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## **Looking for Treasures in Nanaimo's Attics and Basements**

Lynne Bowen

Recorded as presented to the Nanaimo Historical Society on September 14, 2000

Transcribed by Dalys Barney, Vancouver Island University Library, on November 2, 2020

Pamela Mar

Nanaimo Historical Society. Thursday, September 14, 2000 at the society's regular meeting. Introducing Mrs. Lynne Bowen who will speak on looking for treasures in Nanaimo's attics and basements.

[recording stops and restarts]

Christine Meutzner

It's my great pleasure tonight to introduce Lynne Bowen to you, our speaker. Most of you are probably familiar with Lynne, but I'm going to go a little bit into her background for those of you who are not. Lynne has a master of arts degree in Western Canadian history from UVic, 1980. Maybe she doesn't like me saying that. She got it last year, when she was still 18. She did pursue a career in writing, and as you can tell from her output back there, she's been very successful. She's also won a number of important awards. I had the pleasure last year of watching her receive the City of Nanaimo Culture Award. She's gotten a Distinguished Alumni Award this year from Concordia University. That's in Montreal then? Concordia?

Lynne Bowen

No, it's in Edmonton.

Christine Meutzner

Edmonton. And tonight's title of her talk is "Looking for Treasures in Nanaimo's Attics and Basements." This is a girl after my own heart, having spent most of my working days in an attic or a basement. And actually, my office is an attic. So, I'd like you to give a nice, big welcome to Lynne and thank you.

[recording stops and restarts]

Lynne Bowen

Looking for Treasure in Nanaimo's Attics and Basements. Now, is that a bit loud? No? OK. I'm just going to have to scoot back for a minute here. OK. And it has occurred to me that I might owe some of you an apology for that title. If there is anyone in the audience tonight who came here about the finding of old jewelry and rare antiques, I apologize for bringing you here under false pretenses. Tonight I will speak about my idea of treasure, and I suspect that most of you will agree with me.

When I turn my head that way, do you lose me?

[unidentified female audience member]

Yes. [laughter]

Pamela Mar

See, we're learning.

Lynne Bowen

Yes. Now you'll probably hear my heart beating. [laughter]

We've read in the paper recently of the discovery of the journal of Joseph McKay, the Hudson's Bay Company clerk who kept a day-to-day record of what was happening in Nanaimo's first years. This is one of those documents that historians knew was missing and had assumed was a victim of any number of mishaps that happen to historical documents as they get handed down from generation to generation, or lost in house fires, ruined in flooded basements, or fed to a bonfire when the family cleans out grandfather's house after his death. But in the collection of papers associated with Mark Bate, our first mayor, his great-great-grandson found McKay's journal. It made me want to go home right now and [dig] through the boxes in my storeroom.

It's been an exciting year for Christine. Not only did the McKay journal materialize, but Parker Williams chose this year to give his grandfather's papers to the archives. I accompanied her to Protection Island when she went to pick them up. We sat with Parker in his kitchen and looked through the letter books and documents left behind by his remarkable grandparent.

The first Parker Williams and his colleague John Place were MLAs who together constituted the total opposition to Sir Richard McBride's Conservative government during the years of the Big Strike. Williams was a brilliant speaker who was quoted extensively in the newspapers of the day. This brief excerpt from the *Vancouver Sun* from the summer of 1913 will give you a sense of his eloquence: "This is a fight not primarily for a living, but for the right to live. This is a fight against the undertaker and the morgue and the Department of Mines more than against Canadian Collieries." When Christine and I began to look at Mr. Williams' papers that evening on Protection Island, we discovered a man with great wit who went on to become the first head of the Workmen's Compensation Board. And his grandson had found these papers sitting in boxes beside a bonfire, waiting for their turn to be burned.

