

Blacklists and Black Gold:

Using the Census to Learn about Blacklisted Vancouver Island Miners

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History 340: Work and Workers

February 10, 2023

Everybody knows Nanaimo was a mining town. It's nearly impossible to go for a walk in this city without stumbling on some proof of that; from the Morden Mine head (the only intact head of its kind on Vancouver Island) to place names (Dunsmuir Street, Colvilletown), the city is awash with the story of how coal mining enterprises figuratively built it. However, the flipside of this story—the people who worked in these mines and who literally built this city—is rarely talked about. This article will shed some light on these people and what happened to them after they were banned from the mines for fighting for better pay, working conditions, and recognition for their union.

Eastern Vancouver Island was rich in coal, and coal towns started popping up in the nineteenth century. In 1911, the year before what would later be called the Great Strike, Vancouver Island mines employed over 4,600 men and mined almost two million gross tons of coal, most of which was for domestic use. Coal comprised over half of the approximately \$10,500,000 of mined products produced on the Island that year. Across the province, coal accounted for just under one-third of all mineral production. Just as coal was vital to Vancouver Island, Vancouver Island was vital for coal. Throughout the early twentieth century only the East Kootenays region was producing enough coal to warrant a separate mention in the Annual Report of the Minister of Mines. Even then, the East Kootenays' output only ever surpassed Vancouver Island's once between 1908 and 1923, in the year 1913, when the Great Strike and looming recession had cut Vancouver Island's output by almost a third. See figure 1 for a breakdown of yearly production in both regions.

BC Coal Production, tons

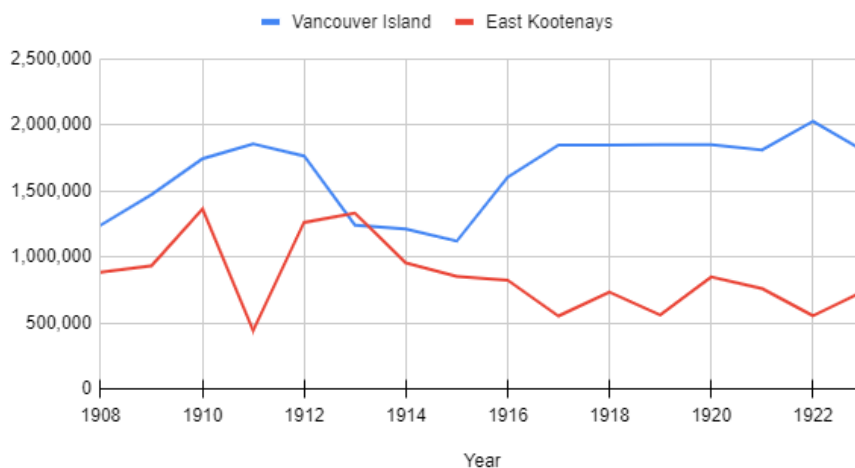


Figure 1 Coal production in tons per year, East Kootenays vs Vancouver Island.

Coal mining was as dangerous and dirty a business as it was vital. Pay was often poor, the working conditions were extremely dangerous, and the miners had little control over the nature of their work. Walkouts and

strikes over these matters were common but companies had a variety of tools at their disposal to squash labour unrest, ranging from evicting striking miners from company housing, hiring “scab” workers to replace the strikers, calling in the provincial militia under the pretext of restoring an “essential service,” and running blacklists of strikers and union organizers. Blacklists featured prominently during the Great Strike, a fact that we will return to later. Labour unrest in the 1910s was amplified by the arrival of the experienced and deep-pocketed United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), one of the largest unions in the United States.

The Great Strike started in 1912, ostensibly over the dismissal of union organizer and gas committeeman Oscar Mottishaw, but largely to win recognition of the UMWA and bargaining rights. The UMWA’s position seemed strong at the beginning, but the end of the firemen and engineer strike, the forced return of Chinese and Japanese labourers to the mines, and the start of a recession in 1913 dealt serious blows to the union’s position. The Great Strike developed a new character in 1913. The *Canadian Annual Review* called it “the labour event” of the year; indeed, it

had gained national attention due to the August riots, when strikers targeted company property, tried to harm scabs, and may have attempted to blow up a railway trestle. The intensity of this riot ended up being severely exaggerated by contemporary sources, the *Canadian Annual Review* included, and the response of the provincial government which, in late August, deployed the militia to crush the strikers. By September, hundreds had been arrested and tried and the strike was essentially broken. The Great Strike certainly ended with a bang, but resulted in no new ground for the miners. As an extra punishment, many miners were blacklisted from the mines, barred from working in any mines on Vancouver Island.



Figure 2 The arrival of the militia in downtown Nanaimo. The Coast Bastion is visible on the right.

These blacklisted miners are the primary interest of this article. How did they fare after being blacklisted? Did they find new work? Did they leave town? Answering these questions first requires finding who was blacklisted. That's harder than it sounds: we have no surviving list of blacklisted miners. What we do have, however, is Myrtle Bergren and Lynne Bowen's interviews of coal miners compiled in the book *Boss Whistle* and digitized in full by the Coal Tye Foundation. With this in mind, the process to find and assess these people looks like this:

1. Scour interviews and any other sources for references to blacklisted miners;
2. Find these miners in the 1911 and 1921 census;
 - a. In most cases, I had to find the interviewees first and then identify who in their family was the miner in question;
3. Compare their income, marital status, and location in 1911, two years before the Great Strike, and 1921, eight years after.

