

Port Alberni and the Great Depression:
Paying the Price of Prosperity

by


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ABSTRACT

Many of Port Alberni's experiences during the Great Depression were similar to those of other western Canadian communities: the collapse of its major resource industry; subsequent unemployment and business closures; and the near bankruptcy of the city. A combination of factors, however, made Port Alberni's experiences unique. The expansion of industrial activity subsequent to the negotiation of a new trade agreement between Canada and Britain combined with the city's situation as the western terminus of the highway and railroad to make Port Alberni the locus of thousands of migrants who searched across Canada for work. The city benefited from symbiotic developments among population growth, industrial expansion and commercial maturation at the same time as it suffered financial and social problems associated with the influx of people. In spite of the short duration of widespread unemployment, industrial and commercial bankruptcies, and financial strains on Port Alberni's treasury, city leaders never recovered their confidence but remained resentful of transients and wary of growth even when conditions improved.

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DEDICATION

To the memory of Simo Nurme (1946-2000) whose love of history inspired his students and enriched our lives.

Chapter 1

Introduction

In the winter of 1934-35, under the headline, "Two Takers For Every Job Makes Port Alberni No Workers' Paradise," the *West Coast Advocate* decried the city's reputation as "a Garden of Eden for incoming jobless workers." It argued that although all the mills were operating and a large new one, expected to employ hundreds of men, was on the verge of opening, the number of local unemployed men was equal to the number of jobs available. Newcomers would inevitably be reduced to begging from residents whose traditionally generous impulses were thwarted by their own financial constraints. The paper therefore advised: "Don't come to Port Alberni unless there is a job waiting here for you."¹ This warning echoed Port Alberni's increasing hostility to the presence of jobseekers as City Council demanded the Esquimalt & Nanaimo (hereafter E&N) railway demolish the hobo jungle alongside its tracks and stepped up its campaign of imploring the province's metropolitan newspapers to stop publicising the town's prosperity.

Some jobseekers were disappointed, but for hundreds of others, Port Alberni was indeed the "regular Valhalla"² it was reputed to be. Among the migrants that winter was a large family of French-Canadians from Saskatchewan who exchanged a miserable existence on their drought-stricken farm for steady jobs on the first day they arrived in Port Alberni. The family's youngest son remembered his first months in the Alberni Valley as "all so marvellous... everybody was so happy. There was money, real money, coming in and their [sic] was fruit, all kinds of those delicious B.C. cherries! This was paradise indeed. And, God, you could go swimming in the ocean at the bottom of the hill, or in lakes or streams! And there was food of all kinds: salmon, clams, oysters, cod, herring,

¹ *West Coast Advocate*, 3 January 1935.

² *West Coast Advocate*, 3 January 1935.

trout, you name it! This was really living..."³ His family immediately wrote to the friends and relatives they had left behind, thus initiating a chain migration from Debden and other nearby French-Canadian communities which persisted into the 1950s.

The antagonism of the local civic authorities and some of the local population toward migrants seeking work appear as a puzzling contrast to the conspicuously successful experience of young Rosaire's family. It can be explained by the dynamics of the shockingly sudden collapse of the forest industry that had brought prosperity and growth to the city in the 1920s and the subsequent widespread unemployment of the early 1930s. Within a few short years, the community was again transformed and found itself in the unique situation of booming during a nation-wide Depression. Therefore, the second wave of population increase within such a hectic time evoked a disproportionately negative reaction that lingered for years. In spite of the fears of civic administrators and some others, there proved to be plenty of jobs for both long-time residents and newcomers in the traditional resource industries, as well as in a commercial sector that was suddenly revitalised by an influx of consumers. Besides, after the mid 1930s, unemployment relief for non-residents became a progressively smaller component of the city's budget. Factors other than the in-migration of unemployed workers caused the city's continual financial difficulties, but the City Council continued to blame its problems on transients.

This introductory chapter includes the definition of certain terms used in the paper, a historiographical synopsis of relevant literature, and justification of this study's parameters. Chapter 2 summarises the city's history and conditions prior to the Great Depression and relates how the collapse of the forest industry affected Port Alberni's workers, business community, and civic finances between 1930 and 1933. Chapter 3

³ Comité du 50e, *The French-Canadians of Port Alberni Celebrated 50 Years 1935-1985* (Port Alberni, BC: Centre Francophone d'Alberni, 1991), xix.

describes the dramatic changes effected by the Imperial Preference agreement with Great Britain which created jobs, expanded business opportunities, and attracted migrants by the thousand. Chapter 4 illustrates the city's xenophobic response to the newcomers. Chapter 5 discusses in detail the negative implications of the population increase and City Council's enduring problems, explains why renewed industrial activity and its attendant benefits did not relieve financial worries, and makes conclusions about Port Alberni's Depression experiences and suggestions for further study.

The complexity of the terminology used to describe Canadians on the move during the Depression is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4, but in the context of this paper, "newcomers" are those men (and their families if they had them) who found work in the Alberni Valley and became long-term residents of Port Alberni. "Transient unemployed men" identifies two categories of men. The first group found work in the Alberni Valley but did not settle within Port Alberni; either they stayed only a short time or lived outside the city in logging camps or rural mill sites. The second group, men who were unsuccessful in their search for work, either stayed awhile in temporary accommodations, or left the Valley within a few days.

After a spate of books and articles in the 1960s and 1970s, Canadian historians lost interest in the Depression. There are significant methodological and analytical deficiencies in the relevant academic literature, and some specific issues have been ignored. There are very few quantitative studies of topics such as unemployment, relief rates, and demography. Certainly, the figures for unemployment are scattered and contradictory, not surprising for the days before a federal unemployment insurance program. The numbers of people on relief and dollar figures are an even greater enigma. In the introduction to his 1969 thesis, "City in Depression: The Impact of the Years 1929-1939 on Greater Victoria, British Columbia," Daniel Gallacher described his difficulties in finding hard figures on how much money municipalities spent on relief. He suggested that "a thesis

might well be written...on the varied methods followed and the potentialities for confusion in city financial statements."⁴ An accountant familiar with municipal finance might be an appropriate research assistant for that project. Many authors discuss regional disparities in relief rates, but it is virtually impossible to find information that shows those disparities in the context of wages or the cost of living. There is little point in knowing that a family in Toronto received more relief money than a family in Belleville, if the difference in the price of food or rent is unknown.

One author who has provided a quantitative analysis of the Depression experience is Peter Archibald. At first glance, his argument that there was little distress or political dissent in Hamilton, Ontario, a city he describes as being particularly hard hit by unemployment, appears to be fallacious.⁵ However, his close reading of a wide range of sources, his critical analysis, and his methodology make his article a convincing one. Archibald's strategy of combining the voices of Hamilton residents with quantitative methodology results in a stunning refutation of the traditional argument that the Depression caused so much distress that political dissent became an outlet for unemployed workers' frustrations and thus the Canadian body politic shifted to the left. All his evidence supports his argument that unemployment affected a minority of residents, and that it was short-lived and uneven in its effects.

Some subjects related to the Depression are either almost completely absent or have been studied through narrow perspectives. For example, few authors address race or ethnicity outside of the deportation issue. Aboriginals are virtually never mentioned, and while some articles deal with discrimination against non-whites and "foreigners," little has

⁴ Daniel T. Gallacher, "City in Depression: The Impact of the Years 1929-1939 on Greater Victoria, British Columbia," M.A. thesis, University of Victoria, 1969.

⁵ W. Peter Archibald, "Distress, Dissent and Alienation: Hamilton Workers in the Great Depression," *Urban History Review* Vol. XXI No. 1 (October 1992).

been written from within those ethnic communities about their economic and social strategies during times of hardship.⁶ There is also an imbalance in the literature based on geography and demography. Large cities are the subjects of study of several articles and theses, but the only smaller British Columbia communities whose experiences during the Depression have been studied are the Crowsnest Pass area and the Cowichan Valley.⁷ Population decline in small communities is an occasional tangential subject, but permanent population increases receive little attention in the literature.

Demographic changes in small communities are one subject of Alma Lawton's thesis, "Urban Relief in Saskatchewan During the Years of Depression, 1930-39."⁸ The widespread exodus from the drought-stricken prairies was a boon for small towns such as Shaunavon because they could not afford to pay relief to so many residents, but depopulation was demoralising and debilitating for those who stayed.

In "The Winter Years in Cowichan: A Study of the Depression in a Vancouver Island Community," Arthur James Wright describes a community similar to the Alberni Valley, in that it boomed during the 1920s and survived a relatively short period of real economic distress in the early 1930s. In "The Crowsnest Pass During the Depression: A Socioeconomic History of Southeastern British Columbia, 1918-1939," William A. Sloan focuses on another British Columbian resource industry community. Its experiences were very different from those of Port Alberni because it was in economic trouble long before

⁶ Archibald, "Distress, Dissent and Alienation," touches briefly on some of the strategies employed by ethnic groups.

⁷ William Sloan, "The Crowsnest Pass During the Depression: A Socioeconomic History of Southeastern British Columbia, 1918-1939," M.A. thesis, University of Victoria, 1968; Arthur James Wright, "The Winter Years in Cowichan: A Study of the Depression in a Vancouver Island Community," M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1967.

⁸ Alma Lawton. "Urban Relief in Saskatchewan During the Years of Depression, 1930-39," M.A. thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 1969.

1929. The picture of the Pass that Sloan paints is a dismal one. In spite of the area's empathetic members of the provincial legislature and parliament, its dependence on aid from senior levels of government made for a depressing lack of local autonomy and the decline of the coal industry appeared irreversible.

Some scholars have examined the administration of relief by civic officials. In "'Thousands of our men are getting practically nothing at all to do': Public Works Relief Programs in Regina and Saskatoon, 1929-1940," Patrick Brennan disputes the argument of James H. Gray in *Winter Years*⁹ that this type of work project was often a "boondoggle" and argues that the projects benefited cities by improving their infrastructure and helping their unemployed residents, who needed money and wanted to maintain their self-respect by earning it. Incidentally, the author also argues that geography plays a role in public welfare. On the prairies, widespread drought led to "almost universal support" for unemployment relief works programs,¹⁰ a situation quite different from other regions of Canada.

According to Theresa Healy's dissertation, "Trouble Enough: Gender, Social Policy and the Politics of Place in Vancouver and Saskatoon," geography figured into the relief equation in at least three ways. First, the amount of relief paid depended on the financial resources of the municipality. Prairie towns, for example, were much worse off than other Canadian towns because of their dependence upon farmers affected by drought.¹¹ Second, there were gaps between municipalities, the provinces and the nation.

⁹ James H. Gray, *Winter Years: The Depression on the Prairies* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1966).

¹⁰ Patrick H. Brennan, "'Thousands of our men are getting practically nothing at all to do': Public Works Relief Programs in Regina and Saskatoon, 1929-1940," *Urban History Review* Vol. XXI No. 1 (October 1992): 36.

¹¹ Brennan makes the same point about Regina and Saskatoon.

Not only were there vast differences in their access to capital, but they espoused different philosophies regarding relief. As well, municipalities responded differently to public pressure depending on their level of maturity. Healy travels even deeper into geographical differences to look at neighbourhoods and finds differences in how people experienced and reacted to the Depression. Healy's is one of the few accounts of women's experiences during the Depression to use gender analysis.¹²

The transient unemployed men who came to the Alberni Valley expected to find permanent jobs. While some of the jobseekers described by Marion Lane in "Unemployment During the Depression: The Problem of the Single Unemployed Transient in British Columbia, 1930-1939,"¹³ might have expected to find jobs in Vancouver, it was the city's role as a centre for resource industry hiring that drew them there. Vancouver was the "home base" for loggers, miners, and construction workers, so it was logical that men would seek employment there. It was also the largest city on the west coast; thus the transient unemployed saw it as an appropriate arena for political action. Lane's analysis of the sit-down strike by the unemployed there in 1938 and Irene Howard's article, "The Mothers' Council of Vancouver: Holding the Fort for the Unemployed, 1935-1938"¹⁴ discuss the sympathetic reaction of local residents to a temporary invasion of the unemployed.

¹² Theresa M. Healy, "Trouble Enough: Gender, Social Policy and the Politics of Place in Vancouver and Saskatoon," Ph.D. dissertation (Simon Fraser University, 1998). Nancy Christie also uses gender as a mode of analysis in *Engendering the State: Family, Work and Welfare in Canada* (Toronto: UT Press, 2000).

¹³ Marion Elizabeth Lane, "Unemployment During the Depression: The Problem of the Single Unemployed Transient in British Columbia, 1930-1938," B.A. Essay, University of British Columbia, 1966.

¹⁴ Irene Howard. "The Mothers' Council of Vancouver: Holding the Fort for the Unemployed, 1935-1938." *BC Studies* No.69-70 (Spring-Summer 1986):249-287.

Although Port Alberni has been the subject of several histories, the authors have paid little attention to the unemployed. Jan Peterson, a former reporter with the *Alberni Valley Times*, has written *The Albernis, 1860 - 1922* and *Twin Cities: Alberni-Port Alberni*,¹⁵ the only books relating the history of the Alberni Valley from first European settlement until the amalgamation of Alberni and Port Alberni in 1967. These urban biographies briefly describe outside forces which affected the local economy and politics but dwell mainly on local activities and issues. The chapters about the 1930s include information on such diverse subjects as the visit of Cornelius Vanderbilt to a local resort, the Indian Residential School, and game hunting. Except for a one-page overview of the onset of the Depression in Canada and a few sentences about British tariffs and economic issues in the rest of British Columbia, Peterson's focus is local. She discusses the business of relief, the growth of Port Alberni's downtown area, elections, and the forest industry.

Other local histories of the Alberni Valley are *Sawlogs on Steel Rails: A Story of the 45 years of Railway Operations in the Logging Camps of the Port Alberni Area* by George McKnight and *When the Whistle Blew: Great Central Lake 1925-1952*, which was written by a committee of former residents. Both include passing references to the population increase but do not discuss its implications.

One of the few academic studies of Port Alberni is Gordon Hak's dissertation, "On the Fringes: Capital, Labour and Class Formation in the Forest Economies of the Port Alberni and Prince George Districts, British Columbia, 1910-1939."¹⁶ Rather than studying only local union formation in the forest industry, Hak looks at outside capital, local businessmen, political parties, international unions, and environmental factors.

¹⁵ Jan Peterson. *The Albernis: 1860-1922*. (Lantzville, BC: Oolichan Books, 1992); Jan Peterson. *Twin Cities: Alberni - Port Alberni*. (Lantzville, BC: Oolichan Books, 1994.)