Papers such as those of Parker Williams and Joseph McKay are very important cultural treasures which enhance our sense of ourselves as a community and provide new material for historians, both amateur and professional, to study and use. In the course of my career as a historian, I have come across a number of such treasures. And I've also spent many hours searching for missing ones. I tried for months to find the minutes of the Ancient Order of Foresters, which I was assured were in safe keeping in someone's basement. Each time I tracked that someone down, I was a couple of months late. They had passed the minutes on to someone else. The minutes finally surfaced several years after I needed them at the Royal British Columbia Archives, where they had been in the storeroom for two years, waiting to be accessioned by that institution's severely overburdened staff. But at least the minutes finally ended up in a safe place. I shudder to think of all the minutes, letters, diaries, and photographs that are languishing in a damp basement, waiting to be disposed of when the last person who realizes their significance has died and the family arrives to clean up the house.

My own mother was guilty of a similar unwitting act of destruction. During the Second World War, my father was a navigation instructor with the Empire Flying Schools, which trained pilots and navigators from all over the Commonwealth for the Royal Canadian Air Force. One class of New Zealanders became very close to my father, who was not much older than they were. They called him "Doc." And when they graduated and were sent to England, several of them wrote back to him regularly. Gradually, the letters stopped coming as one after another of the young men died, until there was not one single one left from that class. Dad kept their letters for the rest of his life. When he died, my mother went through his papers and threw out all but two of them, which she gave to me as souvenirs, not realizing that the whole collection was important.

I have the two letters here. Letters from very young men in their early twenties, full of life and enthusiasm. I'll read the first paragraph from one who called himself "Hostie." Here's the letters in airmail envelopes. This one has been slit open by the censor and then resealed. It says: "Opened by Examiner 6896." It also has George VI on the stamp. The paper has a Royal Canadian Air Force emblem on the top of it. And this one was written in Halifax, that they were waiting to ship out. It's dated March 15, 1943, and then the young man has put underneath "Pay day."

"Dear Doc, here's just a line from the occupants of room 16 to let you know we're still kicking as much as usual. Most of us arrived here on schedule, but Mortimer had a hell of a poor ground speed and was 26 hours out on his ETA. He always was a smooth talker and he got away with it by telling a very fine story about blizzards and being snowbound. He maintains on the strength of pin points of various pubs, brothels, etc., that he was on track during the entire trip."

It's a very long letter, as you can see. All of them are that long. There might have been a book in those letters if I had had them all. And perhaps some families in New Zealand would have liked to have had them for remembrance.

My book *Boss Whistle* was about remembrance. It had ten reprintings and sold well until its publisher decided it was not worth its while to reprint it. When a publisher makes that decision, the author gets the rights to the book back. And because interest in the book continues, I'm negotiating with other publishers to print a revised edition. And I'm getting some very real help from Joy Leach and Thora Howell and their new society to make that come true. Publishers are really reluctant to do revised editions because they have to have a great big sale to begin with to pay their printer's bill. And a revised edition tends to be more of steady seller rather than a great big rush at the first.

Included in that revised edition when it finally comes out will be additional information which has come to me in the 18 years since *Boss Whistle* was first published. My eldest son lives in Ladysmith. And one afternoon at a Boxing Day party at his house, I met a young man whose family had lived in Ladysmith since it was founded. He told me the men in his family had been union men. And he had in his possession a minute book that I might be interested in. You can imagine my excitement when I saw the book and realized it contained the minutes of a local of the Western Federation of Miners. This American union had adsorbed the fledging local miners unions which had tried for 30 years, mostly unsuccessfully, to unionize Vancouver Island coal miners. Now, in 1903, the miners had a powerful international union on their side.

This is the book. The union only existed for four months, so the minutes, the actual writing in the book, only goes up to about page 70. They're amazingly unspecific about actual controversies and you have to read the history books and the newspapers to find out what they were doing. But, juxtaposed with this, and with all the names listed in here, it becomes a very useful and exciting document to have. This union was banned shortly after nationally, after a royal commission investigated them. And it was it was to claim... Banned as a radical socialist union.

12:00

These Extension miners met in the Finn Hall in Ladysmith and resolved to organize their own local of the Western Federation of Miners. James Dunsmuir, their employer, acted quickly; within two days he fired seven union leaders. The afternoon shift refused to work and went instead to a mass meeting. Within six days, 600 miners had joined the local, even though Dunsmuir threatened to close the Extension mines and concentrate his efforts on the Cumberland mines just recently opened.

