Document 2 Working Children

The labouring experiences of British Columbian children has varied widely depending on time and place, existing technology and labour pools, gender and class, tradition, prevailing ideas about childhood, and the perceived needs of the economy. Children have contributed to the household economy with paid and unpaid work, on farms and on city streets, in the home and in factories and mines throughout BC's history.

For pioneer families and during hard times, child labour was essential for survival. But it was also seen as preferable to idleness and a demonstration of good character. Rural children performed copious amounts of labour on farms that included clearing land, harvesting, chopping wood, collecting water, and milking cows, often before and after school, or in lieu of school. Children also learned gender roles through their labour; girls helped with child rearing and other domestic chores, while boys were expected to do outside work. The patterns were similar for urban children, although the nature of the work often differed.

Before WWII, urban children laboured at numerous unpaid tasks to contribute to the household economy. Even in the city, work performed by children was often of an agricultural nature. They picked wild berries that grew throughout Vancouver, tended to cows and chickens, and weeded gardens. Urban children scoured alleyways in search of wood scraps for fuel and sometimes coal on the waterfront. Sometimes children from poor families would be sent out to beg. Others stole to raise money, often brass or other metals and goods that they could easily sell. Getting caught could land them in jail or, for persistent young offenders, the reformatory, which could be as bad or worse. Children sent to foster homes were sometimes treated more as labourers than family members.

Paid work available to children outside the home was structured by gender. Girls had fewer options to make money than boys and often babysat or helped with other domestic chores, picked fruit, or worked in retail. To the chagrin of the daughters, parents sometimes bought bicycles for their sons so they could earn money delivering newspapers or other goods or working as messengers. A typical arrangement would be for the boys to turn over their earnings to their parents, who in turn gave the boys a small allowance.

Another job commonly filled by boys was setting pins at bowling alleys before mechanized pinsetters were introduced. Like other child labourers, pin-boys were vulnerable to exploitation and poor working conditions, but unlike most other young workers, were unionized and therefore in a position to collectively struggle for better conditions. In Vancouver they formed the Union of Amusement Workers of Canada, which in the early 1930s was affiliated with the militant, Communist-controlled Workers Unity League. In March 1932, the Japanese pin-boys at Chapman's Bowling Alley went on strike to fight a wage reduction, for union recognition, and to get rid of the Japanese "boss" system whereby a Japanese "boss" supplied Japanese boys to an employer below the wage rates of whites. The "boss" acted as an overseer, subjecting the boys to arbitrary discipline, and taking a cut of the wages paid out. After a week of picketing under the watchful eye of the police, 14 picketers were arrested on charges of obstructing traffic and vagrancy and spent a week in jail before going to trial. The Canadian Labor Defence League successfully defended the strikers. Meanwhile, the YMCA recruited "a full staff of white boys who were glad to get the work." After three intense weeks, the strike was called off. Talk of unionizing pin-boys resurfaced a decade later when it was some of them were working as much as 12 hours a day, sometimes for as little as a dollar per day.

One of the more dangerous jobs children done by children in BC was coal mining. The proportion of children working in British Columbian mines was never as great as other coal regions. Adult Asian and sometimes native men filled the unskilled, low waged positions filled by boys in other contexts, and in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the number of boys available to work in the resource-based economy was limited. Nevertheless, boys did work in the mines, although as John Belshaw notes , "the evidence for under-age labour is hard to come by. Sadder still, it most often crops up in the roll-call of colliery deaths, as was the case in 1879, when Reuben Gough, a fourteen-year-old, was listed among the fatalities in an explosion" in a Vancouver Island mine.

There is at least one documented case of a nine-year-old coal miner in BC, but most were boys between the ages of 13 and 16 who entered the trade as apprentices to their fathers or older brothers. Mine owners were initially happy with this arrangement as it reproduced the workforce at low cost. But in later years, advances in mining technology reduced the skill required to do the job, and after the completion of the transcontinental railroad, owners were more than happy to use Chinese labourers and paid them even less than white boys.

One of the worst mining disasters in the province's history occurred at a mine operated by the Crowsnest Mine Company near Fernie in the Kootenay Region on 22 May 1902. An explosion in the mine claimed 128 lives, ten of whom were boys under 16. Newspapers reported that "the first body recovered was taken from No. 3 mine about 11 o'clock, and was that of Willie Robertson, a lad of 13." Nine other victims were boys under sixteen, including one young "slav buried under fifty tons of rock."

Conditions at the mine were notoriously dangerous, but the papers initially blamed the explosion not on the company, but the many "foreigners" who worked in the mine. One early theory was that a "careless Italian" used an open lamp in a particularly gaseous mine shaft. Others felt it was the result of a curse that was put on the town after its founder, William Fernie, betrayed the local native family that told him the location of the massive coal deposits in the area. An inquiry later faulted the company for the highly flammable coal dust in the air and recommended a system for watering "the installation of the most approved system of watering for laying dust in coal mines." Another inquiry was held in response to allegations that mine inspector Archibald Dick was being paid off by the company to turn a blind eye to safety violations. Two days before the explosion, he reported that "everything was in good order."