¹⁶ Gordon Hak, "On the Fringes: Capital and Labour in Port Alberni and Prince George," Ph.D. dissertation (Simon Fraser University, 1986).

Valuable though his study is in revealing the complex relationships among social groups in the Alberni Valley, its emphasis is on the employed population rather than the unemployed. Neither Hak nor Elizabeth Forrester, author of "The Urban Development of Central Vancouver Island,"¹⁷ deal with the city's financial situation nor the influx of unemployed transients.

This paper will not mitigate the paucity of gender, racial or ethnic perspectives or of quantitative methodology in the Depression literature. Men are its focus because they constituted the majority of the unemployed jobseekers who came to Port Alberni and the majority of the local workforce. Men, whether or not they were unemployed, were also the subject of concern to the city in ways women were not. They were more visible reminders of the city's relief burden, more politically dangerous, and more socially contentious. Except for a few Chinese businessmen, the male subjects are all white. The first reason for this asymmetry is demographic: whites formed the majority of jobseekers and residents. My emphasis on the attitude of the city towards transients and newcomers makes the experiences of the aboriginal population, virtually all of whom lived on reserves outside the city, irrelevant to this particular study. The experiences of other racial minorities, such as their dealings with the city's relief committee, proved impossible to uncover. The transience of so many Port Alberni residents during the 1930s, the lack of suitable informants, and inconsistent records of relief payments made a quantitative study infeasible.

The entire Alberni Valley felt the effects of the Depression and most areas experienced notable increases in population. However, Port Alberni, the Valley's largest

¹⁷ Elizabeth Anne Marshall Forrester. "The Urban Development of Central Vancouver Island," M.A. thesis, (University of British Columbia, 1966).

community, experienced more growth and more visible angst than either Alberni or the rural communities, so it is the central subject.

The forest industry receives more attention than other industries in spite of the fact that Port Alberni was not a single industry city. However, forestry received the most attention at the time; lumber exports, loggers' strikes, and the cycle of mill start-ups and shut-downs were staple fare for the local media. It also employed the largest proportion of Valley residents. Fishermen may have sold their catches to Port Alberni buyers or brought their boats to Port Alberni repair shops, but they were more apt to live on the west coast of Vancouver Island than in the city. Miners bought supplies in Port Alberni and sought both professional attention and recreation in the city, but they, too, lived elsewhere.

The term "city" refers to the civic administration (the elected council and bureaucracy) and the business elite who saw themselves as the voice of Port Alberni, rather than to the working-class citizens. The goal of these overlapping groups was the protection of taxpayers; they also encouraged outside businesses to invest in the city. It should be noted that, as individuals, residents all around the Alberni Valley were generous and kind hosts to newly arrived families and impoverished vagrants. The dairy farmer who saved jobseekers miles of walking by offering them rides to the Great Central Lake mill site in his wagon and giving them milk to drink along the way, the neighbours who brought food to the widow's family living on the docks, and the construction foreman who let newly arrived workers pitch their tents on his lawn exemplify the friendly reception that ordinary people extended to less fortunate folk who arrived at the end of the road.

City Council records and local newspapers were the major sources of information for this paper. Minutes of City Council meetings proved valuable insofar as specific actions were concerned but lacked any record of debates and discussions. The local newspaper provided much more detail about attitudes of individual council members, the reasons behind council decisions, and interaction between council members and city

residents. The newspaper published consistent accounts of meetings and monthly relief statistics from 1935 on, as well as occasional editorials about civic matters. The latter sometimes criticised City Council for its ineptitude and lack of sympathy for relief recipients but occasionally complimented its members for its efforts on behalf of beleaguered taxpayers. The perspective of these major sources is that of the civic leadership and business owners; the voices of local wage-earners and transients are seldom audible.

The purpose of this paper is to add to the literature on how municipalities experienced the Depression. By examining how the administration and business community of a small city reacted to a relatively unique situation -- a combination of industrial boom and population explosion during a period of widespread unemployment and stagnation -- it becomes possible to see how the Depression exacerbated the financial situation of municipalities and why the Depression intensified traditional attitudes towards strangers.

This is a study of the influx of newcomers -- many of them from places like Shaunavon -- into the Alberni Valley during the 1930s; its central question is whether or not the community over-reacted to the presence of so many jobseekers. The prosperity experienced by Port Alberni after a relatively short period of economic distress made the community a target for thousands of unemployed Canadians. Examination of the city's financial status and the area's employment situation will help to contextualize the social climate during a time of startling demographic changes.

Chapter 2

"A small country lumber town out where the West ends"¹

Booms and Busts: 1860-1933

The Alberni Valley was sheltered physically from the outside world by mountains, but it was vulnerable to external economic forces. While the Depression affected virtually all segments of Canada's economy, Port Alberni's role as a resource industry community put it in an especially precarious position even though the city was accustomed to the boom and bust cycles common to the forest, fishing and mining industries. In the 1920s, its industrial base expanded dramatically when three large new sawmills opened and its population doubled. The ensuing prosperity helped City Council balance the budget and imbued the city with a sense of optimism and security. When the Depression caused the abrupt and unexpected collapse of its major industry, mills shut down, men lost their jobs, businesses closed, and City Council faced economic chaos. The resulting poverty shocked the city, not only because it affected more people and lasted longer than earlier "bust" periods, but because it followed a period of unrivalled prosperity and growth. The Depression affected Port Alberni's economy for less time than most Canadian communities, but its impact proved to be longlasting. This chapter begins with a historical account of the area, describes the collapse of the city's major industry, and shows how unemployment and poverty affected the city's finances and its leaders.

Geography isolates the Alberni Valley from the rest of Vancouver Island. It is situated in the southern one-third of the Island, but it is separated from the populous east coast by the Beaufort Range, Mount Arrowsmith and Mount Cokely. It lies 48 km inland from the west coast at the head of the longest inlet on Vancouver Island. The Alberni

¹ *West Coast Advocate*, 15 September 1941.

Inlet drains Great Central and Sproat Lakes via the Stamp and Sproat Rivers. They join to form the Somass River which empties into the saltwater "canal."² In the 1930s, the Alberni Valley could be reached by a railroad and a gravel road over the "hump" from the east coast or by boat.

The Valley's original residents were the Tseshaht and Hupaceseth bands. The first recorded European visitor was Adam Horne, the Hudson's Bay factor from Nanaimo, who crossed the Beaufort Range in search of new clients in 1856. The first resident newcomers were Chinese prospectors who arrived on the SS Beaver in 1860 and stayed to work on Hankin, or Copper, Mountain. Over the next thirty years, they were joined by a floating population of a few hundred gold miners. In the meantime, one of British Columbia's first export sawmills was established at Stamp Harbour. Entrepreneur Captain Edward Stamp, logger Jerry Rogers, and James Thompson & Co.'s³ representative Gilbert Malcolm Sproat arrived with nine workers in 1860. A townsite grew up around the mill and served as home to a few hundred residents until lack of accessible timber forced the mill's closure in 1863. The company still owned two thousand acres of land and a vegetable farm on the south side of the Somass River. The farm's caretaker planted the Valley's first fruit trees on his own 320-acre farm in 1871, and more farmers arrived in the next few years. Beaver Creek and Sproat Lake, the sites of most of the farming activity, had their own post offices by the early 1890s.⁴

² The original name "Alberni Canal" was changed to "Alberni Inlet" in 1931 to allay shipowners' fears of tolls. Unless otherwise indicated, this historical background is drawn from Jan Peterson, *Journeys: Down the Alberni Canal to Barkley Sound* (Lantzville, BC: Oolichan Books, 1999).

³ The company was known locally by the name of its owners, the Anderson family.

⁴ George H. Melvin, *The Post Offices of British Columbia, 1858-1970* (Vernon, BC: Wayside Press, 1992), 78.

Economic activity in the area increased briefly in the 1880s when another mill, this one to produce paper, was constructed upstream on the Somass River. The British Columbia Paper Manufacturing Co. Ltd., owned by Provincial Assayer Herbert Carmichael, produced wrapping paper from rags for a few years in the 1890s. Nearby was the "Milltown" settlement. Two larger communities, just a couple of miles apart, grew up along the canal. The first was Alberni, situated where the Somass River flowed into the canal. It served the area's farmers. Southward along the canal, where the Anderson mill stood in the 1860s, Arthur E. Waterhouse built a wharf, and miners soon realized his store was closer to them than those in Alberni. The presence of a deep-water harbour made "New Alberni" the preferred port of call for boats from Victoria and, eventually, the site of industrial activity.

During the 1880s, more settlers came to the Valley, and the Anderson Company created a townsite on the land it still owned. Although there was a prospecting boom in the 1890s, with more than 2,000 claims entered between 1895 and 1901, only a few productive mines resulted.⁵ In spite of the emphasis on farming and mining in the early days of European settlement, forestry soon became the basis of the Valley's prosperity. It took the form of logging, tie mills, shake and shingle mills, and sawmills. Several of the latter served local markets, and the first export sawmill of the twentieth century was operated by the Barclay Sound Cedar Co. That property is still the site of an operating mill in Port Alberni (Weyerhaeuser's Alberni Pacific Division, known as APD.) During the early twentieth century, there was a flurry of activity as sawmills and shingle mills started up, changed hands, closed and re-opened. The growth of the surrounding settlements resulted in incorporation of "New Alberni" as Port Alberni in 1912 and of the older town of Alberni in 1913.

⁵ Jan Peterson, *The Albernis 1860-1922* (Lantzville, BC: Oolichan Books, 1992), 104.

Much of the land was owned by foreign interests and absentee Canadian owners. John D. Rockefeller bought 18,000 acres of timber in the Ash River Valley in 1902, and the Red Cliff Land & Lumber Co. of Duluth, Minnesota, bought more than 22,000 acres in the area.⁶ The investors lived elsewhere; the loggers and miners were transients due to the nature of their work; while the sawmill workers, farmers and businessmen became long-term residents.

The construction of the Panama Canal excited local boosters who predicted that Port Alberni's location west of Vancouver would make it the harbour of choice for importers and exporters. The Great War extinguished those hopes, and the Alberni Valley experienced depressed real estate prices. However, in the early 1920s the local industrial base expanded exponentially, as the lumber industry kept pace with the provincial growth.⁷ Several medium-sized and large mills opened in the Alberni Valley: the Bainbridge and McLean mills in the Beaver Creek area, the Sproat Lake mill at Kleecoot, and the King Farris/Bloedel mill at Boot Lagoon on Great Central Lake. The Wood brothers' Barclay Sound Cedar Co. mill changed hands a couple of times and was renamed the Alberni Pacific Lumber Co. (hereafter APL.) It became the largest mill in the area when it expanded by incorporating the Greatex Shingle Mill and then by constructing an addition. New logging operations opened in the Ash and Franklin River areas to supply logs to APL and the Bloedel, Stewart, and Welch Ltd. (BSW) mill at Great Central Lake.

⁶ Peterson, *The Albernis*, 116.

⁷ The 1920s saw a huge increase in the forest industry in British Columbia. The number of logging operations increased from about 3,000 in 1920 to 4,000 in 1929; the number of mills increased at approximately the same rate. British Columbia, *Manual of Provincial Information: Province of British Columbia, 1930* (Victoria: Provincial Bureau of Information, 1930?), 107.

The construction of new sawmills drew large numbers of residents to Port Alberni in the 1920s. The population grew from 1,056 in 1921 to 2,356 by 1931.⁸ According to a directory, it doubled in the seven years between 1921 and 1928.⁹ In comparison, the population of nearby Alberni fell by about 300, and Nanaimo's population grew by less than two hundred.¹⁰ Many new buildings were constructed in Port Alberni, including stores, two hotels, and a community hall. The waterfront facilities at Stamp Harbour were expanded to meet the demands created by a booming pilchard industry and increased lumber exports. Workers generally lived where they worked, so additional communities were established at the sites of the larger operations in Beaver Creek, at Great Central Lake, and at Sproat Lake. Some loggers lived in the bigger townsites, but scattered camps were home to hundreds of men.

The ethnic composition of the population had changed considerably by 1931. The area's non-indigenous population was virtually 100% British in the 1910s¹¹ but consisted of about 20% "foreign" by 1931. While the overall gender ratio was approximately 130 males to each 100 females and the gender ratio among the Canadian-born was 106:100, it was more skewed among the British-born (142:100) and the non-British foreign-born population at 218:100.¹²

⁸ *Seventh Census of Canada, 1931*, Vol. II (Ottawa: Dominion Bureau of Statistics, 1933-36), 9; Assessments 1930, Table I, Inspector of Municipalities Report, *Sessional Papers*, 1931, Vol. I, K5. All population figures are based on the non-indigenous population only, because figures for the indigenous population are hard to find and are not really relevant to this study. Virtually all aboriginals lived on reserves during this period.

⁹ *West Coast Advocate*, 20 December 1928.

¹⁰ *Seventh Census 1931*, Vol. II, 21. Alberni provided services to rural residents, but there was no industrial activity within the town itself.

¹¹ Peterson, *The Albernis*, 197.

¹² *Seventh Census 1931*, Vol. II, 247.

Throughout the 1920s the city treasury usually had a small surplus, but in 1926 it showed a profit of almost \$8,000.¹³ Port Alberni also received a large infusion of cash from the sale of its electric plant. Finances were far less of an issue for City Council candidates than dissatisfaction with the police department's handling of bootleggers and prostitutes. The possibility of corruption among civic officials, including a mayor, the Chief of Police, and city hall employees was raised several times, and municipal politics were in almost constant turmoil.¹⁴ In the meantime, the *West Coast Advocate* worried that the city's rapid population growth was receiving little attention from City Council and suggested it could better accommodate the influx of newcomers by re-assessing land values, making an inventory of public utilities, and appointing a city engineer.¹⁵

The growing local forest industry peaked in 1929 when Port Alberni exported a record 89 million board feet (MBF.)¹⁶ However, lumber prices had begun to fall, and companies were operating at a loss of \$2 to \$3 per thousand feet.¹⁷ Then the domestic market for lumber suddenly disappeared as the Great Depression spread across Canada. International markets became less accessible because of competition, tariffs, and a slump in construction caused by the Depression. Producers all over North America complained that Russian timber producers had an unfair advantage because they paid no taxes on the wood.¹⁸ Instead of buying Canadian forest products, Great Britain bought virtually all the

¹³ *West Coast Advocate*, 17 November 1926.

