

This interview is with Ken Isomura, a retired millworker and IWA member. Isomura is Japanese-Canadian. The major theme of this interview is the decline in forestry jobs in the Fraser River and Lower Mainland, and the attendant cultural changes that caused that decline and resulted from them.

Interview Date: February 16, 2014

Interviewers: Colin Osmond

Date Range: World War II (internment); mostly undated but largely 1969-1988, and 2010s/present.

Sound Recording Length: 1:35:41

Ken Isomura is a retired logger and millworker who was active in the New Westminster community and in the IWA. He was raised in Revelstoke as a result of his family's internment during World War II. After graduating high school, he worked in the woods for 8 or 9 years, but then made the decision to move to the Lower Mainland in 1969, and he ended up getting a job at a Macmillan Bloedel mill in Queensborough. He worked there until the mill closed in 1988. The major themes of this interview are the causes of the decline in forestry industry and millwork along the Fraser River, and its effects of the region's economy and culture.

The interview was conducted in conjunction with History 451: Oral History Practicum taught at Simon Fraser University in Spring 2014

Section 0:00:00 – 0:07:28

- In this section, Ken talks about his early years, moving from the interior to Lower Mainland, and involvement in the IWA. Ken was brought up in Revelstoke as a result of “family relocation” during the war. When he left high school he started working in the woods in the interior, and spent 8-9 years doing that, 5 of which were as a logger, and the other 4 he was promoted to an office job that he hated. Ken and his buddy and moved to the coast. In those days, you had a “dozen jobs at your disposal.” He took a job at the “pole yard” for Macmillan Bloedel. That was the first time he had been exposed to the Lower Mainland and the Fraser River area. Joining the union as a condition of employment was standard, so he became a member of IWA. The whole concept of militancy in a union was “almost foreign” to him at the time. He was active in the union in the interior, but it was different there. You went and had a beer with the boss. If there was an issue you had to deal with, it got resolved. It was a lot easier to work with the employer directly instead of going through grievances, etc. In the Lower Mainland, as an individual he had no clout. Bosses there would have to contact Human Resources, and it was always more of a process. The IWA at New Westminster was active in the community, and played a major role in community affairs. There were many mills in the area then. He said “Fraser Mills” was a community in its own right: there were more people working there than there were people living in the community in which he grew up.

Section 0:07:29 – 0:12:53

- In this section, Ken talks about the “slow and steady erosion of forestry workers in the area.” Abdication to technology. He said the IWA as a union was able to cushion the impact of technology replacing manual labour by negotiating agreements. But in hindsight, he said, “we were negotiating away good paying union jobs.” There was also a change in the attitude among employers. Larger companies, to cut down on competition, swallowed up a lot of the smaller mills and those that didn't get swallowed up went under. The availability of logs was another issue. Big companies ended up with tree farm licenses, and “cutting permits.” This

created an environment where smaller independent saw mills could no longer survive. Smaller plants started up as value added, where they would custom cut wood. When Ken started, the union had 11,000 or so members. When they merged with the Haney local, it was a question of survival rather than wanting to merge. There were times when the union had 3,000 members. Once they dropped below that figure, they were using up their cash reserves. Finally, the environmental movement became active, and there was a lot of validity to the issues they brought up.

Section 0:12:54 – 0:16:50

- In this section, Ken expands on his earlier point about the “slow and steady erosion in the number of forestry workers in the area.” He notes that the residential housing in and around Queensborough was initially built by and for employees of Westminster Ship Division who worked in the region’s nearby mills. As those members passed away, retired, or moved away, new residents who did not work in the mills moved in. Those new residents complained about dust, noise, pollution, and 24-hour a day operations at the mills. They formed committees that “made life hell for industry” in the area. The same thing is happening for the rail lines in New Westminster, he said, as condos are built up around the existing train tracks, and people complain.

Section 0:16:51 – 0:22:31

- In this section, Ken continues listing other major changes that affected the forestry industry in the Lower Mainland. He talks about the effect of changes in accounting practices on the evolution of mills and millwork along the Fraser River. Macmillan Bloedel went from the highest profit margins to losing money in two years, and he said there were two reasons. They had to pay interest on their own inventory. If you are running a pole yard, you have to have a large storage facility for the sale of poles to telephone and electric companies. So this affected the bottom line of Macmillan Bloedel and thus the fortunes of workers there. The second accounting change: there had previously been a barter-type system between divisions of the same company: one division would provide services, and the other division would provide the raw materials. Then all of a sudden the divisions had to purchase the services or goods from one another. For Ken, his division was actually still making a profit but on paper they were taking a loss. So the company deemed some divisions “unviable.” He cites the example of one Vancouver company that was actually making money, but not enough money, so the company shut down. He concludes this section by saying that the increase in land value that accompanied all these developments also contributed to the decline of heavy industry in the area. He said that he thinks the Lower Mainland’s economy would be a lot healthier if there was a better mix of residential and industrial, and blue collar and white collar. He said, in the old days you could bicycle to your job in ten minutes, but now you have to drive 30, 45, or 60 minutes by car, and “that just doesn’t make sense.”

Section 0:22:32 – 0:30:04

- In this section, Ken describes how the union was fighting municipal by-laws which were aimed at industry, but also fighting the industry itself to better protect workers. He said that this contradiction, over and above the normal stuff you do in your day-to-day job with the union, was difficult because you had to balance the interests of the community and the workers at the same time. In the Lower Mainland, there were a dozen steel plants when Ken arrived, and by the time he left there was only one. He dates this period as 1969-1988. A lot of those steel plants were profitable but regulations and owners’ reluctance to upgrade

resulted in industrial decline. Ken knows of two that went to Edmonton area, where companies knew the oil patch was coming, and where there was “no regulation.” In this section he also talks about Annacis Island and the Park Royal* development. He feels that the new technical jobs and service jobs are nowhere near the number of — or the good pay levels of — the old industrial jobs that they replaced.