Threats and counter-threats made the spring of 1903 a volatile season. This I knew before, but what I didn't know were the details, especially the names of the people involved. Names that became famous on the Island during the Big Strike ten years later and in other union battles of the 20th century, names like: Mottishaw, Pritchard, Wargo, and Russell. I'll be using material from the minutes of this union, which had a life of only four months, in the revised edition of *Boss Whistle*. And the family that saved that minute book and passed it down to subsequent generations, who continued to be mindful of its importance, is to be congratulated. Someday, I hope, they will give this book to an archive for safe keeping and for the use of researchers. And don't think I haven't already mentioned it to them.

When family members bring historical treasures to archives, they should know there is seldom a financial benefit. No archives have money to buy artifacts or documents. And while there is a possibility of a tax receipt if the item is very valuable, such a donation requires a costly and time-consuming appraisal and legal process to be undertaken. The rewards for most donors are in the satisfaction of knowing that a piece of our cultural heritage has been preserved.

I was surprised to hear this morning that there does appear to be a small document for documents in second-hand bookstores. Thora, who has her table at the back to sell copies of my books, went into Bygone Books looking for old *Boss Whistles* and *Three-Dollar Dreams*, which has also just gone out of print, and found not only copies of these books but two documents which were for sale in that bookstore. You can look at them at the back if you're interested in them. One is related to coal mining and the other is a poem that was recited at the Mechanics' Institute in Victoria in 1875. Whether these documents will actually find a buyer is another matter. Let's hope if they do, the buyer keeps them in the community.

Two years ago I received news of another exciting discovery which I will use in the revised edition of *Boss Whistle*. Gordon and Rene McLean are old acquaintances of mine, having attended one of my history of coal mining classes at Malaspina. Gordon phoned me one day two years ago to tell me that a friend of his, a retired classics professor from Vancouver, had a letter written by a member of her family who had lived in Extension during the 1913 riots. The family's name was Isherwood. I phoned the classics professor who referred me to her cousin in Prince George, who had more of Thomas Isherwood's letters and who knew a fair amount about him. According to her, Thomas was the son of a wealthy man in England who owned a coal mine. She described Thomas as a remittance man. Being a remittance man usually means the man is paid a regular amount of money by his family to stay out of England. But my contact in Prince George described it a little differently. She said Thomas was given his part of the family fortune after he had travelled the world. Whatever interpretation you wish to put on it, Thomas did not handle money well, even though he called himself a bookkeeper.

The Isherwood family moved to Extension where Thomas established himself as a store owner. Business must have been spotty, however, because he also worked as a coal miner. By 1913, Thomas had at least one grown up daughter, Emily, who was living in Victoria. He wrote to her there on August 15, 1913. The riots on Vancouver Island during the Big Strike took place during that summer. You will recall that the riots began in Cumberland and spread down the Island to Nanaimo, South Wellington, Ladysmith, and Extension. The only place where shooting and wounding occurred, however, was in Extension.

Before I read you the letter, let me point out that there are several things that must be resolved if I am to use this information. First, the spelling and grammar does not seem to indicate that the writer was well educated, nor does the statement that he had been a union man since he was 12. Further research may tell me that his father's affluence came after Thomas had grown up. On the

other hand, he mentions that his daughter had sent money to him. This could be confirmation that his reputation among his descendants as being bad at handling money was well deserved and he needed his daughter to help support the family.

The letter is very neatly written, but as I said, some of the spelling is quite eccentric and, you know how Cockneys add an 'h' before an 'a'? Well, he does it in his writing, which I really can't understand. But anyway, I'll try to read it as he wrote it. So this is about two days after the riots in Extension.

"Dear daughter, Mother received your letter and money on Wednesday all right, and we was glad to hear that you are in good health. Mother and Ethel and Tom come down to the tents on Wednesday to bring me something to eat." Now that really intrigues me. He was, must have been a striker if he was staying in tents away from the mine. But he doesn't say anything more about that.