¹⁴ *West Coast Advocate*, 19 January 1927, 3 January 1929; Peterson, *Twin Cities*, 63-69.

¹⁵ *West Coast Advocate*, 22 November 1928.

¹⁶ *West Coast Advocate*, 11 January 1934.

¹⁷ *Port Alberni News*, 1 January 1931.

¹⁸ *Port Alberni News*, 1 January 1931.

timber exported by Russia, and its 1931 tariff against raw materials and agricultural products effectively halted the flow of Canadian wood products.¹⁹ Tariffs were nothing new in the forest industry; Canadian producers had dealt with American tariffs for years. The old rate of \$2 per thousand feet had dropped to \$1.25 in 1909, and the tariff was removed entirely in 1913. When the 1930 rate of \$1 per thousand feet was suddenly increased to \$4 in 1932, lumber exports to the USA dropped by more than 70% at some points.²⁰ Canadian counter-tariffs only made the situation worse.²¹

Between 1930 and 1933 the Alberni Valley's forest industry underwent an erratic series of shutdowns interspersed with flurries of activity. The changes at the international, national, and provincial levels were felt in the Alberni Valley, although variables affecting local production often made them appear unrelated. The largest local mill, APL, struggled with layoffs and shutdowns because of "unfavourable business conditions,"²² some small outfits folded;²³ and others found themselves unable to pay wharfage fees. The same year, a new, albeit small, sawmill was built along the E&N tracks on the north side of the valley,²⁴ and APL offered to take over the Assembly Wharf when it had "the

¹⁹ Margaret A. Ormsby, *British Columbia: A History* (1958; reprint, Toronto: Macmillan, 1971), 443.

²⁰ Marion Elizabeth Lane, "Unemployment During the Depression: The Problem of the Single Unemployed Transient in British Columbia, 1930-1938," B.A. Essay, University of British Columbia, 1966, 4.

²¹ *Port Alberni News*, 4 August 1932.

²² *Port Alberni News*, 7 August 1930.

²³ *Port Alberni News*, 15 May 1930, described the bankruptcy of Sproat Lake Lumber Co. Ltd. and the Alluvia Lumber Co.

²⁴ *Port Alberni News*, 27 November 1930.

busiest time of its career."²⁵ Although 1930 exports remained higher than the 1928 total and came close to the 1929 record, local producers were losing money because lumber prices had fallen by half.²⁶

Against a background of the traditional seasonal cycle of shutdowns and reopenings, by 1932 the local logging camps and mills were in real trouble because of volatile markets. APL management told its employees in March that, "Business...[was] at the very lowest ebb in [its] history," shortened its shifts in a vain attempt to keep employees working, and finally shut down entirely in June for four months.²⁷ When it reopened its mill and logging divisions in the fall, far fewer men were working.²⁸ American tariffs and cheap Russian timber were not the only problems. The collapse of the yen had a drastic effect on APL, which normally sent a third of its exports to Japan. Although the largest Valley mill survived the first two years of the Depression in "surprisingly good shape,"²⁹ total exports in 1932 dropped below the 1927 level and Port Alberni shipped only 70 MBF of logs and lumber.³⁰ The unpredictable shut-downs and inconsistent employment opportunities created an atmosphere of uncertainty among workers and civic officials that was a marked contrast to the optimism of the 1920s.

²⁵ *Port Alberni News*, 8 May, 15 May 1930.

²⁶ *Port Alberni News*, 1 January 1931; Gordon Hak, "On the Fringes: Capital and Labour in Port Alberni and Prince George," Ph.D. dissertation (Simon Fraser University, 1986), 53.

²⁷ *Port Alberni News*, 17 March, 2 June, 16 June 1932; Hak, "On the Fringes," 53.

²⁸ *Port Alberni News*, 22 September 1932.

²⁹ *Port Alberni News*, 14 April 1932.

³⁰ *West Coast Advocate*, 3 January 1935.

At the same time, the fishing industry endured a similar boom and bust cycle. The explosion in the pilchard fishery in the 1920s was followed by widespread mergers and amalgamations of processors and exporters. In 1933, the pilchards suddenly disappeared from the entire west coast. The twelve reduction plants closed when the federal government's patrol boat could find no trace of the fish, and the provincial government created a special fund to help the 400 affected employees and their families. The plants re-opened on a smaller scale when flexible rules allowed pilchard fishermen to catch herring, but the pilchards did not re-appear until 1935.³¹

The Depression affected more than the major resource industries in Port Alberni; local businesses suffered because unemployed and under-employed residents had less money to spend. While the number of individual businesses grew in the 1920s, the increase in the number of trade licences issued between 1929 and 1931 is misleading because licenses reflected the practice of adding goods and services to existing businesses. Unemployed workers also started up small businesses of their own, many of them home-based.³² During that time, however, an increasing number of businesses were also closing. In an attempt to force existing businesses to pay their trade licence fees, City Council directed the police to shut down the premises of those who were delinquent.³³

	1926	1927	1928	1929	1930	1931
Number of trade licenses	125	113	153	134	200	205
Number of businesses that closed	0	4	10	12	16	30 ³⁴

³¹ Peterson, *Twin Cities*, 127-8.

³² A restaurant that began selling cigarettes or a garage that started renting cars would need to take out a second trade licence. If the entire business, not just the cigarette sales or car rental, ceased operations, it was listed as closed. Figures are not available for 1932 or 1933.

³³ Port Alberni City Council Minutes, 27 June 1932.

³⁴ Port Alberni Trade Licences and Building Permits Book.

As businesses closed, more employees lost their jobs, and the downward spiral continued. In 1921, only 12 people were unemployed out of Port Alberni's total population of 1056, about 1%.³⁵ In 1931, after the population had doubled, the number of unemployed had increased more than ten-fold.³⁶ Of the 751 wage-earners in the city, 60% had missed work during the past year; 35% had missed work because they had no job. On the day the census was taken (June 1, 1931) 22% of Port Alberni's wage-earners were not working. This was similar to the overall Canadian rate, but slightly better than the provincial unemployment rate of 28%.³⁷ Even those with jobs were underemployed. In the year prior to the 1931 census, Port Alberni men worked an average of only about 41 weeks or 80% of the time.³⁸ The impact of the Depression was far greater than the traditional weather-related shut-downs.

The first mention of unemployment in City Council minutes came in August 1930, when an alderman suggested the city clerk write to the provincial government about assistance for the unemployed.³⁹ The presence of transients was not an issue at that time; the unemployed men under discussion were local residents. In spite of being responsible for relief, the province gave municipalities no administrative assistance or advice, so Port Alberni, like other cities, scrambled to put together a relief committee. The federal

³⁵ Peterson, *Twin Cities*, 20.

³⁶ *Seventh Census 1931*, Vol. VI, 1296.

³⁷ H.M. Cassidy, *Unemployment and Relief in Ontario 1929-1932* (Toronto: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., n.d.), 24; Harry M. Cassidy, *Social Security and Reconstruction in Canada* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1943), 51.

³⁸ Cassidy, *Social Security and Reconstruction in Canada*, 51.

³⁹ Port Alberni City Council Minutes, 13 August 1930.

government was no more forthcoming. City Council had to rely on the newspapers to learn what was going on with federal government programmes, provincial loans, and changes in funding formulas.⁴⁰ The complexity of government policies, frequent changes in funding formulas, and red tape were confusing. While some programmes, such as the federal government taking responsibility for transient unemployed men,⁴¹ were helpful to municipalities, the temporary nature of policies such as the 50-30-20% federal/provincial/municipal arrangement for direct relief in June 1931 was hardly reassuring.⁴² The funding formulas that required municipalities to pay a share of public works projects meant that municipalities could end up spending more on public works than they usually spent in good years. As Mayor John Kendall pointed out, Port Alberni's Works Department took \$6,000 of the city's budget in 1931 -- far more than it had ever been allotted before -- because the city had to match the provincial grants.⁴³

As unemployment increased, City Council found itself grappling with other new problems. Tardy payments from the province were hard on municipalities, which waited months for the money to come and paid interest on loans they had taken out in expectation of those payments.⁴⁴ In 1930, just a few months into the Depression, City Council worried about having already paid almost \$4,000 in relief with no government money in sight.⁴⁵ Two years later, when malnourished children were succumbing to a scarlet fever

⁴⁰ Port Alberni City Council Minutes, 6 July 1931.

⁴¹ Lane, "Unemployment During the Depression," 28.

⁴² *Port Alberni News*, 25 June 1931.

⁴³ Port Alberni City Council Minutes, 13 April 1931.

⁴⁴ Alma Lawton. "Urban Relief in Saskatchewan During the Years of Depression, 1930-39," M.A. thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 1969, 59.

⁴⁵ Port Alberni City Council Minutes, 22 December 1930.

epidemic, the province offered the city immediate assistance in the form of its share of \$9,000 and guaranteed a loan for the city's share of \$3,000. However, City Council had learned from past experience that red tape would tie up a lot of money and knew it would be fortunate to see \$1,500 of that money by the end of December.⁴⁶

City Council was willing to provide relief "at once" to "destitute" applicants,⁴⁷ but its initial estimates of relief rates for Port Alberni recipients were made in the expectation that senior governments would pay. When asked for its advice, the Board of Trade felt that because of the large number of applicants, money should be granted for food only and relief should "not mean anything for the industrious man who has put something by for a rainy day." They did not expect men who had been fairly steadily employed to apply for relief; rather, they assumed such men would have enough savings to maintain their families until they returned to work. The Board of Trade's relief formula allowed a married couple \$45 and an additional \$5 to \$8 per child each month.⁴⁸ However, the city could not sustain these rates: by 1932, families were getting only \$12 month, and Alderman A. Fleming exclaimed, "People are on the verge of starvation!"⁴⁹ In spite of its good intentions, City Council could not afford to offer adequate amounts of relief.

As in most Canadian communities, men were required to work for their relief payments. City Council tried to "spread the work around" by rotating it⁵⁰ and gave preference to married men over single ones.⁵¹ The amount of work each man got

⁴⁶ *Port Alberni News*, 10 November 1932.

⁴⁷ Port Alberni City Council Minutes, 13 October and 1 December 1930.

⁴⁸ *Port Alberni News*, 18 December 1930.

⁴⁹ *West Coast Advocate*, 27 October 1932.

⁵⁰ *Port Alberni News*, 5 February 1931.

⁵¹ Port Alberni City Council Minutes, Unemployment Relief Committee Report, 30

depended on how much money was available. When 204 men were on the list, each man got only a couple of days per month.⁵² The work invariably involved building or repairing roads, sidewalks, drainage and waterworks projects.⁵³ The topics of relief work, relief rates, and relief programmes soon dominated Council meetings.

There were few complaints of misuse of the relief system, either by the administration or by residents and only a few instances of "shirkers" and fraudulent claims.⁵⁴ City Council tried to manipulate its workforce to take advantage of the situation. For example, aldermen suggested replacing the "single and unskilled" workers at the city's dam construction project with relief workers⁵⁵ and using truck drivers on relief to replace permanent city employees.⁵⁶ City Council debated the propriety of such actions, but discussion of the ultimate outcome -- city employees being forced onto relief by losing their jobs to men already on relief -- was never recorded. No mention was made of complaints about such practices from taxpayers, relief recipients, or city employees.

Nevertheless, individuals sometimes complained directly to City Council about "inequities" in the relief rotation system,⁵⁷ and unemployed workers joined forces. In August 1931, "a communist organiser from Vancouver" presided over an organizational

January 1931; *Port Alberni News*, 28 January 1932, 1; *West Coast Advocate*, 28 January 1932.

⁵² Port Alberni City Council Minutes, Unemployment Relief Committee Report, 30 January 1931.

⁵³ *Port Alberni News*, 28 January 1932.

⁵⁴ *West Coast Advocate*, 2 April 1931; *Port Alberni News*, 22 September 1932.

⁵⁵ Port Alberni City Council Minutes, Special Meeting, 7 November 1930.

⁵⁶ *Port Alberni News*, 31 December 1931.

⁵⁷ Port Alberni City Council Minutes, 16 June 1931.

meeting in Port Alberni of the National Unemployed Workers' Association (NUWA) and about thirty men joined.⁵⁸ Another organisation, initially unaffiliated with Communist interests, the Alberni and District Workers' Association, was organized in the neighbouring community. It eventually joined the NUWA, probably because of Communist infiltrators, and the joint organization was renamed the Alberni District Protective Association (ADPA) in 1933.⁵⁹

City Council met its first organized resistance in February 1932 when 34 unemployed men marched from the Workers' Hall to City Hall. They demanded "work within 48 hours or the cash equivalent," refused to listen to Mayor David Warnock, and proceeded to the government agent's office in Alberni.⁶⁰ A representative of the Unemployed Workers' Unity League, an organization with Communist ties, addressed a public meeting called to discuss the city's budget. He asked for more relief work, higher rates of pay, and a "a repudiation of bonded indebtedness until such time as the workers were given a decent living."⁶¹ (Relief recipients strenuously objected to City Council's habit of rationalising its inability to pay them more because of obligations to its Sinking Fund.)

Unemployed workers who hoped to participate in the 1933 Hunger March to Victoria asked City Council for "moral and financial" support.⁶² The aldermen were divided on the question. One was sympathetic but disinclined to offer money. Others were

⁵⁸ Hak, "On the Fringes," 204.

⁵⁹ *Port Alberni News*, 1 September 1932. They claimed they had "received no consideration from the local council or the Public Works Dept."

⁶⁰ *Port Alberni News*, 11 February 1932.

⁶¹ *Port Alberni News*, 21 April 1932.

⁶² Port Alberni City Council Minutes, 13 March 1933.

strongly opposed. As one alderman saw it, "a lot of [the unemployed men] have done better on relief than they ever did before" and were showing "a lack of gratitude" by asking for support. Aldermen believed Port Alberni had treated its unemployed better than other cities, and if any local residents were going hungry, it was "their own fault." The participation of a delegation from the city would make Port Alberni "look bad."⁶³ City Council declined to help the marchers in any way. Its initial sympathy for its unemployed workers was no match for its concern about the city's reputation.

