

THE 1900 STRIKE OF FRASER RIVER SOCKEYE SALMON FISHERMEN

by

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ABSTRACT

This study sees the 1900 strike on the Fraser River as providing the setting in which trade unions began in the fisheries of British Columbia, and analyzes both the strike itself and its background from that point of view.

In the two decades to 1890, the Fraser River salmon canning industry grew relatively slowly, limited by the problems of developing techniques for processing, finding labor for packing, and accumulating capital from profits. In the 10 years to 1900, these difficulties had been mostly overcome, and fresh capital, attracted by sizeable profits, nearly tripled the number of canneries. This boom ended in a crisis of over-expansion, marked by strikes and company mergers.

One unforeseen effect of license limitation in the seasons 1889-1891 was a change from paying fishermen a daily wage to paying them at so much per fish, and consequently the start of a series of disputes between canners and fishermen over fish prices. Though in general prices rose throughout the 1890's, the individual fishermen failed to benefit, partly because of price cuts and limits on deliveries during periods of a heavy supply of fish, and partly because of the increasing number of fishermen licensed in each succeeding year.

In an attempt to increase their bargaining strength, white resident fishermen campaigned for changes in federal fishery regulations to restrict competition from Japanese and American fishermen, and to reduce the number of cannery licenses. The first fishermen's

organization, formed in 1893 to further this end, did not survive its unrelated involvement in a strike that year against price cuts. The amendments to the fishery regulations in 1894 and, to an even greater degree, in 1898 reflected the success of this group in gaining their ends by political means. To try to redress the balance, the canners created in 1898 their own closely-knit organization, the British Columbia Salmon Packers' Association.

The difficulties of the seasons of 1898 and 1899, basically caused by over-expansion, led the canners to tighten their organization further by creating in January, 1900, the Fraser River Canners' Association, a cannery combine with power to set maximum fish prices and production quotas for each cannery, and to levy fines on violators of its decisions. About the same time, and partly in reaction to the canners' move, separate unions of fishermen were organized, first at New Westminster, then at Vancouver. The Vancouver union tried and failed to enroll Japanese fishermen who formed in June, 1900, the Japanese Fishermen's Benevolent Society.

The Canners' Association refused to negotiate prices with fishermen's union representatives or to set a minimum price for sockeye. When the sockeye season opened July 1 the fishermen struck, demanding 25 cents a fish through the season. By July 10, the strike included all fishermen on the river--white, Japanese and Indian. After another week, the Canners' Association felt forced to negotiate and in a series of meetings the two sides came close to settlement. At this point, however, the canners broke off negotiations and made a

separate agreement with the Japanese for 20 cents for the first 600 fish in a week and 15 cents thereafter. The canners then provoked an "incident" as an excuse for three friendly justices of the peace to call out the militia to Steveston.

In spite of the Japanese defection and the presence of the militia, the remaining strikers held out for another week. Mediation by E. P. Bremner, Dominion Labor Commissioner, and Francis Carter-Cotton, publisher of the Vancouver News-Advertiser, secured them a negotiated settlement which, though not including any union recognition, guaranteed 19 cents throughout the season.

This success led to the creation in January, 1901, of the Grand Lodge of British Columbia Fishermen's Unions, the first coast-wide fishermen's organization in British Columbia. The strike marked the beginning of continuous union activity in the industry and the start of a tradition of radical leadership that persists to the present day.

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CHAPTER II

THE FRASER RIVER SALMON CANNING INDUSTRY--LICENSE LIMITATION AND PRICE CHANGES IN THE 1890'S

The first trade union of fishermen on the Fraser River was organized in the spring of 1893, and led a short and unsuccessful strike at the start of the sockeye season of that year. In analysing the beginnings of trade unionism among these fishermen, Percy Gladstone and Stuart Jamieson argue that "the major motive impelling the Fraser River fishermen to unionize was not so much to achieve wage or price increases as such, as to protect themselves against growing competition from outside sources."¹ They identify three of these outside sources: American fishermen coming from the Columbia and Sacramento Rivers, Indians migrating from northern coastal communities, and Japanese arriving from their homeland. In the conditions of economic depression and mass unemployment existing in 1893, so runs their argument, sharpened group antagonisms produced an attempt to reduce the number of licenses to Orientals. The union organized out of this struggle, the Fraser River Fishermen's Protective Union, led a strike of fishermen for a 50-cent-a-day wage increase.

¹ Percy Gladstone and Stuart Jamieson, "Unionism in the Fishing Industry of British Columbia," CJEPS, vol. 16 (May 1950), p. 153.

According to Gladstone and Jamieson, "A pattern of organized conflict that was familiar in a number of subsequent disputes in the Fraser River fishing industry immediately developed in the 1893 strike."² The elements that they isolate in the pattern include: attempts by the cannery operators to use Japanese and Indians as strikebreakers against white fishermen; violence by unionists in response to these attempts; use of special police and the arrest of unionists; and a solidarity among the Indians in opposition to the Japanese, not matched by the white fishermen.

An examination of disputes between cannery operators and fishermen during the 1890's will enable an assessment of the merits of this view, as well as providing data on the circumstances in which fishermen's unions were organized.

Prior to the beginning of license limitation in 1889, the great majority of fishermen for the salmon canneries were Indians who worked only during the sockeye season in July and August.³ Payment to them by the canneries was sometimes by the fish--prices per 100 were reported--⁴but generally they worked for wages. The rate at the end of the 1880's was \$2.25 a day for the fisherman and \$2.00

² Gladstone and Jamieson, "Unionism in the Fishing Industry of British Columbia," CJEPS, vol. 16 (May 1950), p. 154.

³ Canada, S.P., 1888, no. 6, p. 257; Table V, p. 48 below [Gillnet licenses].