"I thought I would come home with her, and has we was coming along the road, we heard that seven men were shot at Extension, and that put us in an awful state to think that Alice and Annie and Grace and Ivy were at home alone. And has we got further along, we heard worse news. They told us that there was no more Extension, as it all was burned down. But has we come along, we found that that not to be true, for we met a man has told us the union men was looking after our house. You may bet we was in an awful way. Tom kept crying and Mother and Ethel was near crazy. And I was not so far off, I could tell you.

So when we got to the top of the hill, we could see that our house was all right, but there was fires all around. So we pushed our way along through the people of which there was over a thousand, lots of them with guns, until we got home and we found everything all right. Only Alice and the baby were all crying and Alice has not got over it yet. Mother, Alice, and Ethel never went to bed all that night. But I got Tom and Annie and Baby to come and sleep with me as I was tired out with working that day." So, that makes me think that he was living in tents and working at some other mine or something. Very intriguing there, having that long walk home.

"Mother said everything was quiet when she left in the morning, but 700 men came from Nanaimo and South Wellington in the afternoon to make the scabs quit working. The union men asked the scabs when they come out of the mine if they were going to quit and they answered them with shots. And then the riot started. The union men made all the scabs fly and set fire to the mouth of the mine and it has done so much damage that the mine will not work again for a month or two anyway. Then they turned on the scab houses." And then he goes into detail about whose house is burned down and the only scab houses that were saved were the ones that were close to union houses. And the manager's house was burned down and a store. And until I track down those names and make sure that everything is fair, I'm not going to read you out the names of the so-called "scabs" because it's a touchy subject still. He signs it "From Mother and Father and the children and many kisses."

21:25

Besides a revision of *Boss Whistle*, I am working on an exciting new project about Italian immigration to British Columbia. And several things have happened to me to make me believe that the time is right for such a project. Nanaimo's Italian lodge, the Felice Cavallotti Lodge, is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year. The lodge has minute books from 1924 onwards, but very little information about their first quarter century. So I'm trying to help their historian find what she needs. As if that anniversary isn't indication enough that the time is right for a book about

Italians, there is the fact that the City of Nanaimo has just dedicated the new miner's cottage on Jingle Pot Road. This cottage was owned from 1926 to 1997 by the Specogna family, which cooperated with the City fully during the restoration. Alison Millward of the City's strategic planning department has made three family pictures available to me, copies of which I have here tonight. In addition to showing family members, they show the Buttertubs Marsh area as it once was.

Well, you won't be able to see these pictures too well, but you're welcome to come up and look at them after. They're just scanned from a computer. This is a picture of Anna Sedola Specogna standing outside the little cottage. She married Antonio Specogna after he arrived from Italy in 1921 and she arrived in 1923. So they were married shortly after that. And she was a very good gardener. This is a picture of her in her garden. She was, her family said, she was famous for it. They also skated on the Buttertub Marsh in the winter. I guess it froze over every year at that time. They had 5.45 acres, which Tony cleared and farmed in his time off from the Protection Mine. And the last picture is Anna standing with her grown up son in front of the cottage. Her son's name is Remo, and he is still alive living in senior citizens' housing.

When the family bought the cottage in 1926, it had two rooms. But very soon after, Tony added a kitchen, bedroom, pantry, and creamery on to it. In 1950, he built a cabin for his two nephews who'd come from Italy, and underneath the cabin he built a wine cellar. And that building is still there. The access from the Parkway now divides the cottage from that building. But it even has a grapevine growing on it, it's very romantic.

The most exciting thing of all in this regard is the passport they found lodged behind a cupboard, which they were removing in order to restore it. The cupboard, by the way, can be seen in the cottage in its new location on Jingle Pot Road. Christine is the custodian at the moment of this passport, but she very kindly brought it down tonight. It looks like it's been eaten by rats or something. This was Anna's, I'm not sure if it's a passport or a transit certificate. Because when Italian immigrants came to North America, they came in via New York. And New York immigration authorities had to be assured that they were going on to Canada. So they had this certificate. She left Venice. And it says: "In transit to Nanaimo, B.C." So it's very specific. "Port of entry: New York, about September 30, 1923." I guess they couldn't be specific, not knowing for sure if the boat would arrive on a certain day. This would have been issued by the Canadian consulate in Rome. And "Point of departure: New York" and "To Canada, direct." So this is a very interesting document. It's got her picture in the back and some stamps. Whoops. The passport is, as I say, keeping at the archives. But I understand it will be returned to the family soon.