Anxiety about Port Alberni's image made the City Council reluctant to support this kind of political activity, but its distress about the effects of the Great Depression on the city led to emotional upheavals and inappropriate behaviour. City Council was not totally heartless; some members worried about the poverty of city residents. The chairman of the Relief Committee, Alderman A.W. McMillan, fretted that "lots of people in town...were not getting enough money from relief to keep body and soul together," but the committee's budget allowed him to give them very little relief work.⁶⁴ City Council declared that it would take every "opportunity...to study the destitution," even though it was unable to alleviate it.⁶⁵ In the face of its financial problems, City Council felt hopeless. Individual members trying to perform their civic duties were stymied by lack of funds. When called upon to give a report, Parks Committee Chairman Alderman A.Watson despaired, saying, "what's the use; Mr. Stone [the Finance Committee Chairman] won't give us anything."⁶⁶ As a group, aldermen struggled to understand their rights and responsibilities; they found the 235 pages of the Municipal Act too long and

⁶³ *Port Alberni News*, 16 March 1933.

⁶⁴ *Port Alberni News*, 21 April 1932.

⁶⁵ *Port Alberni News*, 28 July 1932.

⁶⁶ *Port Alberni News*, 23 February 1933.

complex to understand.⁶⁷ An episode involving schools revealed their ignorance of the rules. When local school teachers refused to donate 10% of their salaries back to the city, City Council "did not know quite what to do about it." When it discovered it could not challenge the school board budget estimates, let alone change them, members were shocked at their lack of power.⁶⁸

However, City Council's worst fear was bankruptcy. More than once, "[s]igns of...financial ruin for the city hovered over the council meeting...."⁶⁹ It declared itself unable to relieve the city's unemployed in 1931, and, although it hunkered down to "weather the storm" in 1932,⁷⁰ within weeks it was again voicing fears that Port Alberni would have to join other British Columbia municipalities which had asked the province to take over relief.⁷¹ City Council had earlier reminded the taxpayers that if it did not meet its obligations to the Sinking Fund and interest payments, the province would bring in a commissioner "who would show no leniency" about taxes and would probably not make any money available for public works. It asked the public for suggestions for "any way out."⁷² The city's ability to borrow money was sorely tried on several occasions. In April

⁶⁷ "Chapter 199: An Act Respecting Municipalities," in *Revised Statutes*, Vol. II (Victoria, BC: Province of British Columbia, 1924).

⁶⁸ *Port Alberni News*, 17 March, 14 April 1932.

⁶⁹ Port Alberni City Council Minutes, 16 November 1931; *Port Alberni News*, 14 April 1932.

⁷⁰ *Port Alberni News*, 22 September 1932.

⁷¹ Port Alberni City Council Minutes, 22 August 1932. According to an article in *Port Alberni News* on 27 November 1930, only six municipalities in British Columbia felt no need at that time for government help with relief.

⁷² *Port Alberni News*, 21 April 1932.

1933, the city's overdraft at the bank was at its limit of \$7,400; there was no money to pay relief until the government's share arrived.⁷³

City Council faced repeated deficits and found it impossible to stick to its budget estimates. At a public meeting in December 1932, Edward Cronk, Chairman of the School Board, reminded the audience that the City Council in the past three years had not only spent all its tax revenues, it had also spent \$125,000 raised by the 1928 sale of the city's electric light plant and still had a deficit of \$10,000. He was making the point that the "single tax" no longer sufficed and a tax on improvements was necessary.⁷⁴ The Chairman of the 1933 Finance Committee was "alarmed lest history repeat itself" because two years previously the Public Works Committee had spent \$5,000 before the budget was even adopted.⁷⁵ His fears appear to have been justified: by June the Public Works Committee had already spent \$2,000 of its \$3,000 total yearly budget.⁷⁶ Despite finally imposing an improvement tax in 1933 and thus raising considerably more tax revenue, the city had a deficit of almost \$5,000 that year.⁷⁷

The pressure of meeting its financial obligations led to infighting on City Council, outbursts of anger, and public displays of temper. At one point in the acrimonious debate over imposition of an improvement tax, Mayor Kendall refused to sign the minutes,⁷⁸

⁷³ *West Coast Advocate*, 13 April 1933.

⁷⁴ *West Coast Advocate*, 22 December 1932. At the time of this meeting, Port Alberni's municipal taxes were based on the value of land only. Some alderman believed taxing the improvements made to the land (houses, commercial buildings, etc.) was the fairest way to increase its tax revenue. The owners of homes and businesses preferred to have the tax increase spread among all the landowners within the city.

⁷⁵ *West Coast Advocate*, 16 February 1933.

⁷⁶ *West Coast Advocate*, 1 June 1933.

⁷⁷ *West Coast Advocate*, 11 May 1933, 17 January 1935.

⁷⁸ *Port Alberni News*, 24 December 1931.

during another meeting the aldermen removed him from the chair.⁷⁹ About 300 spectators attended the inaugural meeting of the 1931 City Council, and "pyrotechnics flared up in spots" when an alderman took the newly elected mayor to task for going "over the heads of council" and firing the public works foreman and 15 workers at the dam site. He did not appreciate having so many new names added to the unemployed list.⁸⁰ When the province responded to one of Port Alberni's requests for a loan with "the usual eyewash" about being unable to act until the federal government did, the aldermen were so upset that Mayor Warnock was "powerless to withhold longer the pent-up torrent of words which rolled off the tongues of all the aldermen like water rolls down Argyle street in a November rainstorm."⁸¹ When City Council called upon the public for suggestions on how to balance the budget, "Pandemonium developed" at the well-attended meeting. Present and previous council members charged one another with incompetence, and the public joined them. A former mayor boasted he had not paid his 1932 taxes and exhorted others to do the same. He and an alderman "began poking one another with their index fingers to add point to their arguments, which became fast and furious, with neither one listening to the other. Hot remarks were shot in from the sidelines. The mix-up was hopeless to the chairman." One of the two aldermen who had become ineligible to serve on council because they owed back taxes blamed the City Clerk "for a lot of the trouble."⁸² Tensions within City Council led to behaviour that verged on scandalous.

⁷⁹ *West Coast Advocate*, 16 April 1931.

⁸⁰ *Port Alberni News*, 29 January 1931.

⁸¹ *West Coast Advocate*, 27 October 1932.

⁸² *Port Alberni News*, 21 April 1932.

Desperation drove City Council to dubious measures. In an effort to be creative with finances, it paid the Road Foreman out of relief funds and the waterworks superintendent out of by-law money.⁸³ It even contemplated going beyond creativity into illegality. In 1932 the City Clerk berated City Council for assembling a phoney budget. He asserted that some major items, such as the amount owed to the bank, were "not in accordance with fact." He also warned them that buying replacement equipment out of reserve funds was "not in compliance with the by-law." Even though the budget was balanced in theory, it was obvious that there would be a "substantial deficit" by December. He quoted the Municipal Act and "beg[ged] to be excused from any responsibility for the budget."⁸⁴ A few weeks later, when the city had already mortgaged the upcoming year's taxes and had no collateral on which to borrow any more money, City Council realized it had \$4,000 in the equipment reserve fund. Such funds, created when a utility such as the waterworks generated a surplus, could be used only to improve the works or to pay off the utility's debenture debt. Councillors were unhappy at having "money in the bank...when people [were] starving."⁸⁵ They were furious when the provincial government denied their request to hold a plebiscite designed to free the money for other uses. One of the alderman suggested the city "disregard" the letter,⁸⁶ and Council continued to discuss illicit plans for the fund for months.

The drastic lengths contemplated by the City Council were signs of its desperation over financial conditions caused by the Depression. Port Alberni's prosperity of the 1920s had engendered confidence and led the city's leaders to expect an auspicious future. From

⁸³ Port Alberni City Council Minutes, 7 April 1931.

⁸⁴ *Port Alberni News*, 12 May 1932.

⁸⁵ *Port Alberni News*, 28 July 1932.

⁸⁶ *West Coast Advocate*, 6 April 1933.

1930 to 1933, instead of fretting about illegal liquor sales and other vices as they had done earlier, they were suddenly forced to confront the very real possibility of the city's bankruptcy. The needs of its most vulnerable citizens and the intransigence of senior governments created despair among the alderman because they were unable to fulfil their responsibilities to the taxpayers. The difficulties that resulted from the Depression made administration of the city in the years from 1930 to 1933 a unique experience for City Council. It imbued the community's leaders with a sense of pessimism that would persist throughout the decade.

Chapter 3

"The sound of hammer and saw [is] loud"¹

Booming Again: 1934-1939

Port Alberni quickly recovered from hard times. By 1934, the mill closures, widespread unemployment, and bankruptcies were replaced by industrial expansion, a building boom, and a huge increase in the number of tax-paying businesses and workers. The changes in forestry, mining and fishing encouraged a population increase that stimulated the business sector and benefited the city's finances to some degree. The city should have enjoyed the same level of prosperity that it experienced during the 1920s boom.

External economic factors -- the world-wide Great Depression, American and British tariffs, and collapse of the North American housing market -- caused the Alberni Valley's forest industry woes in the early 1930s. Within a few years, however, a new international trade agreement had an equally dramatic, but more positive, effect on the local situation. Then the international market set a new price for gold, and mining companies immediately became interested in the west coast of Vancouver Island. Soon the pilchards returned in huge numbers. The need for more workers in its resource industries drew more people to the city; their presence led to a boom in construction and commercial activity. While other Canadian communities continued to suffer from the Great Depression, Port Alberni grew and prospered.

¹ Minor changes were evident as early as 1933, but 1934 was the pivotal year for growth.

The renewed prosperity originated in the Ottawa Conference of 1932, a forum in which self-governing members of the Empire negotiated new trade agreements with Britain. Since the Great War, Britain had promoted its mercantilist "Imperial vision" with tariff and migration policies.² One of Canada's primary concerns was competition from Russia for a share of British timber imports. Faced with Britain's refusal to ban Soviet timber, Canada suggested Britain promise to take 30% of its timber from Empire countries and impose duties and quotas on timber from other countries.³ While interested parties such as H.R. MacMillan, a British Columbia lumber exporter, and the Canadian Lumbermen's Association lobbied the Canadian delegation during these discussions, Denny, Mott & Dickson, the British firm that owned the APL mill lobbied the British government to move away from using Russian lumber.⁴ After complex negotiations between countries with quite different agendas, Britain agreed to guarantee free entry to Canadian wood and maintain a 10% duty on wood from non-Empire countries.⁵ The

² Ian M. Drummond, *Imperial Economic Policy, 1917-1939: Studies in Expansion and Protection* (London: Ruskin House, 1974), 33.

³ Drummond, *Imperial Economic Policy*, 277-8.

⁴ Gordon Hak, "On the Fringes: Capital and Labour in Port Alberni and Prince George," Ph.D. dissertation (Simon Fraser University, 1986), 55.

⁵ Drummond, *Imperial Economic Policy*, 278-9. The five-year agreement was renewed in 1937. Even after the Imperial Preference agreement, Russia remained a thorn in the side of British Columbia producers. During the 1934 loggers' strike on Vancouver Island, several companies invoked the spectre of Russian competition. They warned that labour troubles would allow Russia to regain the lion's share of British lumber imports. The following year, Russia cut its prices in attempt to regain those markets. Canadian politicians blamed Russians for infiltrating the Canadian industry in order to foment labour troubles. *Port Alberni News*, 1 March 1934, 3 January 1935; *West Coast Advocate*, 21 February 1935.

Ottawa Agreements, combined with a change in British economic policies that created a boom in housing construction there⁶ had an immediate, dramatic effect on Port Alberni.

During the first year of the agreement, lumber exports rose by almost 50%.⁷ Large and small operators constructed new mills, expanded old ones, and hired more men. APL built a new "pony" mill to cut special sizes and smaller logs and added another 70 men to its payroll for an additional shift.⁸ The mill's owners sold it to H.R. MacMillan, who needed more lumber for his export business. He also bought large timber tracts owned by the Rockefellers and planned more railways.⁹ BSW, with two shifts working at the Great Central Lake mill, ran short of logs, so built five additional miles of railroad and established a new camp six miles from the mill. The expansion required 100 additional employees.¹⁰ An even more important development was the company's construction of a large new mill in Port Alberni. When it opened in February 1935, BSW hired about 400 millworkers and another 400 loggers for the camp at Franklin River.¹¹ The company later integrated a shingle mill into the new sawmill.¹² A small sawmill was built at the mouth of

⁶ Harold A. Innis, "The Lumber Trade In Canada," in *Essays in Canadian Economic History*, Mary Q. Innis (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1956), 249.

⁷ *West Coast Advocate*, 5 January 1939.

⁸ *West Coast Advocate*, 29 June 1933, 12 October 1933; *Port Alberni News*, 12 October 1933.

⁹ *West Coast Advocate*, 17 September 1936; Hak, "On the Fringes," 66-7. Until that time, MacMillan's business involved exporting, rather than producing, lumber. Because APL was affiliated with Seaboard, his main competitor, he bought it so he would have more product to sell.

¹⁰ *Port Alberni News*, 5 October 1933.

¹¹ *West Coast Advocate*, 19 April 1934.

¹² Donald MacKay, *Empire of Wood: The MacMillan Bloedel Story* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1982) 84.

Kitsuksis Creek.¹³ The following year, 20 men were hired to make railway ties at another mill at Lupsi Cupsi Creek, halfway between Port Alberni and Alberni.¹⁴ Sproat Lake Sawmills, which had been closed earlier in the Depression, re-opened and hired 125 men at the mill and camps.¹⁵ The performance of the forest industry soon surpassed that of the 1920s.

City Council and the townspeople were thrilled by the level of industrial activity. As they had done for APL, they sought the province's permission to allow the new BSW mill a fixed assessment.¹⁶ Residents enthusiastically agreed to the construction of a new logging railway through the eastern, residential portion of the city to the harbour.¹⁷ The city hosted a group of 30 British timber importers, who were invited by the province in an effort to sell even more lumber to the UK. Whether because of impending war or Port Alberni's hospitality, Britain increased its orders by 80% the next year.¹⁸

External factors caused occasional setbacks. After Britain, China and Japan were Port Alberni's largest customers in 1934, but rising silver prices in China and a Japanese embargo sharply reduced their purchases. Japan had been taking 3 MBF monthly from APL, and the temporary loss of that market forced the mill to shut down its night shift.¹⁹

¹³ *West Coast Advocate*, 20 July 1933.

¹⁴ *Port Alberni News*, 22 March 1934; *West Coast Advocate*, 19 April 1934.

¹⁵ *West Coast Advocate*, 25 November 1937.

¹⁶ Port Alberni City Council Minutes, 8 May, 1934; *West Coast Advocate*, 7 June 1934.

