

Battle of Ballantyne Pier

EVER SINCE 1912 there had been friction between Vancouver's longshoremen and what came to be known as the Shipping Federation. The latter was formed by Vancouver's wealthier businessmen, who depended on the free flow of goods through the docks to maintain their profits. The Federation included most of Vancouver's notable names, including Brigadier General Victor W. Odlum, the Brigade Commander, and many senior militia officers. Lieutenant-Colonel R. G. Parkhurst, Commanding Officer of the Vancouver Regiment, was prominent amongst them as president of the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company.

In the spring of 1935 the longshoremen's union reached an agreement with the Shipping Federation, which, however, was unfavourable to the union. Thus both sides remained pitted against each other.

The labour scene at that time was volatile for another reason: in April a general strike was called by the unemployed men in the relief camps that the federal government had set up to deal with the massive unemployment situation, and on April 4 almost 2,000 strikers descended on Vancouver to join in protesting the abysmal conditions in the relief camps. These men were organized in the Relief Camp Workers' Union (RCWU), which was affiliated with the Workers' Unity League, the trade union umbrella for the Communist Party of Canada. Thus they had a direct wire to Moscow, and, perhaps not surprisingly, the authorities were afraid of a major revolt, if not a full-scale Communist revolution. In preparation for a confrontation, police forces at all three levels of government were mobilized, and the Citizens' League of British Columbia was formed of anti-communist volunteers who were given rudimentary police training at the drill hall under Odlum and the blatantly fascist and anti-Semitic former chief of police, Colonel Charles E. Edgett. These volunteers, bearing a striking resemblance to Nazi Brownshirts, were sworn in as special constables of the Vancouver City Police.

During the next few weeks the strikers held several demonstrations in order to raise public awareness and empathy. Usually these demonstrations were peaceful, but on one occasion property was damaged at the Hudson's Bay Store, and a policeman was wounded. When the demonstrators converged at Victory Square, Mayor Gerald G. McGeer came out and read the riot act: "Our Sovereign Lord the

GERALD GRATTAN MCGEER. The City of Vancouver's 22nd mayor found himself between a rock and a hard place with respect to the Battle of Ballantyne Pier. Elected in the middle of the worst depression in history, he ordered the police and military to quell the uprising because of rumoured communist infiltration into the importing and exporting of goods into Vancouver. The tense situation resulted in his reading of the riot act: "Our Sovereign Lord the King charges and commands all persons assembled immediately to disperse and peaceably depart to their habitations or to lawful business upon pain of being found guilty of an offense on conviction of which they may be imprisoned for life." As a very forward-thinking politician, McGeer was instrumental in the construction of Vancouver City Hall and Vancouver General Hospital outside the downtown core.



The song “The Red Flag”

*The people's flag is deepest red,
It shrouded oft our martyr'd dead
And ere their limbs grew stiff and cold,
Their hearts' blood dyed its ev'ry fold.
Then raise the scarlet standard high,
Within its shade we'll live and die,
Though cowards flinch and traitors sneer,
We'll keep the red flag flying here.*

King charges and commands all persons assembled immediately to disperse and peaceably depart to their habitations or to lawful business upon pain of being found guilty of an offense on conviction of which they may be imprisoned for life.” He was flanked by Vancouver Police Chief Colonel William Wasborough Foster. The crowd dispersed peacefully, but the situation remained explosive.

On 27 May 1935 the longshoremen at Ballantyne Pier on Burrard Inlet unilaterally took over dispatching of jobs—one of the sore points in the recent agreement with the Federation, giving the Federation the reason for a lock-out. The Federation brought in untrained replacement workers, so-called scabs, and mobilized police forces to prevent the locked out workers from picketing.

Meanwhile the unemployed longshoremen joined the relief camp at Hastings Park. The spiritually and physically broken men didn't have as much as the nickel required for the tram ride to Ballantyne Pier. Many walked from the relief camp to the pier, stood around all day, only to return back to the camp at night and missing out on a much needed meal, as the rule was that anyone leaving the camp in search for a job would not be let back in.

However, a short while after the lock-out started the relief camp workers left town on their famous On-to-Ottawa Trek. Still, it was a crowd of 1,000 protesters, consisting of locked out workers and their supporters, who marched toward the Heatley Street entrance to Ballantyne Pier on June 18 in order to “talk to the scabs.”

