

Episode 27 – Canning Salmon

Transcript by Patricia Wejr

Rod Mickleburgh [00:00:10] Welcome to another edition of On the Line, the podcast that shines a light on BC's rich labour heritage. I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh. In this episode, we bring you the first of a two part series on the role of women in BC's once thriving fishing industry, using both historical and present day interviews. We hear from women who toiled in the fish canneries that once lined the west coast of BC, and on the fish boats themselves. They bring to life a time when fish caught in BC helped feed the nation and many parts of the world.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:00:54] Our first focus is on the shoreworkers who worked in the fish plants. Two thirds of them were women and many were Indigenous. BC's commercial fishing industry began in the late 1880s, and it was soon a vibrant part of the province's working life. The first canneries were located along the Fraser River. Soon they were everywhere where there was salmon. By 1901, almost 80 canneries were operating on the BC coast. Today, there is one specialty cannery in Nanaimo. It's a working world that has disappeared, done in by amalgamations, buyouts, economic turmoil, refrigeration and free trade, which sent large amounts of BC caught fish to foreign processing plants, where labour was cheaper. The final nail in the coffin was the dramatic decline in what were once the most plentiful salmon stocks in the world. The BC Labour Heritage Center has a number of programs created by Vancouver Co-operative Radio, back in the old days, but the station's records were poor. Who was interviewed, when and where remain a mystery. Still, the material is too valuable to be left unheard. The first interview is with a shoreworker who worked along the Skeena River, starting when she was just ten years old, mending nets.

Unknown [00:02:22] And in those days they had linen nets. And I used to selvedge them, you know, put selvedging on them. And those nets then were oiled, you know, and at that time those nets -- you know, women, Japanese women who ever lived at the cannery there used to take contracts and they'd contract selvedging nets. And I can remember, I was so really young and I used to make my own needles and the cannery crew, you know, took pity on me I guess. They used to dash up and have their lunch and be back down in the netloft there in half an hour. They'd be all sitting there helping me fill needles. And after supper, you know, they would come down to our house and help me fill needles. And I used to have about 50 needles because when you're working on contract, you know you can't waste time. I must have started around when I was nine years old, selvedging. But then I still worked. I worked in the cannery when I was ten years of age. We used to pile cans in trays, you know, get cans, open these cans and have them ready for the hand fillers. I used to work on that, and at that time I was getting 15 cents an hour. All hours. There was no overtime pay. It was straight 15 cents an hour. And I can remember when the season was over I used to be so proud. The \$70 I would clear. [laughing] And that was big money in those days. My mother, she used to get \$75 a month. That's net work. But then they raised it later on to 85. It depended on the net boss. If he thought that the person was capable of doing this, well the starting rate was 75. They used to use children to work, piling cans in trays, you know. That was -- it was more or less like play to the younger kids, you know, as long as they were getting money for it, they enjoyed it. And then too, they were a very bunch of tired little kids like myself. There used to be a lot of Chinese. Mostly they worked in the cannery. They pitched fish. And they did all sorts of things, you know. They were actually the main people that did everything in the cannery, that's besides the mechanics and the engineers and whatnot. The mechanics and the engineers were all white. If you were native, you were put over here, hey. You were put in one row of little

shacks and you lived there. No -- not really anything in there except for a stove, wooden beds, no springs in them. And this is what I saw in those days. I even lived it too. And they used to have what they call contractors. You know, they're native people. They get one man from a village, and he is a company contractor and he hires fishermen in his own home. And it went like that in many different villages, they were contracted. And they were the spokesmen for his fishermen, no, company. And he's supposed to fight for them, you know, to get this, which doesn't always happen, you know.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:06:30] Work in the canneries was seasonal. It was taxing. And once the fish started pouring in, the hours were long. Needing the money, few spoke out against their working conditions. But one woman who was not afraid to speak out was Josephine Charlie. She was interviewed in 1978 by Sara Diamond. It was one of the first interviews Diamond did as part of her invaluable women's labour history project. Josephine Charlie was a member of the Squamish Nation. She and her husband would travel to Knights Inlet for six months every year, gathering resources for their own use, and then working in the fishing industry. Her husband fished. She worked in the cannery.