¹⁷ *West Coast Advocate*, 14 January 1937; George A. McKnight, *Sawlogs on Steel Rails: A story of the 45 years of Railway Operations in the Logging Camps of the Port Alberni Area* (Port Alberni, BC: Port Alberni Seniors' History Committee, 1997), 6-11 to 6-17.

¹⁸ *West Coast Advocate*, 18 August 1938, 2 February 1939.

¹⁹ *West Coast Advocate*, 1 August 1935.

APL's profit dropped from \$56,000 in 1934 to \$17,000 in 1935, and shipments to the US, which had been the "heaviest individual importer" before imposition of the latest tariff, declined, but Port Alberni's exports continued to climb.²⁰ Besides the 91 MBF sent to Britain, it also exported to more exotic places, such as French Oceania, Portuguese East Africa, and South America.²¹

Local problems also slowed production. The traditional weather closures, even though they were not unexpected, occasionally proved frustrating. The APL mill had to close down briefly because of problems with water supply.²² Lack of space at the Assembly Wharf forced BSW to curtail production at its Great Central Lake mill just as orders were increasing,²³ and an equipment breakdown closed the mill at a most "inopportune" time when it was already struggling to keep up with its orders.²⁴

The most significant threat, however, was labour turmoil. Some episodes were short-lived, such as the four-day walkout by loggers who feared a wage cut in the fall of 1933.²⁵ The longer strike of 1934, however, caused far more trouble. Loggers wanted a larger share of profits from increased production and felt they needed it because of increases in the cost of living.²⁶ In February, they demanded raises and an end to Sunday work.²⁷ When the companies refused, strike action began at Bloedel operations near

²⁰ MacKay, *Empire of Wood*, 132; *Port Alberni News*, 3 January 1935.

²¹ *West Coast Advocate*, 9 January 1936.

²² *West Coast Advocate*, 3 January 1935.

²³ *West Coast Advocate*, 20 July 1933.

²⁴ *West Coast Advocate*, 27 June 1935.

²⁵ *West Coast Advocate*, 11 September 1933.

²⁶ Hak, "On the Fringes," 212.

²⁷ *West Coast Advocate*, 22 February 1934.

Campbell River and spread throughout Vancouver Island, including Port Alberni. The employers refuted the strikers' arguments about increased profits and warned that Britain might turn to Russia again for lumber.²⁸ They also hinted that the Lumber Workers Industrial Union (LWIU) was a Communist front. With help from the provincial government and the police, strike-breakers imported from Vancouver began logging at Great Central Lake in April, and the strike was over by early May.²⁹ Lack of logs forced APL to close briefly in the fall of 1934, when the company responded to the presence of LWIU organisers at Camp 5 by locking out the workers. The company again used strike-breakers and provincial police, the LIWU lost the fight to have organisers in the camps, and the mill re-opened.³⁰ Labour troubles persisted over the next few years, but disruptions were usually short.³¹

Despite these problems, exports increased continuously, and the results of Imperial Preference were obvious. Of the 70 ships that left Port Alberni between July and December 1935, 30 went to England, 20 to Australia and 5 to South Africa.³² The agreement was renewed in 1937, and after a brief hiatus in shipping in the winter Britain

²⁸ *Port Alberni News*, 1 March 1934.

²⁹ Hak, "On the Fringes," 213, 218, 220.

³⁰ Hak, "On the Fringes," 225-6.

³¹ *West Coast Advocate*, 14 May 1936, 21 May 1936, 16 June 1938. Between 1929 and 1937, lumber industry wages were consistently lower than the average industrial wage. At their lowest, lumber industry employees' wages were 32% lower than in 1929, whereas average industrial wages dropped 23%. However, lumber industry wages increased to approximately the same level as average industrial wages by 1937. In Port Alberni, the average forest industry wage in 1928 was \$4.80 per day; at the time of the 1934 strike it was \$3.79 and the companies offered \$4.13. Department of Labor, *Annual Report, Port Alberni News*, 1 March 1934.

³² *West Coast Advocate*, 9 January 1936.

increased its lumber imports in spite of 50% increases in shipping rates.³³ Several records were broken at Stamp Harbour in 1934. Port Alberni's largest ever accumulation of exports -- almost \$2,000,000 of pilings, shingles, fish, cascara bark, and gold ore, and a record 135 MBF of lumber -- was shipped out on a record-breaking 151 cargo vessels.³⁴ Exports continued to climb, and in 1936 Port Alberni companies exported 283 MBF of lumber, a 50% increase over the previous year and a new record, as well as almost 1 MBF of logs.³⁵ Even though it shipped less in 1937, Port Alberni still ranked third in exports in British Columbia, mostly because of a ten-fold increase in log exports.³⁶ The city regained its ranking as the second largest lumber exporter in 1938, largely as a result of Britain's purchase of 166 MBF, which was 80% more than it took in 1934.³⁷ By the time war began in 1939, Britain was absorbing 65 to 70% of British Columbia's lumber, and 80% of the ships carrying lumber from British Columbia were British.³⁸ Port Alberni heard "dire and terrible rumors of catastrophe in the lumber industry" because of the war, but Britain offered reassurance that ships would be available.³⁹

³³ *West Coast Advocate*, 18 February 1937.

³⁴ *West Coast Advocate*, 3 January 1935.

³⁵ *West Coast Advocate*, 7 January 1937, 5 January 1939.

³⁶ *West Coast Advocate*, 6 January, 3 February 1938.

³⁷ *West Coast Advocate*, 2 February 1939.

³⁸ *West Coast Advocate*, 7 September 1939.

³⁹ *West Coast Advocate*, 28 September, 29 December 1939.

Annual Lumber Exports:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Lumber Exports in MBF</u>
1926	54
1927	73
1928	75
1929	89
1930	83
1931	83
1932	71
1933	104
1934	135
1935	187
1936	283
1937	243
1938	271
1939	301 ⁴⁰

The mills were producing so much lumber for export that local longshoremen could not keep up; extra workers from Chemainus helped load the backlog of freighters during newly organized night shifts.⁴¹ When the wharf proved inadequate for the volume of exports, the Vancouver Chamber of Shipping asked the Dominion government to enlarge the dock facilities at Port Alberni so they could handle two ships at once.⁴²

APL's profits rebounded to \$50,000 in 1936, and BSW's British Columbia operations had their best year ever. Although BSW did not repeat its record profits in 1937 and 1938, it felt it had "recovered" by 1939.⁴³ By then, the Alberni Valley had three of the five largest sawmills in British Columbia, one of which its owner H.R. MacMillan

⁴⁰ *West Coast Advocate*, 9 January 1936, 5 January 1939, 11 January 1940.

⁴¹ *West Coast Advocate*, 26 October 1933.

⁴² *Port Alberni News*, 1 March 1934.

⁴³ MacKay, *Empire of Wood*, 132, 84.

described as "the largest, most modern, most economical [mill] in Canada,"⁴⁴ two thousand men worked in the Alberni Valley's forest industry, and the monthly payroll reached almost \$250,000.⁴⁵

Gordon Hak has enumerated the factors that made Port Alberni's forest industries so successful.⁴⁶ First, the business management of the major company was flexible during its early years in business. Second, Port Alberni's forest companies had large amounts of capital to invest, and, more significantly, they made the local operations an important part of their overall business strategy. The heavy volume of production, a result of temperate weather that allowed logging most of the year and thus protected sawmill production, made investment in technology profitable. Marketing strategy was another important factor; as early as the 1920s the Alberni Valley operators used marketing agencies. The relationship between Port Alberni's well-capitalised and well-organised companies with these agencies gave them political clout that enabled them to co-operate with the provincial government to make gains in the British market.

Timber was not the only local commodity affected by international forces. When Canada went off the gold standard in 1932, gold sold for \$20.67 per ounce. When the Americans adjusted their dollar in January 1934, the price shot up to \$35.00 per ounce.⁴⁷ Port Alberni immediately began to benefit from a resurgence of gold mining in the Alberni Valley and other parts of Vancouver Island. Old mines, such as the 3-W's mine at Franklin River which had operated before World War I re-opened, and new ones were

⁴⁴ Hak, "On the Fringes," 317; MacKay, *Empire of Wood*, 134.

⁴⁵ *West Coast Advocate*, 25 November 1937.

⁴⁶ Hak, "On the Fringes," 31-34.

⁴⁷ Bank of Canada. *A History of the Canadian Dollar*.
 <http://www.bankofcanada.ca/en/dollar_book/full_text-e.htm> 8 February 2003.

created at Taylor River and Mineral Hill.⁴⁸ Within a couple of years, the owners of the latter constructed a road, built a camp for 24 men, and installed a 40-ton mill.⁴⁹ Two full shifts of workers found jobs at a Franklin River claim initially staked by loggers idled by fire season.⁵⁰

Besides supplying workers, Port Alberni serviced the needs of miners all along the west coast.⁵¹ Local hardware merchants sold goods to miners and prospectors,⁵² mills sent lumber there by ship, and the Somass and Beaufort Hotels expanded to accommodate the large number of travellers passing through on their way to the mines on the SS Maquinna. For one sailings, 65 ship passengers came to Port Alberni by train, 11 by bus and more by taxi.⁵³ More finds at Bear River near Tofino fuelled the "mining stampede," and Port Alberni's position as the hub of a booming west coast helped it prosper as a "jumping off point."⁵⁴ Mining became such an important source of revenue that the

⁴⁸ *West Coast Advocate*, 12 April, 31 May, 26 July 1934, 20 August 1936.

⁴⁹ *West Coast Advocate*, 23 January 1936.

⁵⁰ *West Coast Advocate*, 20 October 1938. According to Ben Hines, *Pick, Pan & Pack: A History of Mining in the Alberni Mining Division* (Port Alberni, BC: Alberni Valley Museum, 1976), 46-48, coal was found half a mile from the foot of Argyle Street in 1875. Enough was mined to heat most Port Alberni homes between 1910 and 1920. Mayor Hamilton's attempts to re-activate the coal mine during the 1930s failed because the CPR, which owned the mineral rights, proved to be obstructive and the city owned too little coal-rich property to make mining worthwhile.

⁵¹ For example, local grocers provided supplies and a local trucking outfit hauled goods and equipment for a ten-man crew with headquarters at China Creek. *West Coast Advocate*, 2 June 1938, 18 August 1938.

⁵² *West Coast Advocate* 10 March, 24 March 1938.

⁵³ *West Coast Advocate*, 9 February 1939.

⁵⁴ *West Coast Advocate*, 6 July, 9 February 1939.

president of the Board of Trade, who worried that all the forest resources would be gone within 15 years, suggested that mining might be Port Alberni's salvation.⁵⁵

The fishing industry, too, received a boost when the pilchards returned to the west coast in the summer of 1935. City residents watched fishermen tie their nets to the floats in the harbour and haul in up to 35 tons at one set. The reduction plants returned to the frantic pace of production set in the late 1920s.⁵⁶

Increased industrial activity and business opportunities attracted large numbers of jobseekers and entrepreneurs. Convinced by the growing number of students in Port Alberni schools⁵⁷ that the city deserved more funds from population-based government programmes, City Council organized a census that showed the population had grown from 2,356 in 1931 to 3,885 in 1936,⁵⁸ an increase of almost 65%. By the time of the next federal census in 1941, the population of Port Alberni was 4,584,⁵⁹ an increase of 94% over the decade.⁶⁰ In contrast, Nanaimo lost 1.6%⁶¹ and Prince George lost 18%⁶² of their populations between 1931 and 1941.

⁵⁵ *West Coast Advocate*, 11 February 1937.

⁵⁶ Jan Peterson. *Twin Cities: Alberni - Port Alberni*. (Lantzville, BC: Oolichan Books, 1994), 128.

⁵⁷ *West Coast Advocate*, 2 July 1936.

⁵⁸ *West Coast Advocate*, 3 December 1936.

⁵⁹ *Eighth Census of Canada, 1941*, Vol II (Ottawa: Dominion Bureau of Statistics), 10.

⁶⁰ Elizabeth Anne Marshall Forrester. "The Urban Development of Central Vancouver Island," M.A. thesis, (University of British Columbia, 1966), explains why the nearby town of Alberni actually grew at a faster rate, although the numbers were smaller. One reason for the difference was probably that sawmill employees were starting to live further from their workplaces in the city of Port Alberni and the rural areas.

⁶¹ Jean Barman, *The West beyond the West* (Toronto: UTP, 1991), 375.

⁶² Hak, "On the Fringes," 13.

Canadians fleeing depressed conditions and drought came to Port Alberni from other provinces, mainland British Columbia, and Vancouver Island, as word about its job opportunities spread quickly. When a group of Manitobans celebrated the anniversary of their arrival, they credited a friend for "directing or enticing or otherwise influencing [them] to come to this highly favoured part of the western empire."⁶³ A French-Canadian family wanted to get "as far as possible from [the] hardships" of farming in Saskatchewan.⁶⁴ As they made their way west, other refugees from the prairies told them there were jobs in the Alberni Valley, so the father and eldest son drove to Port Alberni where they immediately found work on the expansion of the Beaufort Hotel. They brought the rest of the family to town and wrote letters home describing their good fortune.⁶⁵ A historian of Port Alberni's French-Canadian community says that "the good news about this 'land of opportunity' spread through the Saskatchewan communities like a forest fire pushed by the wind."⁶⁶ Other migrants had no personal connections to Port Alberni. One unemployed man in Quebec read a newspaper article about construction of the new BSW mill and crossed the country in the hope of getting a job.⁶⁷ While prairie communities and towns across Canada were being depopulated, Port Alberni was becoming a magnet for farmers and unemployed workers from across the country.

⁶³ *West Coast Advocate*, 23 January 1936.

⁶⁴ Comité du 50e, *The French-Canadians of Port Alberni Celebrated 50 Years 1935-1985* (Port Alberni, BC: Centre Francophone d'Alberni, 1991), 111.

⁶⁵ Comité du 50e, *The French-Canadians of Port Alberni*, xviii.

⁶⁶ Comité du 50e, *The French-Canadians of Port Alberni*, 1.

⁶⁷ *West Coast Advocate*, 14 February 1935.