⁴ Canada, Fishery Commission, "Minutes," 1892, S.P., 1893, no. 10c, p. 129 (evidence of Misquam Charlie).

for his partner in the gillnet boat, the boat-puller.⁵ Fishermen of European descent were in a distinct minority,⁶ but most of them also fished in the spring and fall to supply the fresh fish market.⁷ With completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway to Vancouver in 1887, a market for fish shipped in ice began to open up in Eastern Canada and the United States, and the number of men employed in this fishery increased.⁸

License regulations in the season from 1889 to 1891 fixed the total number of licenses allowed on the Fraser River first at 450, and then at 500. Of these, 350 were allotted to canneries and 100 (increased in 1890 to 150) were reserved for "outside" fishermen, including those fishing for the local and export markets in fresh fish.⁹ However, no control was exercised over the erection of new canneries on the river, and the cannery licenses had to be redistributed to provide for the newcomers. Five new canneries operated in 1890 and a sixth opened in 1891.¹⁰ This pressure on a limited

⁵ Vancouver News-Advertiser (hereafter cited as News-Advertiser), Aug. 2, 1891, p. 2.

⁶ Canada, Fishery Commission, "Minutes," 1892, S.P., 1893, no. 10c, p. xx.

⁷ I personally dislike the use of the word "white" but it is invariably used in contemporary sources and is hereafter substituted for the more cumbersome "of European descent" or "of European birth."

⁸ For reports of the increased activities in the spring of 1893, see Colonist, March 24, 1893, p. 2; March 28, p. 2.

⁹ See above p. 34.

¹⁰ Canada, S.P., 1892, no. 11a, p. 168; ibid., 1893, no. 10a, p. 155.

number of licenses was increased by certain established firms, who, in order to get a larger quota of the licenses, erected "dummy" canneries with no intention of operating them. Four plants of this type were reported in existence by the season of 1891.¹¹ The number of licenses available to each cannery therefore shrank; it was said to be 40 in the season of 1889,¹² 25 in 1890, and only 20 in 1891.

In an attempt to ensure a large enough supply of fish, the cannery operators began to bid for the services of the holders of "outside" licenses and entered into contracts for the delivery of the catch of individual license holders. The cost to the canneries of fish bought from contract fishermen was higher than the cost of fish caught on their own licenses--both canners and fishermen agreed on that, but how much higher is difficult to say, since prices varied from season to season, as well as from day to day, and from cannery to cannery.¹³ But by 1893 ten cents per sockeye was regarded as

¹¹ Canada, Fishery Commission, "Minutes," 1892, S.P., 1893, no. 10c, pp. 92, 407.

¹² News-Advertiser, Aug. 2, 1893, p. 2.

¹³ Henry O. Bell-Irving of Anglo-British Columbia Packing Company, Ltd. said that fish from "outside" fishermen cost three times the average of that from the canneries' own boats. (News-Advertiser, July 15, 1893, p. 3). Capt. Alex Anderson, president of the Fraser River Fishermen's Protective and Benevolent Association, placed the cost of fish from a cannery boat at one to two cents, at a time when his organization was asking 10 cents (News-Advertiser, July 25, 1893, p. 7). Evidence was given to the Royal Commission in 1892 that the piece rate for fish prior to license limitation was one and a half to two cents (Canada, S.P., 1893, no. 10c, p. 29 - evidence of Bernard Buck).

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the customary price . Higher prices than this were paid to individual license holders to persuade them to deliver fish to a particular cannery. In the season of 1891 Alexander Ewen and Company paid up to 20 cents though their competitors were paying only 10, 12-1/2 or 15 cents.¹⁵

Another kind of arrangement between company and fishermen is also recorded for the first time in this period: a share or "lay" plan. It had features of both the contract system and the daily wage. The company supplied boat and net as it did for wage-earners, but in this instance it paid for the catch by the fish and deducted approximately one-third as its share. When the price paid was 10 cents per sockeye the cannery share was three and a half cents. The six and a half cents received by the fishermen had to be divided between the two men who manned each boat.¹⁶ Fishing on shares appears to have begun because of license limitation; a man who could not get a license was forced to take a cannery boat. For new entrants to the industry, fishing on shares in a cannery boat was a way of getting

14 Ten cents had been widely paid in two of the previous three seasons. (Columbian, July 15, 1893, p. 1; Canada, S.P., 1893, no. 10c, p. 95).

15 Canada, Fishery Commission, "Minutes," 1892, S.P., 1893, no. 10c, pp. 14, 29, 41, 143, 151, 402. The high prices paid by Ewen appear to be the result of sales commitments he made before the season opened (ibid., p. 15). In his own testimony, he speaks of being under a bond for \$40,000 (ibid., p. 120).

16 Canada, Fishery Commission, "Minutes," 1892, S.P., 1893, no. 10c, pp. 21, 24, 66, 70, 79, 89, 95.

the experience to qualify for an individual license.¹⁷ The companies, for their part, were anxious to get the maximum production from a limited number of licenses. Substituting piece-work for daily wages was an attempt to produce a larger catch per boat. Share or "lay" arrangements were generally made with white men, but Indians, because they were considered to be less productive, stayed on the daily wage.¹⁸

Contract fishermen became a privileged group among fishermen; they received higher prices and, in times of an over-supply of fish, they continued to deliver when the cannery's own boats were taken off.¹⁹ As Henry O. Bell-Irving succinctly put it, "a fishing license was a valuable document."²⁰ These privileges excited the envy of the fishermen on shares or daily wages. When the British Columbia Fishery Commission held its public hearings in New Westminster and Vancouver in February and March, 1892, a parade of fishermen, both white and Indian, appeared before it to complain that they could not get licenses.²¹ Their complaints apparently

17 The regulations in force at the time did not specify the qualifications of an applicant for an individual license. This gave considerable discretionary powers to the Inspector of Fisheries. Thomas Mowat, the incumbent in the position during 1889-1891, made it clear that he gave preference to what he termed "bona fide fishermen," the criteria being previous experience plus a previous individual license. (Canada, S.P., 1890, no. 17, p. 254).

18 Canada, Fishery Commission, "Minutes," 1892, S.P., 1893, no. 10c, pp. 12, 108, 417; Rounsefell and Kelez, Fraser River Salmon Fisheries, pp. 705-7; and Table VI, p. 75 below.

