Ep. 24: T Buck Suzuki
Transcribed by Patricia Wejr

Rod M [00:00:05] Welcome to another edition of On the Line, a podcast that brings to light stories from BC's rich heritage of labour history. I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh. In this episode, we celebrate the life of Tatsuro Suzuki, who spent his life advocating for the West Coast fishing community, first as a young liaison between Japanese Canadians and an industry dominated by whites. Then as a strong trade unionist, and finally as an early environmental activist fighting to protect fish habitat. You will hear him in an interview conducted and recorded by the City of Richmond in 1976, the year before he died. We also spoke with Lorene Oikawa, who was related to Buck on her father's side and who has carried on his legacy of trade unionism and social activism. The first Japanese immigrants arrived on the West Coast in 1877. By 1900, more than 4000 farmers, fishermen and labourers from Japan had settled here. Buck Suzuki's father and other family members arrived in 1906 and took up residence on Oikawa Island, in the south arm of the Fraser River. Buck was born there in 1915. By the time he was nine, he was already fishing. As he grew older, he developed a capacity for working with people and became a spokesperson for the Japanese community in Steveston. But all that came to an end after Japan's bombing of Pearl Harbour on December 7th, 1941. Canada joined the United States in declaring war on Japan and move quickly against its peaceful Japanese Canadian residents on the West Coast. They lost their houses and other possessions, including their prized fish boats, evicted from the coast, and interned in grim, rudimentary camps in the B.C. Interior. Before detailing the impact of internment and the war on Buck Suzuki, however, a bit of background. Here he is talking about the early days of fishing on the West Coast and what it was like for Japanese Canadians like himself. This is from his interview with the City of Richmond's oral history program.

City of Richmond Interviewer [00:02:41] I wonder if you could talk a little bit about the early days of the union and how the union came into being and, your involvement in it.

Buck Suzuki [00:02:52] Well, I noticed that the union movement, the effort to organize has been very strong in the Steveston area from a way back. Firstly, they were, you know, they were divided into ethnic lines, especially with the people of Japanese origin on one side and the natives and the others on the other side sort of idea. And there was, you know, for the companies, it was a very good thing. You would just say [unclear] and one would go and smile at the other, and they would never pull together. And what made it worse, later on in the early efforts, was I think, somewhere along the line, they began to deprive this one ethnic group, the Japanese of certain rights and this weakened them. And when you weaken that person, well then, he's not very good for pulling together anymore.

Rod M [00:03:52] The coast was divided into regions, and licenses were given out for each area, but pressure from non-Japanese restricted where the Japanese could fish.

Buck Suzuki [00:04:03] The company, they didn't care one way or the other. But the pressure from the citizens, made it so that the politicians, [unclear] and they got on this bandwagon and they really blew it up you see. And we didn't know any better. Well, that is I say that we, the persons of Japanese origin who'd always been living in ghettos, segregated, because that was the general attitude of the time. And when you do that, you don't know what the other person is thinking about. A lot of those people in Steveston and other places where there were Japanese ghettos or Chinese ghettos, those people were all normal people. They intended to follow the law and respect the law and they thought that was all that was necessary. But it wasn't so. It was a question of social contact. The

question of understanding, or the problem of understanding somebody else's customs, religion and everything else, and when you don't understand that, in the old days, the majority had very little patience with those people. And as a result, there was further discrimination and until finally in the end, they decided they'd cut the Japs completely out of the industry. I think the year that they cut them was in '24. So anyway, this really segregated them from the rest. And the cry was all right, we started on the Japs, now let's finish the job. But at that time, the company suddenly seen that the fishing power in those days in the hand-pulling days, the experienced ones were going. And, there... wasn't always the level, of, same level of, license applicants each year. In other words, certain years when, there weren't too many fish, well then you'd have a great big drop in the normal Canadian application. The only ones that you had to rely on were the Japanese who prized their license. It was a precious thing. They, you know, so they hung on to it. They became experts in the fishing game. Nevertheless, when they became experts and then they were subject to more prejudice. Damn sons o'guns must be using some other methods or illegal methods, or they work too hard or they can survive on rice and fish and oh, you name it. What they couldn't think of -- the only good, well finally it ended up, the only good Jap was a dead Jap. This is how far it went. So anyway, this wasn't just one person. It was everybody.

Rod M [00:06:43] Various unions competed to represent the fishermen, but race continued to be a factor. Suzuki was asked about the B.C. Fishermen's Protective Association and whether it was mostly for white fishermen.