Many new families were recent immigrants to Canada whose ethnicity was evident in the schools. Norwegian children formed the third-largest ethnic group in Port Alberni's elementary schools, and when they and students of British background were excluded, Asian children outnumbered children of all European backgrounds combined.⁶⁸

Not all newcomers brought families with them. Loggers' obituaries often listed widows and children in Vancouver or in European homelands.⁶⁹ The almost 200 French-Canadians from Saskatchewan included "an army of single people."⁷⁰ Many local businesses catered to men living single. The Somass Hotel encouraged readers to "Live in a hotel this winter,"⁷¹ and the Imperial Laundry and City Cleaners advertised a "Batchelor [sic] Service" of cleaning and mending.⁷² Some newcomers to Port Alberni moved into permanent houses, but others lived in temporary lodgings. There were "so many new people in the city [and] so many new homes..." that new street signs and numbers became necessary.⁷³ The Kingsway, Somass, King Edward, Beaufort, Arrowview, and Port Alberni Hotels in the commercial district were home to working men, convalescents, and the temporarily unemployed, as well as to travellers. A widow sought permission to build a small apartment block in the hope of removing young men from the "temptation to patronize the beer parlors" of the hotels where they lived.⁷⁴ While some local families had

⁶⁸ *West Coast Advocate*, 5 July 1934.

⁶⁹ Some examples were found in *West Coast Advocate*, 31 March, 15 September 1938, 12 January 1939.

⁷⁰ Comité du 50e, *The French-Canadians of Port Alberni*, 4.

⁷¹ *West Coast Advocate*, 14 September 1939.

⁷² *West Coast Advocate*, 21 April 1938.

⁷³ *West Coast Advocate*, 7 November 1935.

⁷⁴ *West Coast Advocate*, 7 March 1935.

only one or two paying guests, more than 200 Port Alberni households accommodated three or more lodgers.⁷⁵

Others who moved to the Alberni Valley lived in rural camps and mill sites. There was a large enough settlement of employees and families living at the Sproat Lake Sawmills site that they successfully petitioned for their own post office at Kleecoot in 1936.⁷⁶ The BSW railway camps and mill site at Great Central Lake were home to the 500 employees and their families.⁷⁷ The McLean brothers moved a school from an old camp to accommodate the dozen students at their Beaver Creek area mill site. The Franklin River loggers' families used railroad speeders to get their children to the camp school and to the boat that would take them to Port Alberni to shop, visit the dentist, and do other errands.⁷⁸ Some of the more isolated work camps, such as the APL camp near Polly's Point along the canal, were also home to families as well as men living single.⁷⁹ Even though they lived in rural areas of the Valley, they bought most of their groceries and clothing from Port Alberni merchants.

Some housing was divided along ethnic lines. In Port Alberni, APL's Chinese workers lived in a boarding house and in shacks on the waterfront near the mill,⁸⁰ while its non-Asian workers lived in a boarding house operated by the mill's owners.⁸¹ BSW

⁷⁵ *West Coast Advocate*, 17 December 1936, 24 November 1938. In the latter article, the temporary address of an injured logger, who presumably lived in camp when he was working, was a local boarding house.

⁷⁶ *West Coast Advocate*, 19 March, 26 November 1936; 25 November 1937.

⁷⁷ *West Coast Advocate*, 12 March 1936.

⁷⁸ McKnight, *Sawlogs on Steel Rails*, 3-17.

⁷⁹ *West Coast Advocate*, 6 April 1939.

⁸⁰ George McKnight papers 101.2.

⁸¹ *West Coast Advocate*, 13 October 1938.

provided a bunkhouse near its downtown mill for its East Indian workers. French-Canadians from northern Saskatchewan usually stayed with friends when they first arrived; later, some opened boarding houses for fellow French-Canadians. Many eventually moved into the "Calgary" neighbourhood that was named for an earlier influx of Albertans but which its new residents called "Little France" or "New Debden."⁸² At the McLean mill community, the Japanese and white bachelors lived in separate bunkhouses. All the Japanese families lived near each other beside the creek and shared a Japanese-style bath. The Great Central Lake mill site had several ethnic neighbourhoods.⁸³ "Japtown" contained several family homes, a bunkhouse, a cookhouse where a Japanese couple cooked for the single men, a bathhouse, and a community hall. "Chinatown" was smaller, with one bunkhouse for 75 single men, a cookhouse, and a house for the married man who oversaw the Chinese workers. The cookhouse and single bunkhouse of "Hindustown" housed about 30 single men.

Developments in industry and the subsequent population growth stimulated business activity in Port Alberni. A community's place in the hierarchy of trade centres depends upon the number of functions available (i.e. having at least one grocery store, bank, church, etc.) rather than the number of each. A village, for example, can provide four of these functions, while a city provides at least twelve. The Albernis, which were considered as one community, fit the definition of "city" or complete shopping centre by the end of the 1930s. Because of the Alberni Valley's isolated location, there was little trade with other communities.⁸⁴

⁸² Comité du 50e, *The French-Canadians of Port Alberni*, 4.

⁸³ All the information in this paragraph about the BSW millsite comes from Great Central Book Project Committee, *When the Whistle Blew: The Great Central Story 1925-1952* (Port Alberni, BC: Jupiter Publishing, 2002), 83-88.

⁸⁴ Forrester, "The Urban Development of Central Vancouver Island," 42-3. Port Alberni

Gaps in the sources make it impossible to determine the exact number of new businesses in Port Alberni, but applications for new trades licences and payment of annual fees indicate that almost 170 business establishments opened during the 1930s. City Council received the largest number of applications in 1934, when it granted 43 new trade licences. Ten applications were for retail businesses, six or seven were for cafes, and five were for contractors of various types.⁸⁵ The number of stores, for example, increased from 58 to 97 between 1931 and 1941; the volume of sales increased from \$1,070,000 to \$2,341,000.⁸⁶

Increased activity along the waterfront encouraged local boat operators to expand their fleets of tugs, as well as buy more passenger and freight boats.⁸⁷ New industries were established, such as the city's first foundry.⁸⁸ Some businesses, such as the new bakery, catered to basic needs, while others, such as the music studio, were evidence of more disposable income among the city's residents. Several entrepreneurs owned more than one establishment, and many businesses changed hands. Some projects were more ambitious than others. A local businessman invested \$30,000 in a new theatre, while the unemployed man who started a business as a night watchman to stay off relief needed no

businesses served travellers passing through on their way to mines in the area, and they shipped goods to communities, such as Zeballos, that had few stores. However, Port Alberni did not draw customers from other parts of Vancouver Island as Nanaimo did.

⁸⁵ Port Alberni Trade Licences and Building Permits Book; Port Alberni City Council Minutes, January 1930-December 1939; *West Coast Advocate* January 1930-December 1939.

⁸⁶ Forrester, "The Urban Development of Central Vancouver Island," 50.

⁸⁷ *West Coast Advocate*, 21 February 1935.

⁸⁸ *West Coast Advocate*, 16 January 1936.

capital investment.⁸⁹ There were opportunities to suit inexperienced entrepreneurs as well as more established businessmen.

The reason for the city's existence, the deep harbour, meant that the topography of the town was "inconvenient" because it was on a steep slope. The appearance of the downtown core changed as a sizeable proportion of businesses, about 40, moved uphill to the wider and flatter Third Avenue.⁹⁰ Most of the construction in the business section of the city was of new stores and offices, but a police station, hospital wing, and church were also built.⁹¹ A couple of dozen existing businesses moved into new buildings on the same lots, and several renovated and/or enlarged their premises. Construction work kept contractors, tradesmen and labourers employed.

Annual Building Permits Issued:

<u>Year</u>	<u>1928</u>	<u>1929</u>	<u>1930</u>	<u>1931</u>	<u>1934</u>	<u>1935</u>	<u>1936</u>	<u>1937</u>	<u>1938</u>	<u>1939</u>
building permits	103	75	65	70	124	142	210	222	201	197 ⁹²

The number of businesses rose, the number of relief recipients fell, and the cost of relief became a smaller percentage of the city's budget. Figures for the early 1930s are difficult to estimate, but unemployment relief may have taken about 5% of the city's total

⁸⁹ *West Coast Advocate*, 7 March 1935, 7 May 1936.

⁹⁰ Forrester, "The Urban Development of Central Vancouver Island," 92-3.

⁹¹ *West Coast Advocate*, 3 June 1937, 21 February 1935; Comité du 50e, *The French-Canadians of Port Alberni*, 10.

⁹² Port Alberni Trade Licences and Building Permits Book. There are no records from 1932 or 1933. These permits are for construction of houses, sheds, and business premises, as well as for additions to existing structures.

disbursements in 1933,⁹³ compared to 0.4% in 1929, when \$451 was doled out in charity relief to the city's destitute.⁹⁴ The upturn of the local economy was evident in fewer relief cases in January 1934: only 20% of the previous year's number.⁹⁵ Between 1935 and 1936, the net costs of relief dropped from 5.7% to 1.6% of the city's expenditures, and then to 1.0% by 1939.⁹⁶

By the end of 1934, it appeared that the city's finances had turned around. It began the year with a deficit of \$4,550 but ended with a surplus of \$2,653. Residents had managed to pay off about 80% of the delinquent taxes, as well as 75% of the current taxes.⁹⁷ City Council congratulated itself for thriftiness but admitted that the surplus resulted from the re-employment of so many taxpayers. In 1934, City Council reversed several costcutting measures of 1932 and 1933. It restored the fire chief's salary⁹⁸ and the 7.5% salary decreases of other city staff. It also raised the City Clerk's pay to \$140 per month.⁹⁹ The next year it installed more street lights and reconnected ones taken out of service.¹⁰⁰ By 1939, the city was spending \$260,508, an increase of 158% over its 1933

⁹³ *Port Alberni News*, 26 November 1933; Corporation of the City of Port Alberni Records and Accounts 1933.

⁹⁴ *Port Alberni News*, 12 December 1929.

⁹⁵ *West Coast Advocate*, 18 January 1934.

⁹⁶ *West Coast Advocate*, 12 December 1935, 1 for 1935 figures; Corporation of the City of Port Alberni Records and Accounts 1936-1939.

⁹⁷ *Port Alberni News*, 17 January 1935.

⁹⁸ Port Alberni City Council Minutes, 13 August 1934.

⁹⁹ Port Alberni City Council Minutes, 9 July 1934.

¹⁰⁰ Port Alberni City Council Minutes, 18 February 1935.

budget of \$100,888.¹⁰¹ Although its struggles with the budget persisted, it had more money to manipulate.

After a few traumatic years of unemployment and civic poverty, Port Alberni recovered its prosperity because of developments in natural resource markets. The trade agreement between Canada and Britain reinvigorated the forest industry, an increased price for gold set off a miniature rush on the west coast, and the return of the pilchards created employment for cannery workers and fishermen. All this activity drew jobseekers, and the subsequent population increase encouraged investors and entrepreneurs to establish new industries and businesses in the city. Wages and profits contributed to the city treasury, which felt less pressure as the number of relief recipients dropped to more manageable levels. Although growth was having a positive impact on the city, it also caused the city's leadership grave concerns.

¹⁰¹ *Port Alberni News*, 26 November 1933; Corporation of the City of Port Alberni Records and Accounts 1936-1939.

Chapter 4

"Keep Away"¹

Port Alberni and Transients: 1934-1939

In January 1935, all of the Alberni Valley's loggers, millworkers, and longshoreman were at work, and BSW was preparing to hire another 800 for its new sawmill and logging camp. Yet, under the headline, "Two Takers For Every Job Makes Port Alberni No Workers' Paradise," the *West Coast Advocate* bemoaned the presence of so many jobseekers from outside while local men were still unemployed.² It suspected that other cities were sending their unemployed to Port Alberni where they were reduced to begging for food. "Under ordinary circumstances," it explained, "Port Alberni would welcome the stranger within its midst," but it could no longer afford its "usual generosity" and it resented the city's obligation to pay a portion of the relief paid to transients. The *Advocate* warned working men who intended to come to the city to better their lots: "Don't come to Port Alberni unless there is a job waiting here for you."

This unfriendly message to newcomers reflected the heightened sensitivity of a community intent on protecting itself from the levels of unemployment it had recently

¹ *West Coast Advocate*, 22 February 1934.

² *West Coast Advocate*, 3 January 1935. The provincial Minister of Labour, G.D. Pearson, made exactly the same argument a couple of years later, saying there would have been enough jobs created for all British Columbia residents in 1938-39, if it had not been for the influx of transients into the province. *West Coast Advocate*, 30 June 1938. Saskatchewan cities had the same complaint. They felt that they could have handled the problem of relief, if local residents were the only ones allowed to collect it. They were upset because so many people came to the cities from smaller towns or rural areas. Alma Lawton, "Urban Relief in Saskatchewan During the Years of Depression, 1930-39," M.A. thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 1969, 90.

experienced. During earlier boom times in the Alberni Valley, newcomers consisted of a relatively balanced mixture of men on their way to specific jobs, businessmen, and jobseekers. The influx that began in 1934 was different: the number of jobseekers was disproportionately high because of unemployment elsewhere. While local residents may have welcomed individual new neighbours on a personal basis, the political leadership and business elite were ambivalent; they welcomed some newcomers but not others. Port Alberni attitudes and experiences were the result of certain traditional perspectives and specific local issues. This chapter begins with definitions of strangers, proceeds to a discussion of the local experience of some newcomers, and provides possible reasons for the xenophobia in the city's response to their presence.

Canadians used the term transient to describe men on the move, but they used it and other terms interchangeably to include several categories. Transient could refer to those who were looking for permanent jobs and did not consider themselves habitual transients; those who traditionally engaged in seasonal work such as in construction, mining, forestry, and agriculture; casual wanderers who had no particular skills but would take any job offered; and confirmed tramps. Within the last group, Ben Reitman, the so-called "King of the Hoboes," distinguished among the hobo who worked and wandered, the tramp who dreamed and wandered, and the bum who drank and wandered, as well as "the Homeguard who, like the poor are always with us." Then, too, there were the vagabonds who were curious by nature and disliked the routine and "conventions of civilization."³ However, as an advertisement for "George Arliss As a Lovable [sic] Vagabond" in the movie *Mr. Hobo*⁴ suggested, the terms could be interchanged. The newspaper identified some of the men who crossed the "hump" of Mount Arrowsmith to

³ Rev. Andrew Roddan, *God in the Jungles: The Story of The Man Without a Home* Vancouver: n.p., 1931, 13.

⁴ *West Coast Advocate*, 14 May 1936.

enter the Alberni Valley as "newcomers" and others as "vagrants," although it is not certain whether it was the length of their stay or their economic status that determined how they would be labelled. Of course, not all the newcomers were men travelling alone; some families arrived, too.