19 Canada, Fishery Commission, "Minutes," 1892, S.P., 1893, no. 10c, passim.

20 News-Advertiser, July 21, 1893, p. 1.

21 Canada, Royal Commission, "Minutes," 1892, S.P., 1893, no. 10c, pp. 60-61, 64-5, 68-9, 70-71, 76, 78, 89, 181, 365, 367, 381, 385, 388, 401, 402, 403.

overshadowed in the commissioners' minds those of the canners and their agents who argued that they needed a greater number of licenses than the 20 which most canneries were then getting.²²

The commissioners had to adjudicate between the charge laid by the fishermen that the canners were monopolizing the river, and the claims of the canners that more licenses of their own were needed to protect them against demands made by the contract fishermen for higher prices. The canners lost this argument: all the commissioners agreed that restrictions on the number of cannery licenses should be continued. The majority report recommended the issuing of 18 licenses to each operating cannery.²³ The minority report favored 25, the figure suggested by a number of cannery spokesmen.²⁴

An interim arrangement had to be adopted for the season of 1892, since regulations to enforce the recommendations were not ready at the opening of the fishing season. Accordingly, in June, 1892, further regulations were added to those which had been enacted in 1890 and the industry operated under these amended rules for two

²² Canada, Royal Commission, "Minutes," 1892, S.P., 1893, no. 10c, pp. 35, 96, 111, 138, 189, 261, 269, 297, 399.

²³ The majority report was signed by the chairman, Samuel Wilmot, Superintendent of Fish Culture for the Department of Marine and Fisheries, and Sheriff W. J. Armstrong of New Westminster (Canada, Fishery Commission, "Report," 1892, S.P., 1893, no. 10c, pp. 429-31). The minority report was signed by D. W. Higgins, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia (ibid., pp. 431-3).

²⁴ Canada, Royal Commission, "Minutes," 1892, S.P., 1893, no. 10c, pp. 415, 427, 433.

seasons. The interim regulations provided that "all bona fide fishermen, being British subjects and actual residents of the province" were to qualify for one license. Provision was made for 20 licenses for each operating cannery and additional licenses for cold storage plants, exporters of iced fish and fresh fish dealers.²⁵

The 1892 changes were announced too close to the opening of the season for their full effect to be felt that year; yet the number of licenses rose sharply from 500 to 721, with the canneries obtaining 417 licenses instead of 350, and individual fishermen 270 instead of 150. Though the number of licenses granted to both whites and Indians was higher, the largest percentage increase was obtained by Japanese who had first entered the industry about 1888. In their case the number was more than doubled. The approach of 1893, a "big" cycle year, promised an accentuation of these trends.²⁶

The increase in the number of licenses, both to canneries and to individuals, presented the contract fishermen with a new situation in which their privileged position was threatened. More individual licenses meant more fishermen offering their catches to the canneries, and in a cycle year this threatened, at the very least, the elimination of premium prices or, even worse, a cut in the usual prices. The contract fishermen reacted to this threat

²⁵ Canada, Fishery Commission, "Report," 1892, S.P., 1893, no. 10c, pp. x-xi.

²⁶ See Table V, p. 48 below; Canada, S.P., 1893, no. 10a, p. 153.

TABLE V
 GILLNET LICENSES ON THE FRASER RIVER, 1887 - 1900,
^a
 BY MAJOR ETHNIC GROUPS

Year	Company	Individual			Between- bridge Licenses	Total
		Japanese	Indian	White		
1887	-	--	615	320	-	935
1888	-	10	323	167	-	500
1889	-	25	308	167	-	500
1890	-	25	308	167	-	500
1891	-	50	283	167	-	500
1892	-	108	373	240	-	721
1893	-	235	558	381	-	1,174
1894	-	417	549	701	-	1,667
1895	-	434	539	731	30	1,734
1896	-	926	530	1,130	60	2,646
1897	-	928	520	780	90	2,318
1898	-	1,321	511	690	120	2,642
1899	-	1,361	501	710	150	2,722
1900	393	1,659	555	1,076	-	3,683

^a Rounsefell and Kelez, Fraser River Salmon Fisheries, p. 706 (Table 2 - Gillnet licenses of the Puget Sound - Fraser River region, 1877-1934). The authors' note to this table says in part:

"From 1877 to 1899 the nationalities [sic] have been estimated from various notes. The company licenses before 1900 are not separated from the total, and so are allocated amongst the other types. There were no special 'between bridges [i.e., between New Westminster and Mission railway bridges]' licenses prior to 1908, so the figures from 1895 to 1899 merely represent a rough estimate of the number of this type of resident up-river fishermen before 1900."

Rounsefell and Kelez estimated the proportions of Japanese, Indian and white fishermen while attempting to measure fishing intensity. The totals, it should be noted, are from Fisheries Department records.

by banding together to ask for further changes in licensing regulations and by organizing a "Fishermen's Association."

The petition prepared and circulated by this Association urged changes in the licensing regulations, in order "to save trouble on our rivers by desperate men whose rights are being trampled under foot to satisfy the greed of monopolists." The Association demanded that Japanese be refused licenses, and that the number of cannery licenses be greatly reduced. At the same time, they asked for an unlimited number of individual licenses, these to cost \$5.00 each,²⁷ to be issued only one per person, and to be non-transferable.

The proposal to withhold licenses from Japanese attracted most attention in the press, since it lent support to the general²⁸ anti-Oriental agitation then current in the province. Editorials discussing the Association's petition chiefly contented themselves with either supporting or attacking the anti-Japanese demands of the fishermen.²⁹ Actually, however, the main concern of the petitioners was for further restrictions of all competitors, be they Japanese, canners or fish dealers. What relative importance the fishermen attached to the anti-Japanese campaign is hard to determine; most labor-sponsored political programs of the time contained anti-

²⁷ Colonist, May 28, 1893, p. 2.

²⁸ The British Columbia Legislative Assembly had a number of anti-Chinese resolutions before it in the spring of 1893 (Journals, 1893, pp. 77, 85-6, 95, 138, 146).

²⁹ Toronto Monetary Times, n.d., n.p., cited in Colonist, June 15, 1893, p. 4; Colonist, June 17, p. 4; News-Advertiser, July 15, p. 4.

30
Oriental clauses. The emphasis given by the press to the fishermen's anti-Japanese sentiment was out of all proportion to the size of the problem in 1892-3, when not more than one-seventh of the fishermen were Japanese.³¹ By distorting the campaign for license reforms, the anti-Oriental emphasis certainly reduced its effectiveness.