Is there a treasure lodged behind a cupboard in your house? Is there a box of nondescript papers in your attic? Do you have an attic? Is that battered, brown ledger in your basement full of information that would tell historians about a vital part of history? These things are treasures which each family should appreciate, but they should be identified and their future determined. Why not look through those boxes and photo albums and introduce your children to them? Maybe the boxes contain nothing but junk. That is a possibility. Great-grandmother's scrapbooks might not be of interest to anybody but great-grandmother. But you never know. An archivist can tell you what is of interest and cultural value to future generations of researchers. Why not make plans for their eventual deposit with an archive? The treasures in our attics and basements can become treasures for the whole community. Thank you.

[applause]

[recording stops and restarts]

27:30

Old birth certificates are a good thing, yeah? Sometimes you can tell quite a bit about a person from a birth certificate: their parents' names, their occupations, those sorts of things.

[unidentified male audience member]

When you loan something to a museum, how come you can't get it back? I'm from Southern Ontario, and I found a document, it was a deed, where the man bought a hundred acres of land from the Crown at 50 cents an acre, and it was dated, I think, May 1847. So what happened, I lent that to the Saugeen Museum in Southhampton, Ontario. Can't get it back.

Lynne Bowen

Well, I can't answer for that museum. I would, I think I'll just leave it. I can't answer for that. I would suspect that the museum misunderstood and thought that you were donating it to them. That should be very clearly set down. Would you like to comment on that Christine?

Christine Meutzner

I can't speak for a museum either, but generally speaking, you do... Did you sign something when you dropped it off?

[unidentified male audience member]

I don't really think so. What had happened, this man bought a house, and it was a [inaudible] house, which was a very common name in that community when the town was called Mernersville. And then Balaklava and Mernersville had a debate as to who would get the station, Mernersville won out. And then they changed the name to Mildmay. What happened, he got me to tear off part of this building. And his grandson was a dentist and I found old teeth and all kinds of dentist stuff in that attic. And I found this paper, it was all folded up. And I remember, they had just recently opened that Saugeen Museum in Southhampton, Ontario, and we, my mother lent it to them. Because my mother used to dabble a bit with antiques. And we lent it to the museum, and then when they wrote a history on Mernersville, which became Mildmay, they wanted to get this deed back, basically, in order to get a photograph so they could put it in the book. No, sir. They just hung on to that thing like an iron fist.

Christine Meutzner

Well, I don't know what their general rules are, but usually when somebody donates something to us, they, in fact, transfer ownership to us. But, if they want, we will give them a copy. So I don't know why they didn't offer you that.

[unidentified male audience member]

Does anybody ever loan something to you?

Christine Meutzner

We don't loan, no. Because the things are usually pretty fragile too, and we don't want them to be, sort of, handled a lot and stuff. But we certainly have made copies for people. Or we've done, made it some way... Now, that's easy to do with paper things. Actually, you couldn't, you know, you can't remake artifacts. But generally speaking, most places will make a copy of it.

Lynne Bowen

I think also, many smaller towns in their early days of their museums are quite informal. And I know that in the past there have been things in the Nanaimo Museum that nobody has a clue

when they got there, who they belong to. And so, you know, when it wasn't all done according to Hoyle's. There's a lot of artifacts that end up being unidentified and their ownership in debate.

[unidentified male audience member]

Because there was a necklace, Aboriginal, found on the shores of Lake Nipigon in Ontario. And the person who found that, he let the Ontario Museum borrow it. We opened a museum in Nipigon, and the Ontario Museum, they did a replica and sent it for us. And they kept it.

Lynne Bowen

That's good. Any other comments? Thank you very much.

[applause]

[unidentified female speaker]

...very special. And I hope the rest of us...[inaudible]...get to keep ours.

[laughter]

Lynne Bowen

That's true.

[recording ends]

32:02