The essence of municipal hostility toward financially burdensome transients was the issue of social control. The foundation of twentieth-century Canadian relief programmes was the seventeenth-century British philosophy that both mobility and poverty were dangerous to the establishment. Strangers were "exceptions" to Poor Law efforts to support old and infirm residents.⁵ The London, Ontario mayor who promised, "We will look after our own men but we cannot do anything more and we should not spend a nickel to try to do anything more,"⁶ and the Kamloops, British Columbia mayor who "complained [the city] was overrun by beggars and panhandlers and ... was being dictated to by 'foreign bums and hoboes'"⁷ were validating the notion that charity should be reserved for local residents.

"Beggars and panhandlers... 'foreign bums and hoboes' " were unwelcome in part because they upset the balance of power in a community. Begging, traditionally common to vagrancy and often linked to it in the Port Alberni courtroom, disturbed the relationship between the poor and the not-poor because it gave the poor the "initiative" which should have remained with "their economic betters."⁸ It was also impossible for donors (whether

⁵ Robert Morris, *Rethinking Social Welfare: why care for the stranger?* (NY: Longman, 1986), 132.

⁶ H.M. Cassidy, *Unemployment and Relief in Ontario 1929-1932: A Survey and Report* (Toronto: J.M. Dent & Sons, n.d.), 208.

⁷ Margaret A. Ormsby, *British Columbia: A History* (1958; reprint, Toronto: Macmillan, 1971), 445.

⁸ Judith Fingard, "The Relief of the Unemployed Poor in Saint John, Halifax and St. John's, 1815-1860," *Acadiensis* Vol. V, No. 1 (Autumn 1975): 38-9.

individuals giving money to beggars or city officials doling out relief to transients) to know if strangers were poor. While relief officials could check up on local residents with established homes or receive reports from neighbours about the veracity of claimants' financial situations, it was impossible to know what assets a vagrant might have hidden. The suspicions of charitable citizens were proven by occasional courtroom accounts of beggars spending money on alcohol instead of food.

When travellers arrived in Port Alberni, their socio-economic status, their success or failure at finding employment, and their place of habitation affected their desirability as residents. The "man of means and money to invest"⁹ who planned to build a new business or buy an existing one was a welcome addition to the community, as were home buyers from other parts of Canada. Loggers sent to Valley camps by Vancouver employment agencies were accepted, but unskilled labourers who came seeking jobs in the local mills were not appreciated. Of the newcomers, single unemployed men formed the most contentious group. Their presence distressed the civic administration, which complained bitterly and continuously that these men were taking advantage of the municipality's responsibility to provide medical care and relief for them.¹⁰ The police were also concerned. As early as 1931, the police chief reported that there were bound to be "a number of vagrants and petty thieves" among incoming jobseekers, but the police declared themselves prepared to be vigilant and get them out of town "ASAP."¹¹ They warned residents to turn away beggars at the door, and the police routinely "rounded up

⁹ *West Coast Advocate*, 3 January 1935.

¹⁰ *West Coast Advocate*, 14 March 1935; 22 April 1937; 13 May, 27 May 1937; 29 September 1938; 5 January 1939.

¹¹ *Port Alberni News*, 1 January 1931.

practically every transient in the city" when crimes were committed,¹² although unemployed transients were seldom charged with serious crimes. They were more likely to be brought before the court for vagrancy, begging, drunkenness and/or disorderly conduct. Between 1930 and 1939, the newspaper identified 48 men as vagrants, transients, or newcomers charged with those offences, and 37 were allowed to leave town in lieu of jail time, while 9 were offered fines in lieu of jail time, and 3 were jailed. A few chose jail because they could not pay their \$20 or \$25 fines, and others were jailed because they refused to leave town when ordered to go.¹³

Some unsuccessful jobseekers spent only a couple of days in the Valley, but others stayed longer whether or not they got jobs immediately. The presence of so many new families and single men resulted in an acute housing shortage, and the City Council involved itself in certain housing issues. It demanded the Sanitary Inspector investigate an overcrowded shack, ordered a squatter off a city-owned lot which he had fenced, and asked police to supervise the removal of a shack that squatters had erected in Coal Creek Park.¹⁴ Its campaign of removing squatters was not unduly aggressive, but in February 1935, City Council asked the E&N railway to remove the "jungle" which housed "innumerable disappointed transients arriving here in search of work" along the railroad tracks near the waterfront.¹⁵ The specific impetus for this request was not recorded, but

¹² *West Coast Advocate*, 4 March 1937, 2 June 1938.

¹³ *West Coast Advocate*, 27 February, 19 November 1936; 7 January, 11 March, 18 March, 5 August, 21 October, 28 October, 11 November 1937; 13 January, 28 April, 2 June, 22 September, 17 November 1938; 5 January, 12 January, 23 March, 8 April, 25 May, 13 July, 10 August, 7 September, 21 September, 29 December 1939.

¹⁴ Port Alberni City Council Minutes, 6 September 1935, 12 April 1939; *West Coast Advocate*, 22 October 1936.

¹⁵ *West Coast Advocate*, 7 February 1935.

jungles, whether they housed transients or long-time residents or both, were invariably regarded as threats to both public health and public safety.¹⁶ The waterfront, with its old shacks and remnants of earlier industrial facilities, was becoming an embarrassment to the city. City Council instructed the Harbour Master to move some structures, and the Board of Trade initiated a programme to raze the old saltery to provide a better swimming place at "Sunnyside."¹⁷ After all these improvements, City Council was concerned that the jungle was undoing all its work.

The most annoying element, as far as City Council was concerned, was the collection of floathouses strung out between the old cannery and Lupsi Cupsi Creek¹⁸ The floating community housed almost 60 people, including 21 children. The minutes described it as "unsightly" and such a hazard to health that the beach had to be closed.¹⁹ What really concerned the city was not the unsightliness of the floathouses or the alleged hazards they presented but the fact that the residents were "non-taxpayers, the majority [were] new-comers and many [were] on relief." Thus City Council expended considerable energy trying, again and again, to "do away once and for all with this undesirable colony."²⁰

¹⁶ Marion Elizabeth Lane, "Unemployment During the Depression: The Problem of the Single Unemployed Transient in British Columbia, 1930-1938," B.A. Essay, University of British Columbia, 1966, 33-4; Lawton, "Urban Relief in Saskatchewan During the Years of Depression, 1930-39," 130; William A. Sloan, "The Crowsnest Pass During the Depression: A Socioeconomic History of Southeastern British Columbia, 1918-1939," M.A. thesis, University of Victoria, 1968, 25-6.

¹⁷ *West Coast Advocate*, 16 May 1935; 30 April, 30 July 1936.

¹⁸ Port Alberni City Council Minutes, 3 April 1939.

¹⁹ *West Coast Advocate*, 8 June 1939.

²⁰ *West Coast Advocate*, 25 May 1939.

To encourage residents to leave, the city turned off the public water supply in the spring but rescinded the order when a floathouse delegation asked for more time so they could find alternate housing. Councillors made plans to destroy each floathouse as it was vacated,²¹ but their plans were repeatedly frustrated. As soon as one floathouse was towed away, another took its place. Knowing that the beach would be "in great demand" when school closed for the summer, the city again turned off the water,²² but floathouse residents immediately renewed their protests. This time a group of women begged Mayor W.C. (Mike) Hamilton to turn the water back on, at least until the end of the school year. After a "fresh outburst of weeping" by the distressed mothers, the mayor agreed to postpone turning it off until the end of June.²³ City Council's renewed attempts to dismantle "Toonerville" that summer were unsuccessful. Days after the war began the following September, a delegation of men who had enlisted in the armed forces addressed City Council about the water supply.²⁴ When they asked the city to provide free water for their 14 dependants for the duration of their service, City Council reluctantly agreed to do so for a few months until their families could be placed elsewhere. It instructed the Harbour Master to remove any remaining "shackers" and made plans to assess and tax any property on the adjacent land.²⁵

²¹ Port Alberni City Council Minutes, 3 April 1939.

²² *West Coast Advocate*, 25 May 1939.

²³ *West Coast Advocate*, 8 June 1939.

²⁴ Port Alberni City Council Minutes, 11 September 1939. The minutes did not record whether these men had been on relief or employed until their enlistment.

²⁵ *West Coast Advocate*, 21 September 1939, 1. During this summer, a couple of out-of-town businessmen presented City Council with a plan for low-cost housing, but Council was not enthused about the idea because it would generate too little tax revenue. *West Coast Advocate*, 17 August 1939.

While Port Alberni had tolerated the existence of the floathouse colony until late in the decade, neither the City Council nor the business community had ever actively encouraged its people to live there. In contrast, their attitude towards establishment of a hostel, whether motivated by altruism or the desire to remove destitute men from public view, was enthusiastically supportive. Generous impulses and the opportunity to mingle with exotic hobos and "Lovable Vagabond[s]" combined with the infectious zeal of the project's initiator to convince the entire Alberni Valley to co-operate in building, furnishing, and maintaining the Strangers' Rest.

The idea for a hostel originated with Rev. Percy Wills. He was a missionary with the Shantymen's Christian Association (hereafter SCA), an organization established in Ontario in the early twentieth century by a young man who travelled around the Parry Sound area taking Christian literature to lonely loggers who were known as shantymen. Other young men who joined him called *themselves* shantymen. They organized themselves into a home mission in 1908 and expanded their operation to include other people living in isolation: prison inmates, merchant seamen on foreign ships, Indians on reserves, and residents of remote islands.²⁶ The SCA became active on Vancouver Island in the late 1920s, when a group of Christians in Victoria focused their attention on "the spiritual well-being" of lonely loggers, ranchers and fishermen. Percy Wills was known to a member of this group, so he was invited to serve as missionary.²⁷ He was born in Victoria in the 1890s and served in World War I. He underwent a religious conversion after the war and began his career as a preacher in northern Canada.²⁸ When he came to

²⁶ Nigel Hannaford, "Breakfast with the Shantymen," *Clarion* (Port Alberni, BC: St. Alban's Church, 1990), 11.

²⁷ Phillip W. Keller, *Splendour From the Sea: The Saga of the Shantymen* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1963), 48-9.

²⁸ Louise Johnson, *Not Without Hope*, (Matsqui, BC: Maple Lane Publishing, 1992), 2-3.

Vancouver Island, he tried to visit isolated areas on foot, but he soon found travelling by boat much more efficient. When the canoe in which he made his first ocean voyages proved unsuitable for deepsea travel, he gratefully accepted the donation of a 50' fishing boat, "The Shantyman," from a Victoria firm supportive of the SCA. On its first voyage in June 1932, Wills was accompanied by several crew members and a doctor. The group spent a month along the coast, "promulgat[ing] the gospel and distribut[ing] to the needy."²⁹ The United Church also had a marine mission vessel, the "Melvin Swartout," operating along the west coast, but the SCA felt there was enough work for both of them³⁰ among isolated workers and their families who appreciated the social and financial support of its missionaries.

The SCA missionary and his assistants were regular visitors to logging camps near Courtenay, Port Renfrew, Cowichan Bay, Port Alberni, and Great Central Lake,³¹ and they established the Nootka Mission Hospital at Ceepeecee, the site of a fish cannery on the west coast of Vancouver Island, in 1937.³² Wills became well-known in the Alberni Valley. Besides officiating at marriages and funerals, he preached to the residents of the Great Central Lake mill site and camps, published a weekly newspaper column, and made guest appearances at social clubs where he promoted charitable initiatives. His poems were occasionally printed in the local newspaper, and he published a small book of them as a fundraiser for west coast charity.³³ Rev. Wills quickly became a favourite figure along

²⁹ *Port Alberni News*, 30 June 1932.

³⁰ *West Coast Advocate*, 31 January 1935.

³¹ Johnson, *Not Without Hope*, 3.

³² Keller, *Splendour From the Sea*, 98.

³³ *West Coast Advocate*, 15 February 1934, 17 June 1937, 21 December 1939; Percy Wills, *Rambling Rhymes from the Graveyard*, (n.p., n.d.).

the west coast and in the Alberni Valley. He is remembered as "a real gentleman" with a friendly manner who was comfortable with all kinds of people. At Great Central Lake, he called on the single men living in the bunkhouses, enjoyed joining the millworkers' children in their games, and was "loved and respected by the entire lake community."³⁴ Another reason for his popularity was his sense of humour. When he and skipper Harold Peters visited isolated camps and farms, they entertained families with a kitchen routine in which they built their infamous "Shantyman sandwiches" -- bizarre combinations of food, such as raw onions, peanut butter, and salmon -- while joking continuously with each other and their hosts. Lonely folks might not have enjoyed the meal, but they cherished the company of the friendly "Shanty boys," as they called themselves.³⁵

The people he visited also appreciated Wills' tolerance and respect for them. He was completely uninterested in people's church affiliations. A historian of the SCA emphasised his open-minded attitude towards people who were not enthused about embracing religion. In his personal and professional life, Wills lived by faith; that is, he believed that God would provide. He kept a little box on the boat to hold money, and it seemed that whenever he needed funds, the box held whatever was necessary. While Wills invariably took that as a divine sign that he should continue his work,³⁶ the money was the tangible manifestation of support by people who responded to his sincerity and generosity by providing moral and financial support for his projects.

Percy Wills approached City Council a couple of weeks after it resolved to rid the city of the hobo jungle near the waterfront where he docked his mission boat. He

³⁴ Jan Peterson, *Twin Cities: Alberni-Port Alberni* (Lantzville, BC: Oolichan Books, 1994), 57.

³⁵ Johnson, *Not Without Hope*, 40-41.

³⁶ Johnson, *Not Without Hope*, 10.

proposed to build a place with showers and a reading room where fishermen from the west coast and others could stay.³⁷ Until then, Port Alberni had no free accommodation for transients who could not afford rooms in one of the half dozen hotels or numerous lodging houses.

Hostels for the unemployed were not a new idea. Several large North American cities had such institutions for many years, and others appeared during the Depression. Some smaller cities and towns used police stations as emergency shelters, but they were uncomfortable and crowded.³⁸ Whether religious groups or municipal bureaucrats administered the hostels, they were proud of them; their annual reports, tours for local dignitaries, and newspaper articles emphasised the size, cleanliness, and hospitality of the facilities.³⁹ This pride was evident in Port Alberni, too. The operators made a point of describing the Strangers' Rest as a "strong" building which was built to the proper fire regulations, and described details of its construction, floor plan, and furnishings, and family atmosphere in newspaper articles.⁴⁰

Clients did not always appreciate the hostel features that were such a source of pride to their administrators. Destitute transients resented the Salvation Army's policy of charging a token fee, imposed so that men would feel less degraded by accepting charity, because it was a cruel barrier to those with no money.⁴¹ Clients were often appalled by crowded sleeping quarters, disappointed by watery stews, and infuriated by the constant

³⁷ Port Alberni City Council Minutes, 18 March 1935.

