet or not, of course we've got this metric system now; but when you were digging coal you got paid by the English long ton which was 2240 pounds and when they sold it they sold it as 2000 pounds. But when you were digging it you had to beat 2240, eh the British, eh what they call a long ton. As long as men were digging coal that's what they got paid by the long ton and sold by the short.

Interviewer: How many days would you work?

Thatcher: Well they worked 6 days a week, Saturday too.

Interviewer: Were the Companies running 7 days a week in '20s and '30s?

Thatcher: They wouldn't work on Sundays, only the maintenance, but they always worked Saturdays, you had to work 6 days a week, there was no 5 day week in them days.

Interviewer: When did the 5-day week come in?

Thatcher: Oh... for a long time when we worked on the road they used to give us an hour off on Saturday. 70 years ago I hauled gravel in here when I was only about 17 years old, I'm just bordering on 87 now, in September I'll be 87. 70 years ago I hauled gravel on here for 10 hours a day with a team of horses for \$6. That's the kind of money you got then. 10 hours for \$6!

Interviewer: When did you first go into the mines?

Thatcher: When I first, when I first went in the mine was about 1912. I was only with the surveyors, I was a top-hand. I started to work on the railroad and when the railroad got finished the fella says "Have you got a hammer and a saw at home" I said "Yes" "Well" he says, "fetch it down. We're building a tipple here now and you can give the other carpenters a hand and work with them." So I worked on the tipple for the PCCM and helped build the barn and I helped build the office. I painted the office with a 2" brush because the company couldn't afford to buy a brush!

Second Interviewer: Do you remember anything about the strike that took place here in 1912, 1913?

Thatcher: Well I remember all about it!

Second Interviewer: Can you tell us about it?

Thatcher: Well the men went on strike and the company was persistent in hiring what we call scabs, and I don't know whether I should say this or not, but don't put it in the tape, but I'll tell you. The striking men tried to burn the scabs out and the wind turned and burnt their own town out! Burnt the whole South Wellington right out! And then a fellow by the name of Tangle Jackson [?], a man from Ladysmith, had a house to pay for and kids to look after, and they really carried the strike on past, past of winning when it was useless. And some went to work again, you see, and this man went to work and a man by the name of Tangle Jackson threw sticks of dynamite into his house, through the window, in Ladysmith, and he picked it up and threw it out and he threw it back in again and it went off in his hands, broke his ribs and bones, blew one arm off and that fella got quite a few years in jail for it. And then they had the trouble in Extension and they sent the army over to go up to Extension to quiet it, but they never did. There was no fightin' with the army. The men went up there to get after what they called the scabs and the scabs went and fired a volley of shots, they could have killed ... the scabs could have killed them if they wanted to, but they just fired a volley over the top of their heads to push them back. And that's when they started wrecking the town then, and that's when the soldiers came. The men lost the strike.

First Interviewer: What portion of the men were on strike, what portion of the men continued to work?

Thatcher: Oh, from Cumberland to here every mine was out!

First Interviewer: How many of the miners went back to work there?

Thatcher: Well, there was enough went back to work with scabs coming in from outside; the scabs come in from the States and from everywhere and they came here to go to work, you

see. Finally, finally the other men got back. Finally! But only by dribbles. They just didn't go back en masse like that.

First Interviewer: Do you remember any of the attempts to organise the men?

Thatcher: Well, I wasn't, I wasn't working in the mines at that time. I was hauling timber to the mines for another man, with my horses. (Long pause). I never went to the union meetings you see, so I don't know. But they had their organizers.

First Interviewer: Where were the union meetings held?

Thatcher: Well, they held, they held them in Cumberland, they held them in Nanaimo.

First Interviewer: But they wouldn't,.. they couldn't be right in town could they? Would they be secret or..?

Thatcher: Oh, they had them in Nanaimo but then they would have the Cumberland men, some of the Cumberland men come down for the meetings or they would go up there sometimes too, you see. They was all together.

First Interviewer: What happened to the union people once the miners went back to work?

Thatcher: Well, they got back to work and then they organized again and they finally got, they finally got a union goin' again. And as of today, if you paid your dues there are some of them men getting immense pensions right now. I don't know exactly what they get, but it's a big pension. In the hundreds of dollars a month. If you talk to some of the old miners that you had to keep up your dues, you understand. Lots of them when they quit working in the mine they quit paying their dues, they're out. But the ones right to this day are gettin' a terrible big pension, the miners are, the old miners. I can't tell you any more than that.

First Interviewer: Where did you live in the twenties and thirties?

Thatcher: I lived on a farm down Thatcher Road till I was 55 years old. Till the forties. I lived where I was born. I was born down Nanaimo River Road and moved up about a mile and a half and was on the farm there down Thatcher Road there in 1895. Then the sawmill started on the farm there and I've got some pictures in here of the sawmill there. Then I sold the,...give the farm away and I moved down here.

TAPE ENDS ABRUPTLY