Why, then, was such prominence given by the Fishermen's Association to the attack on the Japanese? Undoubtedly, it reflects their reaction to the granting of individual licenses to Japanese, which first occurred in the season of 1892. When the first 10 Japanese entered the industry in 1888, they fished for English and Company's Steveston cannery, presumably on cannery licenses.³² During the seasons of 1889 to 1891, when individual licenses were limited largely to previous license holders, the growing number of Japanese was prevented from taking out their own licenses. With the ending in 1892 of the limitation on their numbers, individual licenses were issued to Japanese, bringing them as contract fishermen for the first time into direct competition with the white group. This occasioned the angry outburst among the whites that we have discussed.

³⁰ See T. R. Loosmore, "The British Columbia Labor Movement and Political Action, 1879-1908," unpublished M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, Oct., 1954, appendices, pp. iv, xiii, xv.

³¹ See Table V, p. 48 above.

³² Rounsefell and Kelez, Fraser River Salmon Fisheries, p. 705.

The charges, stressed in the preamble to the petition, that Chinese and Japanese were fraudulently getting naturalization papers to qualify for fishing licenses, are another instance of the Association's attempt to preserve the privileged position of its members. On the recommendation of the Royal Commission, a new requirement that fishermen be British subjects and resident in the province had been inserted into the interim regulations of 1892. If it could be enforced, it would strengthen the bargaining position of the resident fishermen for whom the Association spoke. The Association chose to concentrate on a politically popular attack on the Japanese, rather than on the United States fishermen who also came and went freely. ³³ It may have felt that the emotional fervor of anti-Orientalism provided its best defence against the charge that it wanted these regulations enforced to create a monopoly for its members.

To get support for their demands and to recruit members the fishermen held meetings in New Westminster and Steveston. Finally, an organization, the "Fraser River Fishermen's Protective and Benevolent Association" with Alex W. Anderson, President; Thomas Steffensen, Vice-President; William Crawford, secretary; and Edward Johnson, treasurer, was incorporated under the provisions

of the provincial "Benevolent Societies Act" of 1891 (54 Vict.,
34
Chap. 41).

While the fishermen were attempting to bring public pressure on the government, the canners were quietly planning a counter-offensive against the privileged group of contract fishermen. A meeting of Fraser River canners held on July 8, 1893, fixed the price to be paid for sockeye in the coming season at six cents.
35
Newspaper reports of this meeting of the "Canners' Association" reveal a division in its ranks. Alexander Ewen, the longest established of the canners and one of the largest operators, refused to join the "combine."
36
Henry O. Bell-Irving, manager of the Anglo-British Columbia Packing Company, Limited, the newly-formed English syndicate which had seven canneries on the river, favored the price-cut. His attitude underlines the determination of the newly-formed company to establish a firm position for

34 B.C., Reg. of Cos., File 20 (Soc.) [microfilm]. The name reproduces the style of that of the "Columbia River Fishermen's Protective Association"--the only change being dictated by the necessity of registering as a benevolent society--so closely as to suggest that the older organization was used as a model.

35 This was reported to be a drop from "the usual price--ten cents" which suggests that over the period of license limitation that figure had come to be regarded as the customary one (Columbian, July 15, 1893, p. 1). No evidence on prices during the season of 1892 could be found. That year was a small one for sockeye and if it followed the pattern of 1891, prices would have ranged up to 20 cents (see page 44 above). The fact that 15 cents was mentioned in 1893 by union spokesmen in connection with the fishermen's demands, may indicate that this price had been paid in at least part of the previous season (News-Advertiser, July 18, 1893, p. 8).

36 He wished to continue to pay 10 cents, and was still paying eight cents (Columbian, July 15, 1893, p. 1).

itself in competition with the older firms in the industry.

During the subsequent dispute, Bell-Irving outlined the objective of those canners who had agreed to cut the prices:

In previous years, he said, part of the licenses were assigned to the canners and part to the free fishers. The canners did not get sufficient to assure them as many fish as they might need. They engaged men by the day for their own boats and licenses but for fear they should not get enough fish they contracted at the beginning of the season with outside men by the fish for their catch of the season. To guarantee that they should get as many fish as they required the canners usually paid these outside fishermen much more than the cost of those [fish] caught in their own boats would average. They found it better, however, to do that than to be short at the end of the season. In those times a fisherman's license was a valuable document. This year all that is changed. All who care to pay the fee may get a license and the river is covered with fishermen, about 1,200 in all having been issued. The canners are thus pretty well assured of their supply and have put the price to what they consider a proper price 37

The fishermen, including all-holders of individual licenses, whether white, Indian, or Japanese, refused to sign contracts at the reduced price and held out for 10 cents. ³⁸ It is probable that they were supported by share or "lay" men who would also be affected.

The tactics, apparently agreed upon at the fishermen's mass meeting on Saturday July 8, unfolded in the next week. ³⁹ A letter was dispatched to each of the canners asking him to meet with a committee

37 News-Advertiser, July 21, 1893, p. 1.

38 Columbian, July 15, 1893, p. 1.

39 Ibid., July 11, 1893, p. 4.

of five from the Fishermen's Association at Ladner's Landing on
Friday July 14 to negotiate a settlement of the dispute. ⁴⁰ When,
on Friday morning, the fishermen who supported the Association
refused to work, a strike had begun. ⁴¹ None of the canners, not
excluding the dissident Alex Ewen, would meet with the fishermen's
committee. ⁴²

Having thus decided not to negotiate, the canners concen-
trated on winning the dispute with the fishermen. Their opening
move was to insert an advertisement in the New Westminster and
Vancouver newspapers, signed by all the canning companies--Ewen
and Company along with the rest--offering a \$50.00 reward for
information leading to the arrest and conviction of anyone cutting
nets, or damaging other property, intimidating fishermen or pre-
venting them from performing their duties, inciting to unlawful
acts, or "using violence or threat of violence to any person or
persons in pursuance of any combination or conspiracy to raise the
rate of wages." ⁴³

⁴⁰ Columbian, July 18, 1893, p. 4; News-Advertiser, July 18, p. 4.