Buck Suzuki [00:06:59] Yes. All white. As a matter of fact, they wouldn't allow any Japanese in the membership. Then there was the Pacific Coast Fishermen's Union, which was, a sort of a follow up from the old Wobbly people and the Fishermen and Cannery Workers Industrial Union. I attended many of their meetings in the early 1930s, you know, and I know their thinking and everything. They were a bunch of dreamers, you see at that time. Oh, very practical dreamers but still they would be classified as radicals and real dreamers in those days by society in general. I think they were on the right track in so far as organizing is concerned, and they finally culminated in the Pacific Coast Fishermen's Union, which went together with seine boat, Salmon Purse Seiners Union, and they formed the United Fishermen's Federal Union, which again changed its name to United Fishermen and Allied Workers Union, which is the most dominant union here in the industry now, you know, embracing all, fishermen and shore workers.

Rod M [00:08:12] But conditions remained difficult for Japanese fishermen, no matter how much Suzuki involved himself in the union.

City of Richmond Interviewer [00:08:19] What was your involvement in the union?

Buck Suzuki [00:08:23] Well, in those days, I tried my best to be a sort of liaison person. Because one, you were not allowed to claim, you know, become a member in the Pacific Coast Fishermen's Union. And the other, you were sort of semi welcome provided you toed the line and did as you were told sort of idea. Then you were a good man and they would stand by all that they came up with. And so when you looked at it, if you joined one, you antagonized the other. Where do we go? The companies, for one thing, didn't like the idea of us joining the Pacific Coast Fishermen's Union. Why were we afraid of the company? Because most of the Japanese people, especially in Steveston, were subservient to the company. Everything they owned, except their boats and nets, their houses, their tie-up facilities, everything else was owned by the company and they ensured they were advanced enough to, you know, tide them over the wintertime and

they'd start again in the spring sort of idea. So they had no choice but to, not be principled, would just be, you know, straddling both sides. What can we do? No politician wanted to help us for the simple reason we were without franchise. We were second class citizens at that time or third class citizens, whatever you want to say. We weren't worth, well, speaking for. So they just really, you know, instead, they gave us the boot.

Music: Song of the Sockeye sung by George Hewison [00:10:00] O hark to the song of the sockeye like a siren's call of old. When it gets in your blood you can't shake it. It's worse than the fever for gold. There's a hole in BC's coastline, Rivers Inlet is the place that I mean. And it's there that you'll find the old timer. Also, the fellow that is green. And the boats head for there like the sockeye. Some are a joy to the eye, while others are simply abortions. They ought to be left high and dry. But when the season is over and we think of the money that we made, we'd have been better off to have stayed on shore no matter how low we were paid. So hark to the song of the sockeye like a siren's call of old. When it gets in your blood you can't shake it. It's worse than the fever for gold.

Rod M [00:11:13] Internment was the coup de grace. In addition to being forced into camps, the boats belonging to Japanese fishermen were seized and sold off for a pittance. But Buck Suzuki managed to escape the worst of it. He had contacts at local naval headquarters and got a sense of what was coming, so he moved quickly to sell his boat before it was confiscated.

Buck Suzuki [00:11:40] I sold that boat. I knew what was coming, so I just sold it as soon as I could. I tried to move on, tell the other people in Steveston immediately after the boats had been impounded -- all their fishing gear and their boats -- I said, I can distinctly remember. And I must have been very, very youngish looking, because I remember going to this meeting, and there was just every person of Japanese origin that was in the fishing industry was at this hall in Steveston. When I spoke to them in my broken Japanese and told them, you better sell your boat. You better sell your net. You're not going to go fishing anymore. But they had the idea that they had -- oh, there was all kinds of people, you know, who were taking money from some of the Japanese and saying that, look, we're going to go Ottawa. We've got friends in Ottawa, we've got politician friends. We'll see that you go back out again. And here I was bucking this sort of thing. You see, I knew that it was impossible. I'd been, you know, working on this thing, studied the psychology of the Canadian public.

Rod M [00:12:44] Growing up, Lorene Oikawa always referred to Suzuki as her Uncle Buck, although technically he was an older cousin. While she recalls him being around she doesn't remember him telling stories about his work. He was busy and away a lot. Not until Lorene became active in the B.C. Government Employees Union did she begin to hear about his trade unionism. That prompted her to begin her own research. In an interview, she reflected on the tendency of families not to speak about the cruelties and racism they experienced.