Josephine Charlie [00:07:15] I used to help the Indians up there because they didn't understand very well the white man's ways. Sometimes he tried to get the best of us and I'd go right there after the manager, but otherwise we were happy.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:07:31] Mostly she filled cans, but when things got busy and they often got very busy, she was ordered to help out wherever labour was needed.

Josephine Charlie [00:07:41] And pretty soon we'd look at the point, seine boats coming around the point or a packer. Oh, gonna get busy I tell the ladies. They nod their heads. They know what busy was in English. Sure enough, early next morning the Chinese boss goes there with a big stick and he's hitting our doors. Get up, get up. You got to go wash fish. I don't know who's washing fish. Got to fill cans, gotta be there 8 o'clock. But all get up, hurry in the morning. He's there 5 o'clock pounding our doors. That's the start, the very start of the canning season. Then we're all ready. The washers rush over to the cannery, got their freshest oil aprons. You got to have a uniform, the bonnet.

Sara Diamond [00:08:39] And did you have to buy your own uniform?

Josephine Charlie [00:08:41] No, the cannery supplied it. But you had to keep it clean yourself. They wouldn't allow you dressed the way you are. But we never wore boots. Never did. That's one place I never wore gumboots in that cannery. It's just dry inside that cannery. Of course it had big cracks in the floor. Any water would go down, you know. And the washers hurry up. Chinese, Indian woman, older woman and some teenager Indians.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:09:15] It was tough manual work that had to be done quickly with no mistakes.

Josephine Charlie [00:09:20] We'd be waiting there with our knives. And I always had a file to sharpen my knife. I'd have two, three knives. And pretty soon the fish would come. They'd bring it in boxes and they're laid before you, where you're standing. And I was very small and light then, and I was too short for the trays that you put down to put your cans that's full. So I always wore spike heels, very high heels. And I could use them from 8 o'clock to midnight. Never tired me. [laughing] I was so short I couldn't reach those trays. Ah, they'd laugh at me because sometimes I'd be late running. I'd get my daughter Barbara, now that's working. Get everything ready before I'd run. I'd run and those heels

make noise, come on the sidewalk. It's a mountain sides, all sidewalks, boards, you know. And we go by piece work, you know. And the washers are done long ago 'cause there isn't that much. No machinery, no machinery at all. All hand, the washers, ones cutting the heads, chopping the heads. Then the fillers just sort of goes on the line. The line women are all there inspecting what the cans that's going, they're all right. These women that fill cans up there are first class. They just get the right weight. I had to be like that. I had to get the right piece. And they told me you wouldn't like to buy a can that's full of cracks and that, they told me, not filled good. So every can was perfect.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:11:16] At the same time, most of the women had kids they took with them. Whole families lived in the shacks provided by the canneries. To ensure the children were safe, older children were paid to keep an eye on the younger kids. Often, a cannery would hire a woman to go around and visit the children to make sure all was well. Josephine Charlie says no children were hurt during her time in the canneries. That kind of support was essential when the season was in full swing. She paints a vivid picture of what it was like.