Leading the protesters was Victoria Cross recipient Mickey O'Rourke, a pacifist who had been a stretcher-bearer while serving overseas during the First World War. After being awarded his medal in November 1917 at a ceremony Buckingham Palace, O'Rourke sailed to the west coast of the United States and was engaged in public speaking to crowds often in the thousands to raise money for War Bonds. After his discharge, he suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. He also had emphysema from being gassed, and by 1920 he was seeing doctors in Shaughnessy Veterans' Hospital in Vancouver with a nervous condition that severely affected his ability to hold onto jobs, although he did work on the Vancouver waterfront for many years.

According to union legend, the 59-year-old O'Rourke, a well-known personality in the city, and union leader Ivan Emery led the parade in the confrontation on 18 June 1935. The aged war hero usually



IN THE DIRTY THIRTIES. Ballantyne Pier was east of the old Hastings Mill site and just west of the Rogers Sugar Refinery. The huge grain elevator, dubbed “Steven's folly,” was sandwiched between the pier and the CPR tracks. The smaller dock was called the Great Northern Railway dock.

wore sun glasses due to eye infections resulting from having been gassed in the First World War but opted to loan them to Emery to conceal the union leader's identity, as the police had him on their surveillance list. At first observers of the march believed O'Rourke was guiding a blind man with a Union Jack draped over his shoulders. The two men, with many First World War veterans marching immediately behind them, left Labour Hall and marched east one block on Hastings Street before turning north on Heatley Street towards Ballantyne Pier. O'Rourke's presence in the procession was established by an impeccable source: the police reports. They had a clear photograph of him, standing neat and proud, recorded in their files.

As the demonstrators approached the entrance, they were met by a line of Vancouver Police led by Colonel Foster, who would not let them through.

Foster and O'Rourke were definitely from opposite sides of the tracks. Foster was born in England in 1875, and on coming to British Columbia immediately became involved in the lucrative lumber business before serving as a superintendant with the CPR and then as a police magistrate in Revelstoke. From 1922 to 1927 he had been the Commanding Officer of the Duke of Connaughts. At the time of the Ballantyne Pier lock-out he had just been appointed chief of the Vancouver Police Department.

What was said between Foster and O'Rourke has not been recorded, but it was not cordial, as the strikers attempted to force their way through the police line.

According to the *Vancouver Sun* newspaper, members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police fired tear gas over the heads of the crowd. The Vancouver City Police began to use four-foot-long wooden clubs to disperse the strikers. At that point a contingent of the BC Provincial

Memories of a Union Leader

by Gordon Westrand

President of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, 1992-1996

My grandfather started working at the Hastings Sawmill in 1906 as a longshoreman loading heavy timbers into confined areas into the ships. He'd come over from Sweden and was a very capable fisherman so was nicknamed "Charlie the Fish." He had several sons by the time of the big strike in 1935. He would go out fishing all night and then do picket duty during the day. There were several incidents on the picket lines when the "goon" squad, scabs working for the Shipping Federation, either beat up or abused strikers. My uncle Carl was a semi-professional boxer and sometimes he and some other men would go around and repay individuals for transgressions against some of their union members.

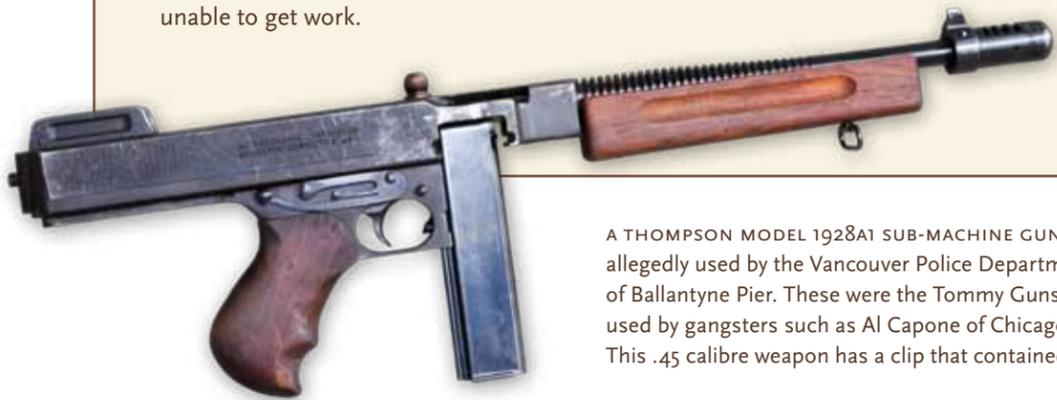
My family was in the march that ended in the Battle for Ballantyne Pier on 18 June 1935 when the police fired tear gas at the strikers and charged them on horseback with clubs. My grandfather was clubbed down at least once. My uncle Carl was clubbed down and knocked unconscious four times. I was given reassurances that each time he left his mark with the police officers in question.