⁴¹ Ibid., July 15, 1893, p. 1.

⁴² A Fishermen's Association letter to the press alleged they were reported as saying "they would never lower themselves to meet common fishermen and paupers" (Columbian, July 19, 1893, p. 1). Mr. Bell-Irving, for his part, complained that "because we refuse to meet them, we, the canners, are now called monopolists and such names" (News-Advertiser, July 15, 1893, p. 3).

⁴³ Vancouver News-Advertiser, July 15, 1893, p. 1 (running to July 28); Vancouver World (hereafter cited as World), July 15, p. 2 (to July 28); New Westminster Columbian, July 15, p. 4 (to July 29).

This legal phraseology seems to have been chosen to frighten the unsophisticated into believing that any group action by fishermen was somehow illegal. The section quoted above paraphrased Section 524 of the Criminal Code of Canada, 1892 (55-56 Victoria, Chap. 29), but with a significant omission designed to strengthen the implication that any group action by fishermen was illegal. The canners' version of the section omitted the word "unlawful" (plentifully sprinkled through the preceding text) from in front of "combination and conspiracy." In fact, the Criminal Code specifically exempted combinations of workmen as such from prosecution for conspiracy, so long as they did nothing that was otherwise illegal (s.s. 516-9). The ambiguous position of trade unions under the law of conspiracy, then and later, laid-⁴⁴ working men open to this type of pressure from employers.

The suggestion that the fishermen were committing, or were about to commit, "unlawful" acts was followed up with direct charges that the fishermen were, in fact, intimidating the Indians so as to prevent them from going fishing. Some of the charges seem to be based on the union's methods in collecting dues from and issuing membership cards to Indians. Some Indians were said to have regarded the card either as a license, without which they could not fish, or as a new revenue tax.⁴⁵ The Hon. J. H. Turner,

⁴⁴ Canada, Department of Labor, Trade Union Law in Canada, Ottawa, King's Printer, 1935, pp. 22-24.

⁴⁵ News-Advertiser, July 15, 1893, p. 3; July 18, p. 3.

Provincial Minister of Finance, and himself a canner with interests on the Fraser River, wired Premier Davie asking for provincial police to be sent to communities along the Fraser. ⁴⁶ Half-breeds, charged with intimidation, ⁴⁷ were arrested.

The Fishermen's Association was placed on the defensive, but their officers promptly denied the charges, saying they would "use their best endeavours to prevent any acts of lawlessness on the part of members of the Association." ⁴⁸ The Association, in turn, charged that the cannery owners were "using all legal and illegal means in their power to put down 'this conspiracy to raise the rate of wages' as they call the Fishermen's Association." Specifically they charged Indian agents, cannery owners and even a priest with using undue influence to get the Indians to return to work. ⁴⁹

Behind these charges and counter-charges lay the crucial struggle for the support of the fishermen, a great majority of them Indians, who fished for daily wages in cannery boats. In numbers they probably represented from one-third to one-half of the

⁴⁶ News-Advertiser, July 15, 1893, p. 3.

⁴⁷ Ibid. The harassing nature of these arrests can be judged by the cases being adjourned several times at the request of the prosecutors until the strike was over, when the charges were apparently quietly dropped (Columbian, July 20, 1893, p. 1; Aug. 3, p. 4).

⁴⁸ Columbian, July 15, 1893, p. 1.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

approximately 2,350 men involved. For either side to win, it must get the allegiance of the men on daily wages. On the day the strike began, the Association announced that its demands included one for \$3.00 a day for "boatmen." But the canners had already partially forestalled this strategm by offering a raise of 25 cents over previous years to \$2.50 and \$2.25.⁵¹

The canners did not, however, rely solely on the offer of an increase in wages to lure the Indians back to work. As the Fishermen's Association charged, they enlisted the help of federal Indian Affairs officials. On Sunday July 16, just before the weekly opening, A. W. Vowell, Superintendent of Indian Affairs for British Columbia, toured the Indian camps at Steveston with the Indian Agent from the Cowichan district, W. H. Lomas.⁵² With Vowell and Lomas went William Moresby, governor of the provincial gaol at New Westminster. They told the Indians that they were free to go

⁵⁰ The number of men on daily wages is difficult to estimate. A total of 1,174 licenses was issued on the Fraser in 1893. Rounsefell and Kelez estimate that Indians got 558 of them (See Table V, p. 48 above). At two men per license, this would mean about 1,100 Indians were involved. But not all Indians were wage earners and not all wage workers were Indians. Anderson, the union president, claimed a membership of 1,600. His figures of 1,287 licenses to whites and Indians and 63 to Japanese gives too high a total, while underestimating the Japanese share and not differentiating between cannery licenses and individual licenses (News-Advertiser, July 18, 1893, p. 8).

⁵¹ Columbian, July 15, 1893, p. 1. The rate in recent seasons had been \$2.25 for fishermen and \$2.00 for boat-pullers.

⁵² World, July 15, 1893, p. 2.

to work and should make their own private arrangements with the
canners. It was reasonable enough advice, but, as advice given in
the presence of a provincial gaol official who also performed
police duties, it could easily be construed as intimidation.⁵³

Also lending their presence to attempts to get the Indians back to
work were a number of special constables, under a provincial police
sergeant who had been dispatched by the Davie government in response
to Turner's request.⁵⁴ An Indian chief who supported the strikers,
declared: "At Ladner's there were so many constables they tried
to scare the Indians to go fishing."⁵⁵

A number of Indians, whether intimidated or persuaded, went
back to work on Sunday night.⁵⁶ There is some question as to the
exact number, but a Vancouver steamer, bearing excursionists
returning after a day's visit to the canneries in Steveston,
reported that the river was so choked with nets after the six
o'clock opening that the vessel found passage difficult.⁵⁷ Once any
return to work had begun, however, the issue of the strike could not
be long in doubt. The weakness of the strikers' position was