Josephine Charlie [00:11:51] Pretty soon, the big run comes. Oh, me. The Chinese man goes, hitting our doors at 5 o'clock. Everybody wash fish. I'm not a wash fisher I thought. You have to, because there's a lot of fish, he says. There's a packer in and two seine boats. Oh, my, I hurry up, dress. I heat my tea. I used to make my own bread and I'd toast on the stove. No electric lights there. I just had the gas lamp, that oil lamp. I got my toast, I put on the stove, and I hurry. I wake up my little girl -- you better eat something before I go. You can go to sleep again, I told her. Oh, she sat down, start crying a little bit, then she forgot. Oh about 7 I run to the cannery. It's not my regular time but I have to go help wash fish. They got a lot of places, and I helped them. Eight o'clock, it blows again, the whistle. that's for us fillers. Off we run. The ones that are washing, go in our places and we start filling cans. No rest period in between. But you're allowed to go to the washroom any time you want to go. But we hate to leave our work because the harder you work, the little more money you make. But the wages were awfully cheap. Very cheap. Only 2 bits an hour for washers. And we used to get \$6 for 150 trays. That's 48 cans, the small ones in one tray. And, I don't know, about 20 cans in the pound tray. And we'd work all hours from then on. That's the sockeye season. And then the pinks come in. That's where we pretty near die. They'd come by the thousands. Sometimes once in port we'd get 20,000. 30,000. You could see them around the point because the packers couldn't bring them. So the seiners bring their own. You could see them come around the point, just like if there were swaying, you know, they're so full of fish. Oh, we all groan [laughing] and we'd work on. There was no ice, no place to make ice, they'd just throw salt on, you know. They hosed it down with salt water that they throw salt on so the flies don't get on. Early in the morning, we all go to wash fish, and we got packs and packs all lined in the warehouse. And the manager says everybody's got to go to the warehouse and box. There's a steamboat coming to take all the pack. That's about pretty one month's work you know. So we get up at five and we all run to the pack warehouse, and we start boxing the sockeye, box it all up, and the longshoremens come and they start to bring them in those, like trucks. And then next we get to the pinks. They're one pound talls. We start boxing all those. Then the whistle blows, 7 o'clock the washers run in and start washing fish and then some have to go help them. Eight o'clock the whistle blows and we leave but we're boxing and we run to fill cans. Sometimes it's sockeye, that's quarter pounds. And we got an inspector. She was an Indian woman. She was very old, but so strict she wouldn't break a smile. I said if she ever smiled, her face would crack. [laughing] She had to, you know. She wouldn't give us any -- nobody anything at all, you know She had to be real strict.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:16:34] In 1931, the Native Brotherhood of BC was founded to advocate for Indigenous people up north, spurred by a Haida elder, Fred Adams, and his vision of tribal unity. Women quickly formed a separate Native Sisterhood of BC. Josephine Charlie was a member and a firebrand.

Josephine Charlie [00:16:54] Yeah. Sisterhood. Brotherhood. That's the only union we had. But I joined in that because I heard they were paying good in Butedale canneries. I heard that the tickets we were getting for \$6 were \$9, and the hours were 75 an hour and they were paying only 20 cents an hour. I told the ladies tell your other friends and the workers, we're gonna go into the netloft and we're gonna call the manager. 'What you gonna do Josephine,' they said, 'what you gonna do?' I heard this, I told them. I talked to the leader. I kind of knew who would do a lot of loud talking. You know what we're gonna do? I'm gonna put the manager as chairman. You can't have nothing to say. Chairman? What's that they said. You'll see I told them then I called the others. We sat down. We talked. I told the foreman, the manager, Mr. Matthews, we want to go in the same as everything as the other canneries. Butedale and everywhere else. The same wages. He got red. He's an Englishman. He nod his head. Because he meant yes, you know. He couldn't say nothing, he's the chairman. They start to talk and he kind of understood a little their language, and we got through. And we all went again to go to work, you know. Our wages were up now. In the meantime I turned right around. 'What is it, Miss Charlie?' 'Ten dollars or nothing' I told. Our tickets. Oh, he got redder than ever. He had a pipe, he started smoking fast. 'All right,' he says, 'all right.' I went out, I told Katie. She's a very lively woman, she's still alive yet, I've seen her in Campbell River. Tell your friends our six dollar tickets are \$10 now. Oh, they just screamed, ran for me. My hair was just like that where they were grabbing me. But that was coming to us the others said. That was our cannery life you know, too.