My grandfather and uncles were all blacklisted by the employers after the strike and were unable to get work.

The Battle for Ballantyne Pier was a set-up with the police and the employers provoking the confrontation. The strikers had been marching in an orderly way to talk to the scabs that were taking their jobs. I've been told that there were police with machine guns hidden in a flat-deck rail car at the marshalling yards at the north foot of Heatley Street. The strike had the support of the general public and several storefronts on Hastings Street had signs in the windows saying that they supported the strikers. The police fired tear gas into these grocery stores and other buildings. After the police read the riot act mounted policemen with clubs emerged from behind buildings and charged at the crowd. The strikers fled east down Powell Avenue but were prevented from escaping by police who were in hiding in police cars armed with shotguns.

Many of the stories that I heard from my family never appeared in the newspapers. My father told me about having to go to the butcher shop and get discarded liver that was usually given away for dog food. He and his bothers and sisters ate the liver.

My grandfather died in 1938 but my father and other family members have many fond stories about him. It's good that he is being remembered.



A THOMPSON MODEL 1928A1 SUB-MACHINE GUN. Guns like these were allegedly used by the Vancouver Police Department during the Battle of Ballantyne Pier. These were the Tommy Guns of the same type used by gangsters such as Al Capone of Chicago in the 1920s–1930s. This .45 calibre weapon has a clip that contained 20 rounds.

Police, armed with clubs, and members of the RCMP, mounted on horses, charged into the crowd. The horsemen experienced some difficulties when some of their horses refused to cross the railwas tracks. Reinforced by the "specials," the VCP quickly gained the upper hand, and a running battle ensued that saw the first use of tear gas in Vancouver. According to some reports the police had machine guns, but they were not used. During the melee O'Rourke was said to have thrown a large brick at one mounted officer before being seized by an RCMP sergeant and dragged out of the fray to safety.

The strikers did not back down meekly, however, and the fight lasted some three hours, spreading into the surrounding residential area, where the police on galloping horseback chased the longshore strikers and clubbed them with batons even as they were retreating. Two demonstrators received buckshot wounds in the back of the legs by a police who emerged from prowl cars armed with shotguns. Close to one hundred police and strikers were injured during the confrontation, thereafter referred to as the "Battle of Ballantyne Pier."

Between 4 June and 25 October 1925 over 500 criminal cases were brought before the courts resulting in 148 convictions for assault, damage to property, trespassing, rioting, obstruction, unlawful assembly, threatening and even vagrancy. Union leader Ivan Emery was charged for inciting a riot and for counselling an unlawful assembly and sentenced to three months in jail, and one man was sentenced to three years in jail and five lashes with a cat-of-nine-tails. At year's end 18 longshoremen and seamen were serving time in Burnaby's Oakalla Prison Farm. Mildred Dougan, a women's auxiliary member who was charged with assaulting a police officer, was held in jail for six weeks before coming to trail and receiving a sentence of a \$25 fine or 30 days in jail. She chose the 30 days.

Though the Shipping Federation won the battle, they would eventually lose the labour war. By the 1940s working conditions had improved considerably, a strong union had developed, and the Federation eventually lost its grip on the dockyards.



WILLIAM WASBOROUGH FOSTER. A Colonel with Vancouver's prestigious Duke of Connaught's Own Rifles during the World War, this much decorated war hero became Chief Constable of the Vancouver Police Department following a corruption scandal. He had the unfortunate duty of leading riot police against longshoreman strikers during the depression years to win the "Battle of Ballantyne Pier."