53 Colonist, July 18, 1893, p. 2; News-Advertiser, July 18, p. 1.

54 News-Advertiser, July 16, 1893, p. 3.

55 Ibid., July 25, 1893, p. 7.

56 Colonist, July 18, 1893, p. 2; News-Advertiser, July 18, p. 1.

57 World, July 17, 1893, p. 4.

underlined by pronouncements by canners to the effect that no out-
side boats would be needed for the season.⁵⁸ This action was
undoubtedly an attempt to influence the strikers though the
experience of previous years of a heavy run had indicated that
far less than the 20 boats allowed could catch all that a cannery
could process.⁵⁹ By the end of the first week, all the Indians
were reported to be fishing and a number of "Austrians" had also
gone back.⁶⁰ There was also a report that "a few" of the Assoc-
iation members had made "private arrangements" with the canneries
and were fishing again.⁶¹

The strike apparently ended on Sunday night, July 23, with
most of the fishermen going back to work on whatever terms they were
able to arrange with the canners.⁶² When the strike was at its last
gasp, the Association made a final appeal to public opinion at a
mass meeting held in the Market Hall in Vancouver the previous
evening. The diminishing support for the strike can be measured
by the size of the audience: only 200 fishermen and 50 members of
the public. The meeting passed two resolutions. One condemned the

58 Colonist, July 19, 1893, p. 2.

59 Canada, Fishery Commission, "Minutes," 1892, S.P., 1893,
no. 10c, passim.

60 World, July 22, 1893, p. 4.

61 Columbian, July 22, 1893, p. 4.

62 Columbian, July 24, 1893, p. 4; Colonist, July 25, p. 2.

Indian Agents for "using their influence as Government officials to induce them [the Indians] to return to work for starvation wages." The second repeated the demand that "the number of fishing licenses granted to the canneries should be greatly reduced" and added that "all licenses illegally granted to Japanese and canneries in name only should be immediately cancelled."⁶³

The strike of 1893 was defeated chiefly by the solid front maintained by the canners during a time of economic depression,⁶⁴ but there were also a number of other reasons. The Association had been unable to hold together the diverse group that it sought to lead. The contract fishermen were chiefly concerned about licenses and fish prices. Their support of a raise for men on daily wages appears as almost an afterthought. They were unable to hold the Indians in face of the raise in daily rates offered by the canners, and of the pressure that the canners brought to bear on them through government officials. Towards the Japanese, their attitude was ambivalent. On one hand, they boasted of Japanese support for the Association, and, on the other, refused to let them join its ranks,⁶⁵

63 News-Advertiser, July 25, 1893, p. 4; Columbian, July 25, p. 4.

64 As Henry Bell-Irving remarked, "on this occasion at least the canners had taken united action," a wry commentary on their previous failures in this direction (News-Advertiser, July 15, 1893, p. 3).

65 By the beginning of the second week of the strike, the Colonist carried a Vancouver report stating: "Every stage for Steveston is crowded with men going to work in the canneries" (Colonist, Aug. 20, 1893, p. 2). Other reports of the time stress the unemployment prevalent in Vancouver.

even though the Japanese apparently asked either to be admitted, or alternatively, offered \$500 if the Association would set up a separate union for them.⁶⁶

This dispute, although brief, is important because in many respects it anticipates the problems of the strike of 1900. The refusal to accept a price cut, the ad hoc character of the fishermen's organization, the stresses among ethnic groups, the aggressive tactics of the canners, the appeal to public opinion and the role of the provincial police--all figure in the later dispute.

The strike of 1893 having failed, the Fraser River Fishermen's Protective and Benevolent Association faded from public view.⁶⁷ During the rest of the 1890's, the fishermen were at the mercy of supply and demand in the setting of fish prices. For the remainder of the season of 1893, prices varied according to the pack prospects. The expected big run did not commence until the beginning of the week of August 20.⁶⁸ In the meantime, prices rose to eight cents, then to 12-1/2, and even to 15 cents. When the price was still at eight cents some of the "free" fishermen--individual license holders--refused to fish unless they got 10 cents.⁶⁹ When the big run did

⁶⁶ News-Advertiser, July 18, 1893, p. 8.

⁶⁷ It at least survived the strike, holding a meeting in Steveston to apply for admission to the Vancouver Trades and Labor Council (Colonist, Aug. 5, 1893, p. 2). Three hundred fishermen, probably the hard core of the Association's support, marched in the Labor Day parade (ibid., Aug. 26, p. 2).

⁶⁸ Colonist, Aug. 22, 1893, p. 2.

⁶⁹ Ibid., Aug. 4, 1893, p. 2; Aug. 9, p. 2; Aug. 17, p. 2.

come, the slow-moving cannery lines were soon over-supplied with fish. The fishermen then experienced what must have seemed to them the other side of a "heads I win, tails you lose" situation: just when they could make some money, they were limited in their deliveries to the canneries.⁷⁰ The season ended with full packs for the canneries and reports that the fishermen's average earnings, in spite of the larger number of fishermen, were equal to those of previous years, a situation that neither canneries nor fishermen could expect to be repeated in subsequent off-years.⁷¹

An analysis of price trends in the succeeding season⁷² of the 1890's will help to establish the problems of the fishermen facing price fluctuations without any form of bargaining group to assist him in his negotiations with the cannery operators. This, in turn, may serve to identify the types of difficulties that he tried to solve through organization and collective action.

Increasing competition for fish is mirrored in the prices paid in the 1894 season. The canners met before the season to decide on the price and apparently set eight cents as the rate.⁷² But not all operators were prepared to "hold the line." When the run continued poor into August, prices shot up. An "unprecedented" 25 cents was paid by one cannery while others paid 15 and 20 cents.

⁷⁰ Colonist, Aug. 25, 1893, p. 2.

⁷¹ Columbian, Aug. 30, 1893, p. 4; Sept. 1, p. 4.

⁷² Colonist, July 20, 1894, p. 2.