In the early years of the 20th century, the school attendance officer in Vancouver "reported 'a great many young-looking children,' some no more than nine years of age, working in department stores, laundries, and offices, others 'street trading' in merchandise, newspapers or magazines." This changed rapidly after the First World War when full-time child wage labour was largely supplanted with mandatory, public schooling. New technologies and raised standards of living have reduced the need for children to contribute to the household economy. Nevertheless, child labour has never been definitively outlawed. The rise of unions and major improvements in workplace safety standards have improved work conditions for most of us, but there remains no nation-wide rules restricting child labour in Canada, one of a minority of countries that has not ratified the International Labour Organization's Convention on Child Labour. Provincial regulations limiting child labour are in place in certain industries (beginning with coal mining in the 1870s and notably in the film industry today), but generally, children are able to work in most industries when they reach the age of twelve in British Columbia, the youngest "start work" age in North America.

Quotes:

"School holidays! No one asked where you were going for holidays. You knew you were going to do your part to help clear the land during Easter Holidays."

-Resident of Evelyn in the Bulkley Valley on growing up in a pioneer family

"She had an awful life, with real chores, hard work. My father never spoke to her and wouldn't even look at her."

"If you went to high school, your parents had money and anybody who didn't have money, the kids left school at 13, 14, 15 … I didn't go to school after 13 because I had to go to work. People were poor. I earned about $3.00 a week."

-a Cedar Cottage resident on growing up in the 1920s

Research Document Prepared by Lani Russwarm

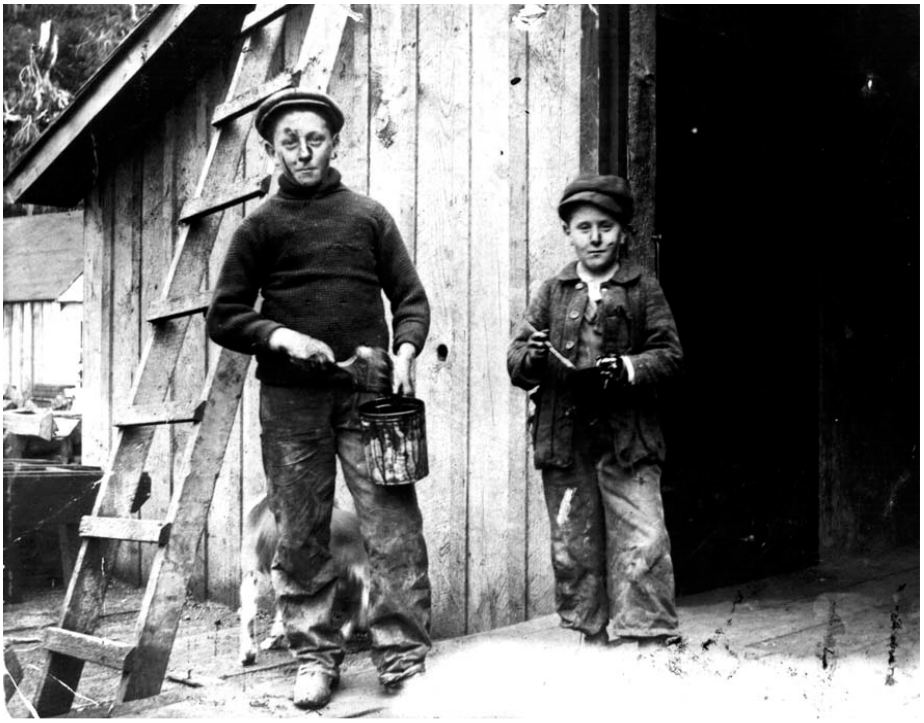

Figure 3 Cannery works on Painting detail circa 1900

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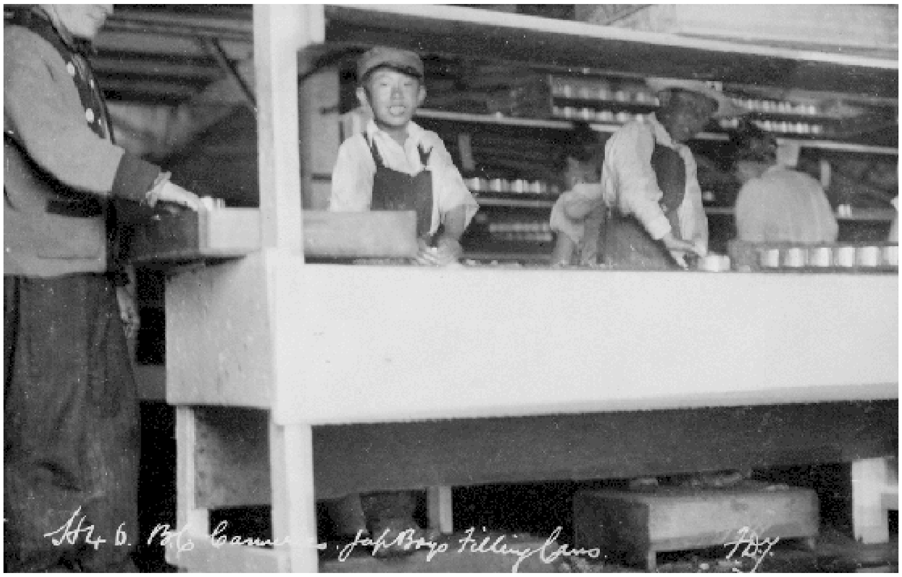
446. B.C. Canneries. Jap Boys Filling Cans.
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Figure 4 Japanese youth working on a cannery line 1913