Music: 'Canning Salmon' performed by Fraser Union [00:19:42] Somewhere outside a whole summer slips away while we're stuck in here canning salmon. First we can springs, so heavy our arms ache. Then we do sockeye, which we can with ease. Then we do pinks, all mashed up and rotten. So they're packed up in pound tins and shipped overseas. High is the smell, low is the pay. Long are the hours. Why do we stay? Somewhere outside a whole summer slips away while we're stuck in here canning salmon.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:20:51] The Canning Salmon song was written by Linda Chobotuck and sung by the Vancouver folk group Fraser Union. In the years after Josephine Charlie's cannery experiences, the industry began to change. For one thing, there was a strong union to represent the shoreworkers, the United Fishermen and Allied Workers Union. Jackie Campbell was a long-time shoreworker who in time became a union activist. In a recent interview, she recalled leaving Vancouver in the late 1960s to live and work in the isolated coastal village of Sointula. She was torn when the union showed up.

Jackie Campbell [00:21:31] But my real first steady, proper job was at Windsong Roe. This guy, Jim O'Connor, O'Connell, I think. Jim O'Donnell. He had a float plane and all the gillnetters and not so much on the seine boats, but I think it was mostly gilnetters and trollers would just throw away -- because they'd clean their fish -- and they'd just throw the guts and the roe overboard. So he got this great idea. I'm going to fly out to the grounds and collect the roe, the salmon roe, from all the fish boats. And he got in touch with Japanese specialists in what they wanted for the market in Japan. And it was boxes of roe, like full pieces of roe, not the individual eggs. So we had to basically learn how to tell what it -- whether it was sockeye or spring salmon or pinks or whatever, just by what the roe looked like. So that was a learning curve and that was really interesting. And there was a

little place down by the ferry terminal that he rented, and he got these guys, these technicians to come over and teach us and so it was amazing. So they had to weigh the exact right amount and we had to weave them together so they looked the same on the top and the bottom. So when they cracked the box open, it looked good, you know, it looked the same whether they did it upside down because they were just banded together. It kind of oozed out and each layer had salt on. So it was quite a thing to learn, right. And so we were really happy. There was about four of us, to have that job, like, right down the street. So it was amazing, right? Oh, I get to go to work every day and make money. We gotta keep this, you know. So back in the day, the union had a boat and I can't remember. I've been trying to remember the name of it. Anyway, they would tour the coast and went to different camps and stuff, and they came to Sointula. And so we were like, 'we gotta keep this job!' And we didn't really think about how it would affect this entrepreneur that was doing this amazing thing. But being an entrepreneur, not a union person. And he got really upset because we -- I think it was Frank Cox was the first person and I met Frank and he was like all gungho, yeah, oh yeah, you guys want to have this, this is a sweet deal. And he said you can have this all the time, and then they can't lower your wages or. But we're not going to -- and we were really worried, right. We didn't want to cost him extra money and it was 'oh no, no, it's just to secure your job' and, you know, not be replaced by somebody else and still still have this. But he got so upset. That was basically it and I didn't do it anymore, but we were trying to work with him and it wasn't a money thing. I think he felt that we went behind his back or something. I don't know how it evolved. That was 40 years ago. But that was my very first experience with the union. I still was really pro-union because of what they stood for, you know, and like there were so many abuses.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:25:02] After her roe packing job ended, Jackie worked in Port Hardy during the herring season. By this time, she was a single mother. The cooperative nature of Sointula allowed her to leave her son with members of the community while she was away working. She returned the favour when the season was over. But eventually she left Sointula to return to Vancouver. That's where her union activism took flight. She was in the forefront of a determined fight to end the industry's longstanding two-tiered wage system that kept cannery women from earning as much as men.

Jackie Campbell [00:25:40] There was a two-tier wage thing. This was a real issue. This was a big thing in the fishing, in the shoreworkers. We had quite a few like grievances and things that went to convention and stuff around this two-tiered thing. And we finally got it changed, if you wanted to do it. That was the issue. People didn't want to be forced into it. There was so much misinformation and fear mongering and everything, but we were like pretty tough. And we said we want to work in the freezer. Well, no one should lift a 150 pound halibut. We can do it together. The guys should do it together. This is ridiculous and we worked here all these years and we're being sent home and some new guy just because he's got muscles. We've got muscles too, you know, and I wasn't scared of the cold storage. So I started working in the cold storage and I really liked it. And then in, you know, in herring season we popped the roe and then salmon season I worked on the fresh fish. But mostly once we were allowed to go in -- if you look it up, there's a book. I think that it's the book that they put out for people. It was like the pension. We finally got a pension plan after years and years, and I think it was the book about the pension plan, but it says in it 'shoreworkers no longer frozen out'. And there's a picture of us -- or 'shoreworker women no longer frozen out of cold storage'. And we're standing in front of the sharp freezer with all this mist in our freezer suits. They're like, you know, snowsuits type, skidoo suits or whatever. Big green ones with hoods. You could hardly see us in this fog. Anyway, that was pretty cool.