The canneries that kept the old scale were forced to offer the counter-attraction of accepting all fish delivered--a promise that meant no limit even in heavy runs.⁷³ When the run improved, some canners led an attempt to cut back to the eight-cent level, but only about two-thirds of them followed this lead.⁷⁴ The season ended with only a "three-quarter" pack⁷⁵ on the Fraser and the canners holding large unsold and uncommitted stocks for a rise in London prices.⁷⁶

The high prices paid in 1894 had their effect on the next season. Although 1895 was an "off" year for sockeye the run was expected to be early and to come with a rush. The contract fishermen, therefore, asked for higher prices and this in turn caused a rush of would-be fishermen, attracted by the prospect of 25 cents per fish.⁷⁷ That year the canners were unable to agree at all on a price: Anglo-British Columbia Packing, which had maintained a hard line on prices since its formation in 1891, announced that, in the absence of any agreement, it would pay 25 cents through the

73 Colonist, Aug. 5, 1894, p. 2.

74 Ibid., Aug. 8, 1894, p. 2.

75 This expression stems from the days of hand-made tins. Canners had to decide before the season opened on the number of cases they would prepare to pack, as more tins usually could not be made quickly enough to take advantage of any heavy run. A "three-quarter" pack meant only that proportion of the cans prepared had been filled.

76 Colonist, Aug. 10, 1894, p. 5; Aug. 27, p. 2.

77 Ibid., June 23, 1895, p. 2; July 11, p. 2.

whole season.⁷⁸ Some contracts also apparently contained clauses allowing unlimited delivery of fish.⁷⁹ As soon as the run began, prices, other presumably than these contracts for the season, dropped.⁸⁰ In one tremendous 24-hour period, beginning at the weekly opening on August 11, every cannery was glutted. One of Anglo-British Columbia's canneries took 40,000 fish in two days at eight⁸¹ and 10 cents each, and was reported to have been offered 100,000. The price dropped to as low as five cents and remained there after the run had eased. The fishermen responded by refusing to fish at that price.⁸²

The season of 1896 saw a continuance of the high prices of the previous year. Contracts were made with fishermen for 25 cents, 20 cents being the lowest price offered.⁸³ Some canneries experienced difficulty in getting fishermen,⁸⁴ but this situation was relieved, partly by the arrival of fishermen who left Rivers Inlet because of a strike there for higher prices,⁸⁵ and partly by the

78 Colonist, July 13, 1895, p. 2.

79 Ibid., Aug. 13, 1895, p. 1.

80 Ibid., July 16, 1895, p. 2.

81 Ibid., Aug. 18, 1895, p. 6.

82 Ibid., Aug. 15, 1895, p. 2.

83 Ibid., July 14, 1896, p. 2.

84 Ibid., July 18, 1896, p. 2.

85 Ibid., July 19, 1896, p. 2.

licensing of more Japanese.⁸⁶ Price changes in the season closely paralleled those of 1895. When the heaviest part of the run developed in August, prices dipped to 10 and five cents, but rose again to 15 cents as it dropped off.⁸⁷ Problems arose with contract fishermen, for apparently their contracts that season permitted no price drop. When the supply of fish became abundant, the canneries simply refused to honor the contract price of 25 cents. The fishermen involved resisted the price cut, but, it was reported, "after much consideration and a few threats a compromise was made--20 cents being the figure to canners who made contracts."⁸⁸ That the threats, whatever they were, were not acted on, simply spells out how vulnerable even the fishermen holding a contract were to unilateral action by the canners.

Both canners and fishermen approached the season of 1897 in expectation that it would be a "big" year. Before sockeye fishing started, 16 of the canners on the lower reaches of the river around Steveston and Ladner's, met and agreed that they would offer only eight cents a fish. This decision caused an uproar among the fishermen who had gathered for the season's opening. The protest was spontaneous, since no organization then existed; neither was any formal organization set up during the short dispute. First to balk

⁸⁶ Colonist, July 31, 1896, p. 2.

⁸⁷ Columbian, Aug. 11, 1896, p. 4; Aug. 12, p. 4; Aug. 19, p. 4.

⁸⁸ Colonist, Aug. 15, 1896, p. 2.

at the declared price was a group of Indian fishermen, numbering 300 to 400, who announced that they were on strike, and would return home, unless they were paid 25 cents a fish, the price during most of the previous season.⁸⁹ The Japanese followed as a group, asking for 15 cents.⁹⁰ The white fishermen joined them, somewhat unwillingly, a number standing aloof, particularly some of the men having their own gear.⁹¹ These men, who made up the once-privileged contract group, seem to have disliked the Japanese so much as to be unable to co-operate with them, even to their own advantage.

The three groups were unwilling to give up their separate identities to the point of forming any kind of common organization. Each met separately, and then jointly in a mass meeting at Steveston. This meeting elected a committee to ask the canners to sign an agreement to pay not less than 15 cents a fish for the entire season--a compromise price between the whites' preference for 15 cents to open and not less than 10 cents,⁹² and the Indians' demand for 25 cents throughout the season.⁹³ Reports of the dispute suggest that some white fishermen did not like the 15-cent figure simply because it had been first proposed by the Japanese. If this same

⁸⁹ Columbian, July 8, 1897, p. 1.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid., July 12, 1897, p. 1.

⁹² Ibid., July 13, 1897, p. 4.

⁹³ Ibid., July 9, 1897, p. 1.

source can be believed, they were also reluctant to sign a "no 15 cents, no fish" pledge partly because it had originated as a Japanese idea.⁹⁴

It is highly unlikely that the cannery owners agreed even to meet the committee, but they did hold a meeting among themselves in Vancouver that Saturday and raised the opening price to 10 cents.⁹⁵ This figure was acceptable to a good many white fishermen and their acceptance probably influenced the other groups. In any case, all went back to work without any significant loss of fishing time during the run. Subsequently some refusals by the canneries to take on the "kickers" was reported, and the whole dispute blamed on "American agitators," although with what justification is not known.⁹⁶

Some features of this dispute underline the changes in canner-fishermen relations that had taken place since the last dispute in 1893. Indians, who in 1893 had been on daily wages, were now, at Steveston at least, on piece-work--in fact, some of them expressed a desire to go back to the former system.⁹⁷ This older method of payment had not been entirely eliminated, however,

⁹⁴ Columbian, July 12, 1897, p. 1.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid., July 13, 1897, p. 4. Numbers of fishermen from the U.S. fished on the Fraser that season (Columbian, Aug. 19, 1897, p. 1). Perhaps some of them had had experience in the Columbia River strike of 1896 (Columbian, Aug. 27, 1896, p. 4) and that formed the basis of the report.

⁹⁷ Columbian, July 9, 1897, p. 1.

as New Westminster canneries still had some men on daily wages.