It's important to identify the limits of this approach. The census is not foolproof: before personal computers became common, the government hired enumerators to go door-to-door and record the head of households' (or Indian Agents', if on reserve) answers. Sometimes they made mistakes or didn't record certain information. Often their handwriting is very difficult to read and their spelling irregular. The census was later digitized and released to the public; this work is made no easier by the enumerators' handwriting. Unsurprisingly, faced with daunting handwriting and strange spelling, the census archivists sometimes make mistakes too. It is perhaps no wonder that, of the nine individuals I identified as likely being blacklisted, I was only able to gather complete data for five of them. This data is only a snapshot: it does not capture anything that occurred in the ten long years between censuses, such as temporary moves or periods of unemployment-induced poverty. These five men can nonetheless provide a valuable glimpse into the situation for blacklisted miners after the Great Strike.

Of the five blacklisted miners, four were immigrants, all from Europe. In 1911, two lived in Nanaimo, two in Ladysmith, and one in Northfield; by 1921, three of them had moved. One moved from Ladysmith to Wellington, another coal town, and one moved from Nanaimo to Burnaby. The third disappeared from the census, presumably having gone to find work in the United States. Of the four that remained, two returned to the mines and two found new work, one as a salesman in

Northfield and the other as a self-employed roofer in Burnaby. The roofer's, Albert Steele's, income was not recorded in either 1911 or 1921, but in 1921 he was self-employed—essentially gaining the control over his labour the Great Strike was partially about—and his choice to leave town is informative nonetheless.

The ones who left the mines were generally better-off financially than the ones who stayed. For example, Joseph Simpson reported a yearly income of \$990 in 1911 compared against \$1,000 in 1921, a meagre 1% raise that was blown away by the inflation of the postwar years. John Cottle, on the other hand, was making \$600 a year in the mine in 1911 and \$1,500 in 1921 as a salesman. He had almost tripled his income and was making half-again what Simpson was. Martin Slogar, another man who went back to the mines, was making \$1,200 in 1921; respectable, but still less than Cottle, and Slogar was forced to move from Ladysmith to Wellington, whereas Cottle stayed in Northfield. Slogar and Simpson also had less regular employment than Cottle. The miners reported forty-four and forty-three weeks of employment in 1921, respectively, whereas Cottle reported a full fifty-two weeks of employment for the same period.

Of the four men who stayed in Canada, only one of them was married and the head of their own household in 1911. The others married and became heads between 1911 and 1921; none of them were single or living with parents in 1921. In fact, they had all started families by 1921, with at least one child in each household. Cottle had two children while Steele had one. Of the miners, Simpson reported three and Slogar reported eight children living with him, though two of them were employed making \$850 and \$800 a year, supplementing Slogar's \$1,200. If we compare the Slogar and Cottle households, we see the Cottle household makes \$375 per member (four, including Cottle's wife), whereas the Slogar household makes \$285 per member (ten, including

Slogar's wife). Even with supplemental income from adult children in the household, the Slogar household lags behind the Cottle household by \$90 per individual.

While our sample size is very small, it appears that the men who were able to find work outside of the mines fared noticeably better than those who returned, not to mention the substantially safer character of their new work. But one question remains unanswered: why did men like Slogar and Steele return to the mines? We normally think of blacklisting as permanent—and it often is—so why were the Vancouver Island coal mines different? Why did the colliery companies eventually rescind the blacklist?

Some historians have speculated that World War 1 caused a spike in the demand for coal and thus a spike in the demand for labour in the mines. This, however, is not the case: the *Annual Reports of the Minister of Mines* actually reports a decline in demand for British Columbian coal during the war, allegedly due to a decline in the consumer economy leading to a decline in freight traffic, coal's primary market. Nor did the price of coal rise; the ministry kept its estimations at \$3.50 per ton until the last year of the war. Non-American coal exports dried up during the war years too; while the United States dominated coal exports in the years before the war, the war years saw an unprecedented decline in the non-American market. Some years, exports to the United States accounted for 100% of Vancouver Island's coal exports. Production, as shown on figure 1, generally slumped in the early war years as well, and did not recovery until 1917, the year the Americans entered World War 1 and also the height of Vancouver Island exports to the United States. In addition to the economic situation created by the war, coal was facing competition from a newly emerging fuel source: oil. The minister's reports are dismissive of the threat of oil but the competition it posed in the early years of the war cannot be dismissed out of hand.

So if demand for coal doesn't explain deblacklisting, what does? The answer can be found in another kind of demand: demand for labour. The minister's reports in the early years of the war take note of a labour shortage in both Vancouver Island and the East Kootenays. The logic seems sound. Young men who were working in the mines enlisted at the outbreak of the war; to some, getting shot at would be seen as preferable to the mines and came with an improvement in pay. In addition, many of the men who would've replaced these workers also enlisted. Conscription in the latter days of the war would've intensified this issue. Thus, in search of replacement labour, the colliery companies sought out previously-blacklisted workers, many of whom may have been too old to enlist and, without government support, were likely struggling, and rehired them. World War 1 caused the rehiring but in a different way than was assumed.

There are many insights we can derive from the struggles of these workers, especially for future retraining initiatives. The men who left the mines did better for themselves, but many were unable to make a living and thus had to return. In the light of recent debates over forestry workers, the historical precedent established by blacklisted coal miners emphasizes the need for the government to support displaced workers through retraining and financial support during the transitory period. Without applying our knowledge from the past we may be doomed to repeat, much to the pain of displaced workers and their families.

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