Patricia Wejr [00:27:26] Were you in the union in that plant?

Jackie Campbell [00:27:28] Yeah, that was a union plant when I started. But that was the union that was fighting that first. But in early days, you know, things were grandfathered in and it was a real fight. Like we had to prove to the union that it was worth fighting. And through that whole process, I became a shop steward. So then I was going to the hall, and I was learning about how the organizing of the union worked. And, you know, because I was not an organizer, but I was fighting that battle and then others for people. So I knew how to read the contract, figure out whether it was a violation. But then quite often I had to go and say, okay, we should be fighting this. It's right in the contract there. Yeah, but yeah, but. And I'm like, no, you know, so it's like everything was a fight. But I learned to do that, and I learned that I really liked the union and especially the UFAWU. And then because they were, I felt ahead of their time, and even more so now, looking back at some of the things.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:28:35] She recalls the catalyst that finally broke the back of the entrenched wage system that had shortchanged women shoreworkers for decades.

Jackie Campbell [00:28:43] Yeah, that was the basis of it. But it was called the two -- it had been written in stone for so long that nobody questioned it until a bunch of us got -- well, there was actually a woman that worked at BC Ice that had to sue the union. It was a huge thing that went on and then everybody, 'oh, she's a troublemaker', right? But we sort of went, well, if she can do it, we're not going to sue the union, but this is winnable kind of thing, right. And so we finally got them on side, you know, to actually fight it and bring it to -- like it didn't have to go to arbitration. But you know, to argue that, that we would go to arbitration if they didn't work with us. So then they sort of did it and tried to -- oh, also, there was a woman at where I worked that actually went to the human rights and in order to sue the company for human rights, they had to sue the union. And so she wasn't a very union person, but she wanted her job. She did. She was a single mum, too. So she won that. And they were just blown away, the management. Like, how can she work here, when she sued us? Like who sues a company and then continues to work? Well, that's what the human rights is about. But it worked. And we all worked. She worked in the freezer, too, and she got to work on the dock for the first time because she fought that. She couldn't, you couldn't run the winch unless you were a guy. So it was pretty unequal and sexist. So we changed a lot of that.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:30:21] As well as fighting for equal pay, Jackie was also on of the union's health and safety committee. Later, she became active in the T Buck Suzuki Foundation that worked to preserve healthy salmon streams. But industry jobs kept disappearing. Thanks to union pressure, there was federal funding to retrain displaced workers. Jackie developed a whole different set of skills and a new job at a Community Fisheries Development Center. Looking back on her time as a shoreworker, she has no regrets.

Jackie Campbell [00:30:53] Well, it was stressful, but I think that winning to be able to work in the cold storage and have my seniority and not to be discriminated because I was a woman, I think that was a huge battle and it felt really good.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:31:09] And that's it for part one of our two part series on the work experiences of women in the BC fishing industry. Part two coming soon.

Music: theme song [00:31:20] Hold the fort fort we are coming! Union hearts, be strong...

Rod Mickleburgh [00:31:27] Thanks as always to other members of the podcast collective, Donna Sacuta and Patricia Wejr, who did the research and interviewed Jackie Campbell. Thanks as well to Zoe McCrystal for helping to arrange that interview. As mentioned, the Canning Salmon song was written by Linda Chobotuck and performed by Fraser Union. This episode of On the Line was produced by John Mabbott and the BC Labour Heritage Center. I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh. We'll see you next time, On the Line.