Section 0:30:05 – 0:32:25

- In this section, Ken talks about the erosion of the middle class, and attributes it to the transition from industrial, “middle-class” jobs to the service economy. He says the economy is based on an inverted pyramid, where at least 10% of the workers in the economy have to be producing real products, not some “airy-fairy” thing like technology. You can have all the service jobs in the world, says Ken, but if there’s nothing real to it, the whole thing will collapse. He says “we’ve become a society that is used to disposal, use and dispose of.”

Section 0:32:26 – 0:47:15

- In this section, Ken initially begins talking about the mills along New Westminster, and its linkages with railways, but then transitions to talking about changes over time in political culture, as well as the relationship between universities and workers. He said it was really interesting once upon a time to go up the river and look at the New Westminster side, and see all the industry. He said the best wood used to come from Haida Gwaii. Today, most employers don’t bother training. They expect people to come out of university fully or significantly trained in what they as students-turned-workers were going to be required to do in the workforce, and Ken said that that bothers him. He said he objects to his tax dollars being used to train business administration students who will go on to kill jobs. He said Burnaby and New Westminster used to have social democratic and progressive councillors, but city councillors have since the 1980s become more “developer-friendly.” He admits that he doesn’t know what the solution is, and in hindsight he can think of other decisions that could have been made, but those times are gone. He said the corporate take over of the education system has resulted in people who have the bottom line as their way of thinking, rather than the visionaries who had a broader education. There is no analysis of how technological change is going to be beneficial to society.

Section 0:47:16 – 0:54:49

- In this section, Ken talks about industrial changes since the ‘60s and ‘70s, and the role that corporate culture change has had on the industry. The hiring of outside CEOs resulted in a “blood bath” at Macmillan Bloedel. He relays a story about a time that the company hired engineers and draftsmen to build moving decks. The millworkers knew it was not going to work, but nobody had asked them. By the time the moving deck was in place, within three days the “bloody thing collapsed!” Ken points out that this is an example of the change in the culture of the city from middle class to “a bunch of wannabe yuppies” with disposable income.

Section 0:54:50 – 0:59:44

- In this section, Ken gives examples of how the Lower Mainland has changed socially and economically. He says that in those days you could afford to live and pay rent, even while on

* Park Royal may be the mistaken identifier. Park Royal is a retail development in North Vancouver and Isomura appears to be discussing the industrial park on Annacis Island.

EI. He gives the example of East Vancouver, which is now “yuppie heaven,” and he says New Westminster got caught up in that as well. “A lot of that deep-rooted working class culture was being pruned off,” he said, and “New Westminster lost its identity”.

Section 0:59:45 – 1:08:40

- In this section, Ken returns to the topic of mills along the Fraser River, and their steady decline. For Ken, the closing of the “Mac-Blo” mill in 1988 meant “everybody had to be out,” and he points out that Park Royal didn’t open until 1998. He points out the utility of Annacis Island, which had rail and highway access, but he said people with “no vested interest” in the local industry, who worked somewhere else, wanted to “get a good night’s sleep” and didn’t like the smell coming from those mills. He summarizes the situation by returning to the New Westminster Quay, and pointing out that the only industry that remains is “Scott Paper.” Ken spoke of the need for “complete cities” where people can live *and* work in the same city, and he ponders why they did not take that approach in New Westminster. He speaks briefly about growing up in Revelstoke, and remarks that people are disconnected from resources.

Section 1:08:41 – 1:15:59

- In this section, Ken talks about the economically important location of New Westminster along the Fraser River. He talks about New Westminster’s rich history, but notes that it lacks an awareness of its role in the development of BC. New Westminster was the major supply port for the Fraser River, all the way up to Hell’s Gate. He provides details about the lumber industry in BC. Ken relays the following anecdote: “I always think in terms of my uncle telling me the story of when they were fishing...they used to dip out of the Fraser river to make their tea with. They just reached over the side and dipped the kettle into the river and boiled it up for tea!” Later in this section he brings up the Royal City Cannery and talks about the fishery in New Westminster.

Section 1:16:00 – 1:26:00

- In this section, Ken returns to the topic of New Westminster’s changed culture. He says there was a sense of community in New West, “Neighbours looking after neighbours,” but “they just don’t do it that way anymore.” He spoke about Columbia Street, which was mostly owner-operated independent stores, and notes that New Westminster was still a hub in the 1970s but deterioration was well underway. He says that department stores and shopping malls in Burnaby took business away. He said that New Westminster has turned into “trendy yuppieville.” Ken reminisces about a time when there was a mutual loyalty between company and employee.

Section 1:26:01 – 1:35:41

- In this section, Ken talks about the negative spin off effects of the new “bottom line” thinking that came about in the ‘60s and ‘70s. The IWA suffered because they lost union dues. The community started to feel the decline for a period as well, as there was a loss of taxes as the industrial economic base of the region was shutting down. As a result of all this, there were technological change agreements that were signed between union and employer. But he also points out that there were pension issues in the 1990s, and problems with bridged pension plans. He points out that his role in the IWA made him more interested in the community. Ken concludes by talking about New Westminster’s urban planning challenges today.