Lorene Oikawa [00:13:23] In fact, later I found out too, my mum's family, they were given 24 hours notice, weren't told how long they're going to be gone, where they're going, told to pack whatever you could carry. And then they were -- my mum's family were in Cumberland on Vancouver Island. It's the north part of Vancouver Island and it used to be a mining community. Anyway, they were shipped from there. They were shipped to Hastings Park, which the federal government had taken over. And then families that got there were forced to separate again. So children and the mums and the grandmas went to the livestock barns, teenage boys went to another building, men went to another building.

And they weren't allowed to, if you can imagine, if you're a teenage boy, you're not allowed to speak to your mum, your dad, anyone. You're separated into these buildings and they lived there for sometimes several weeks before they were shipped out to a camp. And so that's the experience of my mum's side of the family and then my dad's side, along with my Uncle Buck, right, were already in Vancouver. So they weren't shipped to Hastings Park, they were shipped directly to the camps. But yeah, it's just, it's really hard to -- I think for most people, it's really hard to understand. But if you think of it, you're in your home, you're safe. You have all your stuff, your belongings. And if you can imagine that all of a sudden there's a banging on the door and there's police there saying you don't belong, we're going to move you out, take what you can carry. It's just, it just, it just yeah boggles your mind. Like, I don't even know what I would think.

Rod M [00:15:00] It's not well known that even after the war ended, Japanese Canadians were not allowed to return to the West Coast for another four years. By then, as Lorene Oikawa recounts, many had no interest in returning.

Lorene Oikawa [00:15:16] Sometimes I think because families don't talk about the internment, for example, just because the whole kind of what I call philosophy, is that it happened. It was bad, but let's move on. They were forced to rebuild their lives, to work, to get money. So not a lot of people could come back, to the West Coast. But this huge part of our history is not, not as well known because families just didn't talk about it. They worked hard, they rebuilt their lives. They just pushed forward and wanted to make a better future. So I know for my family, I didn't know about it. It was only till later. And that's kind of the same thing with my Uncle Buck. We didn't talk about things.

Rod M [00:16:02] Meanwhile, despite the shameful way he and other Japanese Canadians had been treated, Buck Suzuki tried to enlist in the Canadian Army. Yet even then, he was rejected because he was Japanese. The British Army, however, was not so fussy. They were fighting Japan in the Pacific and recruited Suzuki for vital intelligence work. He spent two years with the British as an intelligence officer in India and Singapore, where he helped to investigate war crimes after Japan surrendered. Lorene Okawa explains.

Lorene Oikawa [00:16:40] So World War Two and Canadians of Japanese ancestry wanted to show again their loyalty, and they were rejected. And so, at one point, my Uncle Buck, the British Army, said, well, we want people, we want skilled people, etc.. So, yeah, he got recruited by the British Army. The Canadians said something about loaning or whatever. So my cousin laughed and said, well, that was because the British Army said, we'll take the Canadians, Japanese Canadians and then to save face that the Canadian Army just said, oh, well, they're on loan to the British Army is the way my cousin put it. So yeah and that's how he became involved with the British Army.

Rod M [00:17:26] When he returned to Canada in 1947, Suzuki simply ignored the ban on Japanese Canadians returning to the West Coast. He boarded a train for Vancouver.

City of Richmond Interviewer [00:17:38] Perhaps you could tell us a bit about how, what it was like when you returned, after the war?

Buck Suzuki [00:17:44] Well, in my case, there was no trouble at all. Absolutely no trouble. I was a returned veteran, I'd just come back from overseas. And I just stayed for a little while in southern Ontario, where my wife and child was and then took a notion and come out to British Columbia. It wasn't because there wasn't a job for me or a house or

anything, they were very, very nice in Ontario. They were going to get me a house, the jobs were all over for me and everything, you know. But, the statements being thrown around at that time was that no Jap will ever be allowed to come back to the coast. So I said, well, is that so! What are you going to do about it? And this was within ten days after I had landed in Canada. I had friends out here, so I just came right out here on the train. I still had my military pass and everything else and came out to Vancouver and I wasn't going to beat around the bush. I went straight into the, what we called the Japanese, you know, Security Commission headquarters with the RCMP, who were still keeping statistics. I went over and I knew them, the man in charge, and I went up and talked to the man. And I says, hey Blackie, I'm back. And he just squirmed and squirmed something fierce, you know, because I knew damn well that there were no Japanese person is supposed to come in here without a permit. So I said, hey Blackie... then after a while I stayed and we chewed the rag about everything and he was squirming sort of thing and give me that slip of paper and I said give me a permit right now. I said I don't want to get you in Dutch. He didn't say a damn thing, he just shoved the paper over to me and I signed that, requesting permission to come here and, you know, look around. And he said what are you going to do? I said well I think I'll go look for a job, Blackie. So I came out here and I guess as a veteran I could have brought my wife and child out here although the housing was something fierce, there was no houses. But anyway, I finally found a couple of rooms in Vancouver. I got a job longshoring. And then I decided, well, everything is free and easy now, so I might as well go and see how fishing is like. So I came out here and started fishing. It wasn't that easy, I just went directly to the person that I used to fish for before. I said, hey, I was just wondering if I couldn't get you to back me up to go fishing?