The progress of the 1897 season was a vivid demonstration of problems facing the fishermen. A heavy run, one of the largest in the history of the Fraser, set in and lasted two and a half weeks. Even the greatly increased number of canneries since the last "big" year was unable to handle the fish. Prices dropped as low as two cents and limits were everywhere put on deliveries. So heavy was the run that the fishermen were left with thousands of fish on their hands for which no sale existed.⁹⁹ A few fish were salted but thousands were thrown away each day--some estimates range as high as 100,000 a day.¹⁰⁰ Small consolation to the fishermen, then, that the pack was the largest yet on the Fraser River. Nor were they much comforted by newspaper observations that "this is not their year"¹⁰¹ and the hopes expressed that they could "make a little money" by fishing the tail end of the run.¹⁰²

The season of 1898 saw another flare-up among fishermen. That season was a failure compared with the years just previous to it, or indeed, with corresponding years in other four-year cycles.¹⁰³

⁹⁸ Columbian, July 9, 1897, p. 1.

⁹⁹ Ibid., July 26, 1897, p. 1; July 28, p. 4; July 31, p. 4; Aug. 2, p. 4.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., Aug. 5, 1897, p. 4.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., Aug. 9, 1897, p. 3.

¹⁰² Ibid., Aug. 5, 1897, p. 4; Aug. 11, p. 4.

¹⁰³ See Table II, p. 8 above.

The price of fish, therefore, stayed at 15 cents in the first part of the season. A sudden spurt on the evening of a weekly Sunday opening caused some canneries to cut the price--prematurely, as it turned out--to 10 cents.¹⁰⁴ This time the fishermen with their own gear and those on shares refused to work. The cut in prices had been made only by a few canneries and these soon found out they could not sustain such an action without majority support.¹⁰⁵

Individual settlements ended the walkout and the price returned to 15 cents; then it climbed, as the run stayed light, to 20, 22-1/2 and 25 cents.¹⁰⁶ This high price did not mean too much for, as one report commented, "the fish are not running so the price is immaterial."¹⁰⁷ The pack, when complete, was the smallest on the Fraser since 1892.¹⁰⁸

In 1899, prices went even higher than they had been in 1898. The season opened with a price of 25 cents and the prospect of its reaching 30 cents.¹⁰⁹ The 25-cent level was maintained through practically the whole season except for a brief slump to 15 cents during a temporary glut.¹¹⁰ The size of the run does not

104 Columbian, Aug. 2, 1898, p. 4.

105 Ibid., Aug. 3, 1898, p. 3.

106 Ibid., Aug. 15, 1898, p. 4; Aug. 17, p. 4.

107 Ibid., Aug. 17, 1898, p. 4.

108 See Table II, p. 8 above.

109 Colonist, July 16, 1899, p. 5.

110 Ibid., Aug. 15, 1899, p. 1; Aug. 18, p. 2; Aug. 25, p. 2;

explain this price level as it does that of 1898, since the pack was in fact second only to the record catch of 1897.¹¹¹ Competition among the large number of canneries is the only explanation that can be offered.

Although wide fluctuations in price occurred both during each season and between seasons, the trend during the period from 1893 to 1899 was for prices to rise. This created problems for the cannery operator, who was faced with an ever higher cost for his raw material. Yet the individual fisherman, because of more competition in his trade, limitations on deliveries and price changes during the course of the fishing season, did not always benefit from the higher prices.

The opposing interests of canners and fishermen in the matter of fish prices, produced a conflict that had become endemic in the industry by the end of the 1890's. This conflict did not, however, of itself result in an organization of fishermen. The formation in 1893 of the Fraser River Fishermen's Protective and Benevolent Association may appear at first glance to contradict this statement, but this organization was not formed to seek price adjustments. Its objective was legislative action to change the balance of fishing licenses as between individual holders and canneries, and to alter the conditions under which licenses were

¹¹¹ See Table II, p. 8 above.

granted. The end of these changes would be to weaken the canners' control over the supply of fishermen and to create a monopoly for the contract fishermen. The strike of 1893 bore little relation to this campaign. It was in a sense forced on the Association by its members' reaction to the canners' insistence on price cuts that would undermine their privileged position. Throughout this essentially negative struggle, the Association was on the defensive.

If the strike was a diversion of the Association from its main purpose, then its reluctance to assume the leadership of all fishermen regardless of ethnic group, or whether they were on contract, shares or wages, and failure to hold together this motley group, is understandable. The approach to the Indians and the inclusion of the demand for a raise in daily wages appears to have been made only at the last minute. The Association rebuffed the Japanese when they tried to join it, even though the Japanese of their own accord adopted the Association's price demands. It stood by while the Indians were persuaded, by methods amounting to intimidation, to go back to work. Although the press was ever ready to leap on any reports of subsequent disturbances, no evidence exists of any Association attempt to interfere with fishing by non-striking fishermen. The evidence, in fact, points just the other way--to the passivity of Association members in face of the bleeding away of their support. The main resolution at the final public meeting, for instance, did not even refer to the strikers' price demands, but repeated arguments for license changes.

Granting the purpose of the Association to be the protection and improvement of the position of the contract fishermen at the expense of other fishermen, then its relation both to the struggle over prices and to other fishermen, including the Japanese, becomes clear. It hoped to control prices by creating a monopoly for its members. An influx of fishermen, whether Japanese or American, could only destroy this monopoly. No organization that united all fishermen would serve the purpose of advancing the interests of a particular section. Hence the refusal to broaden the Association to include all fishermen.

This also seems to be the reason why the opportunity that existed at the opening of the season of 1897 to re-create a fishermen's organization was not taken. The protests over price cuts were in that year started by the Indians, followed by the Japanese, and only then taken up reluctantly by the white group. The logic of the situation demanded an organization embracing the three groups, but they met separately, and ineffectively, during the brief dispute. Even though the white group were again actively promoting legislative change, as will be seen in the following chapter, they were apparently prepared to accept the lower prices offered rather than submerge their special interests in an all-inclusive organization.

We must, therefore, look to the struggle over fishery regulations to find the genesis of those fishermen's organizations that were to lead the 1900 strike.