Music: I Don't Want Your Millions Mister, sung by George Hewison & the Rank N File Band [00:20:33] I don't want your millions mister, well I don't want your diamond rings. All I want is the right to live mister, give me back my job again. Well I've worked to build this country while you lived a life of ease. Now you've stolen all that I've built mister while my children, they starve and freeze. And I don't want your millions, mister, and I don't want your diamond rings. All I want is the right to live, mister, give me back my job again.

Rod M [00:22:04] So Buck Suzuki wound up fishing again without much trouble. But other Japanese Canadians who wanted to get back into the industry weren't so fortunate. Racism remained strong in the industry, and they were kept ashore. It took a dramatic intervention by Homer Stevens of the United Fishermen and Allied Workers Union to smooth the waters for their return. Buck Suzuki.

Buck Suzuki [00:22:31] So in those days, it didn't cost too much. You didn't want anything much, you know, all I wanted was a roof over my head and a boat. So we'd gotten a place down the road here with an acre of land, boathouse, fishing equipment, a boat and a bunch of nets for $2,000. So that's the way I got started. But as far as I was concerned, there was no trouble. But the people in Steveston, they had a lot of trouble. They had the right to go and obtain a fishing license for the first time as free people. They had licenses in their back pocket. None of the companies wanted them. Didn't want them for the simple reason that the fishermen said we will not have any Japs fishing out of this cannery. If you do, we're leaving. Or if you do, we're going to make hell out of them, that sort of thing. The first people that are going to take them on, you know, take anybody of Japanese origin on outside of myself who were down in Steveston, was GH Todd & Company. They took a couple of boys. Then one day I was fishing up here and my cousin was fishing. We were both returned men and we were fishing down here and then these two men come crying up. And I found, and I wondered what in the world had happened. The whole gang in Steveston, the fishermen, chased them away from the dock, chased them all the way up

the river, told them to get out of here and don't you come back here again. So these two against all of Steveson in those days. Well, they didn't know what to do. Well, I've never seen a man so mad and crying at the same time when he come up here. And I said, well, look, you just take it easy. So I picked the phone up and O called Vancouver. Quit fishing and called Vancouver and I talked to Homer Stevens who I'd known very well. And I said to Homer, I said this is what happened. Well, he says, leave it to me. Leave it to me, he says, I'll look after it. So he went straight down to Steveston, called a meeting, and he really roasted them, you know, on principle.

City of Richmond Interviewer [00:24:46] Head of the union?

Buck Suzuki [00:24:48] Yes. He was secretary treasurer of the union at that time. And he roasted them, he really gave it to them, you know from a philosophical point of view and as a trade unionist. So anyway, they got together and the Steveston local decided that, all right, if any person of Japanese origin wants to come fishing on his own, we'll do everything we can to set up a committee to protect him from the rowdies. And then right away, immediately, Steveston cannery, especially BC Packers, people who'd been shunning the Japanese and telling everybody else, no we won't have more Japs around. We'll never have any Japs. They grabbed every person that had a license in his back pocket and had been hanging around. They just phoned them up and called the whole works in. See, it wasn't for love of the Japanese or anything. They loved the production at that time. And as soon as BC Packers did it, [unclear] Fidelity started in the Skeena River area, and then Canadian Fish was left out in the cold so they just even went on a recruiting drive to see if they can entice the Japanese from the prairies and eastern Canada to come out here and fish, which was something I objected to very strenuously. I mean it's one thing for people who want to come, but to go and recruit them and almost call the situation, you know, like that we knew before the war, they were dead against it. But then if nothing else, money talks. And this was the way its been but I'd been in a position to guide these people, to work together with the union, to work within the union. Step by step, I shed the Japanese people, you see. Not because I wanted to shed them, but I realized that they had to stand on their own feet. But what did I do with my energy? I had excess energy at that time and those things, I started to take over general, you know, union work. Not that I was paid or anything, but you know, took part in all the regular things and...

City of Richmond Interviewer [00:27:04] Did you help organize people and?

Buck Suzuki [00:27:06] Organized people and organized meetings and take care of strikes and you know, everything else. Fisheries. My main job was taking part in fisheries regulations and international law fisheries.

City of Richmond Interviewer [00:27:29] When you were busy with the union, were you also fishing at the same time?

Buck Suzuki [00:27:32] Yeah.

City of Richmond Interviewer [00:27:36] Can you recall any conflicts or outright confrontations you had, because of your union activities with, say, with the companies?

Buck Suzuki [00:27:47] They were very subtle, you know. No, they would never do that. I got along splendidly with them. But, I guess they found out that I was one of those characters that when I said no, I meant no. And if I said yes, well I would try and make sure that we kept our word one way or the other. So I got along fine, but I knew which side

of the bread the butter was on. And the nicest part of it was when we had trouble in 1967 and the president of the union and the secretary treasurer were thrown in jail, that's the year that they asked me to take over. And so I took over for over a year. And then once they come out of jail I fished for a while and then went back again as welfare director of the Union for British Columbia until I couldn't move anymore.

Rod M [00:28:48] As if all that wasn't enough, Suzuki became more and more concerned about the health of the salmon fishery and the threats to it from environmental degradation. Lorene Oikawa.

Lorene Oikawa [00:29:01] And then later on, although years ago, he also then became involved in, what we would term as the environmental movement. But there really wasn't a movement at that time, it was basically he was saying, we're dumping stuff in the water, which was typical, garbage, pollutants. They're poisoning our fish habitat, poisoning fish, but that's also poisoning us. And so I know that was a hard battle because at the time, people just would have thought, why are you talking about this? This is this is something we do. Why are you worried about it? But he persevered and continued. And I'm glad he was one of the people, because that's a huge concern for us today as well.

Rod M [00:29:45] Buck Suzuki died in 1977, but his name lives on with the T Buck Suzuki Environmental Foundation, established by the United Fishermen and Allied Workers Union in 1981 as a legacy of his tireless work to preserve fish habitat. The goal of the foundation is to protect BC's marine ecosystems, fisheries and ocean dependent communities. Says the foundation's website, our strength lies in a collaborative, socially minded and flexible approach to environmental activism pioneered by our namesake, T Buck Suzuki. Buck Suzuki had a huge impact on both fishermen and the waters off the West Coast. But he also had a personal impact on Lorene Oikawa.

Lorene Oikawa [00:30:38] It was made -- Japanese Canadians were made invisible. They were disappeared. Buildings, everything they contributed to, too communities, all their work. And so that's the other important [thing] is we have to remember what's the possibilities? What was it like? What we've lost. Certainly some things we've gained, but also to recover some of the beauty, some of the nature. And then also just to to remember all the contributions, like the fishers, all that they did and the Japanese Canadian fishers and their role. And that was one of the amazing things about my Uncle Buck, too, because he was fishing since he was nine years old. He was fishing, so I can't imagine. But as a nine year old, I wasn't fishing or doing anything like that. And then I think he was 15 years old -- you know, he was really bright and he could speak Japanese and English, and he knew a lot political, and he knew he was good with people. He was one of the founders of the Japanese Canadian Citizens League, and he was doing great work to try to build the relationship between the fishers. And he was and, you know, who knows if if they hadn't been interned and all that, who knows what might have happened. But anyway, that kind of all blew up at that point. And then -- but then he did. He came back. He came back, and then he worked again, and he brokered a deal to make it so that Japanese Canadian fishers would be accepted. And then he worked alongside, alongside his fishing brothers because it was most mostly, if not all, men at the time. And he worked with them to fight for the rights of workers, fishers. But just to say that, that very proud of that legacy and also want to ensure it continues. Continues beyond me and that we always remember these stories and ensure that we do not do what we've done before of take away people's rights and jump on actions that are so divisive. And also to remember our environment because our environment is us. We all have to have that harmony of animals and fish and all of us living together because we only have one earth. I maybe didn't know as much

before, but as I learned more and more, I know that I'm carrying on the work of many good people, not just my uncle, many good people who've done a lot of work to fight for the rights of workers in the labour movement, etc.. So, I want to honour them by continuing that work and make sure the stories are never forgotten.

Rod M [00:33:31] Tetsuro Buck Suzuki was a remarkable person. He could teach us much today about living a principled life, overcoming adversity, and fighting for justice at a time when none of that was easy. I hope you've enjoyed our tribute to him. Thanks to the other members of the podcast collective, Donna Sacuta and Patricia Wejr. Patricia did much of the research and the interview with Lorene Oikawa. The music, appropriately, is by George Hewison, a former president of the United Fishermen and Allied Workers Union. John Mabbutt put everything together and I'm your podcast host, Rod Mickleburgh. We'll see you next time, On the Line.