³⁸ Henry Paul, "I Am a Transient," *The Canadian Forum* Vol. XIX (1939): 47.

³⁹ Joan M. Crouse, *The Homeless Transient in the Great Depression: New York State, 1929-1941* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1986), 70-1.

⁴⁰ *West Coast Advocate*, 10 October, 28 November 1935.

⁴¹ Paul, "I Am a Transient," 47.

proselytising in mission hostels. The administrators of church-based hostels claimed to offer "[s]piritual guidance" rather than forcing men to attend religious services.⁴² In reality, the men resented being obliged to listen to sermons before they were allowed to eat. A hobo explained that missions were home to the equivalent of "rice Christians," old men unable to stand up to the rigors of being on the road, who exchanged "testimony to their changed lives when pious contributors [were] present" for permission to stay permanently. Such men were called "mission stiffs," a derogatory title.⁴³ The food provided at such hostels was monotonous and lacking in meat; sleeping rooms were overcrowded; and clean and sober young men found themselves in intimate quarters next to old and filthy drunks. For all but the most desperate men, rescue missions were a last resort.⁴⁴

Whatever type of hostel Port Alberni City Council believed it was supporting, the mayor and alderman did not hesitate to help Percy Wills with his initiative. They immediately set aside a city lot near the waterfront, railway station and bus depot, and a grateful Wills thanked them publicly for their "helpful attitude."⁴⁵ Even though Wills' philosophy of living by faith meant he would not solicit donations personally,⁴⁶ he

⁴² Crouse, *The Homeless Transient in the Great Depression*, 81.

⁴³ Paul, "I Am A Transient," 49.

⁴⁴ Crouse, *The Homeless Transient in the Great Depression*, 99-100.

⁴⁵ Port Alberni City Council Minutes, 18 March, 7 October, 24 October 1935; 30 January 1936. The city sold Lot 4 Block 85 D.L.I. Map 197 to Percy Wills for \$5. When he received a bill for municipal taxes, he wrote to City Council to express his disappointment, but the city explained that only churches were exempt. This gift of land actually benefited the city financially; at a time when it owned a large number of vacant lots, it now received taxes from one more landowner.

⁴⁶ Johnson, *Not Without Hope*, 10; *West Coast Advocate*, 19 December 1935; 30 July, 10 October 1936.

gratefully accepted help from sympathetic local residents. From all around the Alberni Valley, people offered cash, equipment, and labour to build a small two-storey house with a reading room, baths, and four rooms upstairs. They donated a medicine chest, bookcase, chairs, blankets, towels, cooking utensils to furnish it; groceries and firewood to help it operate; and clothes, stationery, books, and sundries for the comfort of the clients. The local women who attended a silver tea and gift showers, the Great Central Lake Sunday School, the owner of a trucking firm, and a broad spectrum of businesses and individuals were listed as donors during construction and the first weeks of operation.⁴⁷ The administrators were careful to make it known that they were operating within the Rest's income. When monthly income was \$16.04, expenses were \$15.25; when donations totalled \$31.75, expenses rose to \$29.34.⁴⁸ The hostel could survive on such minimal amounts of cash because so much food and fuel was donated by businesses and individuals. Percy Wills made a point of advertising the hostel's debt-free status, even with construction costs of over \$500 and \$44.97 in yearly taxes.⁴⁹ At Christmas, the

⁴⁷ *West Coast Advocate*, 10 October, 17 October, 31 October, 28 November, 12 December, 19 December 1935; 13 February, 14 May 1936; Keller, *Splendour From the Sea*, 82 The newspaper noted that "women of the two towns" had combined their charitable efforts. This was an astonishing development, because there was so much competition between Alberni and Port Alberni that the *Port Alberni News* noted on 24 November 1932 that when a clothing depot was opened in Port Alberni, some Alberni residents refused to donate anything that might end up being worn by a Port Alberni resident.

⁴⁸ *West Coast Advocate*, 12 December 1935; 13 February, 12 March 1936, 14 May, 22 October 1936.

⁴⁹ *West Coast Advocate*, 12 November 1936, 10 June 1937; Port Alberni Collectors and Assessors Roll 1939. When the Bivouac Club planned a building for day use only, it estimated the cost of a two-storey building at \$3500.

Strangers' Rest Society publicly thanked all the hostel's supporters through an announcement in the paper.⁵⁰

The need for the hostel was immediately apparent as men flocked to Port Alberni looking for work in the new BSW mill and other Alberni Valley operations that were putting on extra shifts. As soon as it opened in late October 1935, 8 to 10 men crowded into its bunks.⁵¹ By mid December it had supplied 140 beds and 97 meals, and in January it supplied 191 beds. Fewer men used the facility in better weather: 121 in April, 61 in May and 63 in September. At times the little house was so crowded that Wills "would find as many as 36 men at a time...Some under the tables, some on the tables, others on the floor, on chairs."⁵² Once he expected to stay overnight himself but "the only place [to] sleep was on the ceiling so [he] didn't stay! The house was more than full!"⁵³ Up to 1,300 men annually used the Strangers' Rest during the 1930s.⁵⁴

Within months of the Rest's opening, the SCA was planning an annex.⁵⁵ Increased demand for accommodation was responsible for the style of the structure: long and narrow (40' x 16') with a flat roof with no interior walls, few windows and only a couple of electrical outlets.⁵⁶ It stood in stark contrast to the original building, which resembled a single-family dwelling. The unique construction of the annex -- exterior walls of vertical

⁵⁰ *West Coast Advocate*, 21 December 1939.

⁵¹ Statistics from *West Coast Advocate*, 24 October, 12 December 1935; 13 February, 14 May, 11 June, 22 October 1936.

⁵² Keller, *Splendour From the Sea*, 82.

⁵³ *West Coast Advocate*, 14 December 1935.

⁵⁴ *West Coast Advocate*, 11 September 1947.

⁵⁵ *West Coast Advocate*, 11 June 1936.

⁵⁶ *West Coast Advocate*, 17 August 1936.

2 x 4s -- was doubtless due to the character of donated material. The main floor had a reading room, sink, and coffee supplies; the upper floor was a dormitory with room for at least 20 cots. When the annex was built, the original building was converted to office use and living quarters for the caretakers.⁵⁷

The Strangers' Rest was designed for the exclusive use of men. No sign outside indicated its use; apparently most men heard about it from other travellers. No fee was charged for accommodation or meals. Therefore, men who had a little money bought their own groceries, while more destitute clients ate donated food.⁵⁸ There were no formal rules, but men usually stayed only a few days. Residents chopped the firewood, cleaned the dormitory,⁵⁹ and did most of the cooking for themselves. Those clients who found work moved into camps or boarding houses, while most disappointed jobseekers moved on after a few days.

Unfortunately for those hostel supporters who acted primarily because of their affection for Percy Wills, there was never any question of the missionary acting as caretaker himself; both the SCA policy of itinerancy and the pressure of his work along the coast prevented it. Unable to find a "suitable man" to run it, he made arrangements with a couple of male Salvation Army members who volunteered to act as caretakers. This was the first real Salvation Army institutional presence in the Alberni Valley. It had operated in Port Alberni for a brief period in 1914, but except for delivering the *War Cry* to a few subscribers, it was absent from the Alberni Valley until the 1930s.⁶⁰ Although

⁵⁷ *West Coast Advocate*, 17 August 1936. The dormitory was built so close to the original house that there was barely room to walk between them.

⁵⁸ *West Coast Advocate*, 10 October 1935, 17 September 1936.

⁵⁹ *West Coast Advocate*, 14 December 1935.

⁶⁰ "Officer Appointments" in the 30th Anniversary Album. The Salvation Army did not open its own place of worship in Port Alberni until 1952.

the 1941 census listed no Salvation Army members in Port Alberni,⁶¹ the Army must have had some supporters since it held prayer meetings in the Strangers' Rest and in other places, including the United Church.⁶² Salvation Army personnel were prominent at the opening ceremonies of the Strangers' Rest. Brigadier & Mrs. Dalziel, the Divisional Commanders of the Salvation Army in British Columbia, were honoured guests, and a Salvation Army band from Nanaimo was in attendance.⁶³ The Brigadier performed the dedication ceremonies, spoke about the work of the SCA and narrated a history of the Strangers' Rest.⁶⁴ The Salvation Army's involvement in the hostel soon proved problematic, but Wills was grateful for the work of its volunteers.

While the Salvation Army managers took care of daily operations, a group known as the Prayer League administered the finances. The League's members represented several churches: the Church of the Nazarene (now Southside Community Church,) the Church of the First Born,⁶⁵ First Baptist Church, and Elim Chapel (now Elim Tabernacle.)⁶⁶ Ministers from other churches, including Rev. A. W. McLeod of the Presbyterian Church, occasionally appeared at Strangers' Rest meetings as guest speakers.⁶⁷

⁶¹ *Eighth Census of Canada, 1941*, Vol II (Ottawa: Dominion Bureau of Statistics), 639.

⁶² *West Coast Advocate*, 22 August 1935, 16 January 1936, 7 April 1938.

⁶³ *West Coast Advocate*, 24 October 1935.

⁶⁴ *West Coast Advocate*, 31 October 1935.

⁶⁵ The Church of the First-Born was the invention of one of the members of the Prayer League.

⁶⁶ *West Coast Advocate*, 14 November 1935, 11 September 1947.

⁶⁷ *West Coast Advocate*, 13 February, 22 October 1936.

The Prayer League supported the Rest faithfully for many years, but even before the annex was built, the Strangers' Rest had become a subject of controversy, and the city's initial enthusiasm for it had evaporated. The first problem developed within a couple of weeks of its opening when the *West Coast Advocate* reprinted Brigadier Dalziel's article about the hostel in the Salvation Army's magazine, the *War Cry*. According to the *Advocate*, in his "glowing tidings [about] the planting of The Army Flag in Port Alberni," the Brigadier claimed to have co-operated with the mayor to organise the Strangers' Rest and said that the City Council had agreed to give the Army a lot large enough for both the hostel and a place of worship next door. He pointed out that by operating the Strangers' Rest the Salvation Army was gaining free accommodation for its officers and a free meeting place.⁶⁸

Dalziel's misrepresentation of the Salvation Army's role in establishing the Strangers' Rest stirred up anti-Salvation Army sentiment that echoed nineteenth century Canadian antipathy to its practice of allowing women to play prominent roles, encouraging men and women to mingle at late-night meetings, and creating unconventional, not to say rowdy, public displays.⁶⁹ It was so different from mainstream churches that their adherents considered the Salvation Army inferior; they also saw the Army as competition.⁷⁰ The Salvation Army persisted, however, and made a niche for itself in urban British Columbia, where it found conditions it felt most comfortable handling.⁷¹

⁶⁸ *West Coast Advocate*, 28 November 1935.

⁶⁹ Robert Collins, *The Holy War of Sally Ann: The Salvation Army in Canada* (Saskatoon, SK: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1984), 39.

⁷⁰ Robert McGahan, *Killers, Thieves, Tramps, and Simmers* (Fredericton, NB: Goose Lane, 1989), 38.

⁷¹ Collins, *The Holy War of Sally Ann*, 43-4.

What really offended Port Alberni citizens was Dalziel's claim that there were "twenty-seven beer parlors and about as many poolrooms in a town of 3,000 people."⁷² Not only was the allegation totally false (there were only 5 or 6 beer parlours and a couple of pool halls,) but his claim insulted the town's reputation. Dalziel's attempts to explain himself only made the situation worse. On December 5, the *West Coast Advocate* published a letter in which the Brigadier credited Percy Wills and the SCA with building the Strangers' Rest and admitted that the Salvation Army's role was confined to operating it. He blamed "a strange confusion of figures" for exaggerating the number of beer parlours, a mistake which "made the position to appear very much worse than it is."⁷³ The editor took "violent exception" to Dalziel's statement because of the inference that Port Alberni was "bad enough to warrant correction" even with fewer than 27 beer parlours.⁷⁴

Port Alberni was sensitive about its reputation as a drinking town. The attitude of its police towards hard-drinking, hard-working men may have been inflexible, as evidenced by the number of court cases involving alcohol, but the drinkers had their defenders. The *Advocate* noted most of those charged were loggers and fishermen in town "for a bit of well-earned recreation or relaxation,"⁷⁵ and a "Taxpayer" warned the city that if police did not stop picking up all the drunks and if the courts did not stop fining them, they would all leave town to party.

Everyone in this town seems to recognize the fact that this is a working class community except the police magistrate and the police force...it is

⁷² *West Coast Advocate*, 28 November 1935.

⁷³ *West Coast Advocate*, 5 December 1935.

⁷⁴ *West Coast Advocate*, 5 December 1935.

⁷⁵ *West Coast Advocate*, 19 November 1936, quoted by Gordon Hak in "On the Fringes: Capital and Labour in Port Alberni and Prince George," Ph.D. dissertation (Simon Fraser University, 1986), 125.

about time that [City Council and the political representatives of the city] in conjunction with the Board of Trade and all business men took steps to make this town a place where loggers, fishermen and miners can spend their hard earned dough and go on a little binge... If things keep going very long under the present set-up our streets will be bare as Mount Arrowsmith and the bus company will have to put on extra stages to carry Alberni district's wages to Nanaimo.⁷⁶

The city was fortunate that outsiders paid no attention to other behaviour that could not be considered respectable but which was tolerated and again, even welcomed, by commercial interests. Businessmen throughout British Columbia blamed transients for the province-wide problem of prostitution. However, when the police initiated a crackdown on Port Alberni's brothels, they met resistance from the business community. The opponents were of two camps. One group asserted it was safer from a health perspective to keep prostitutes from scattering. The other group argued that "a 'wide open town' attract[ed] visitors with money, which [was] good for trade in general."⁷⁷

To outsiders unaccustomed to the "work hard, play hard" lifestyle of the loggers, miners, fishermen, and sailors who visited Port Alberni on the weekends, public drunkenness was never respectable. City residents cringed at the idea that the whole city was marked with an "obvious daub of red sin"⁷⁸ and that *War Cry* readers, ignorant of Port Alberni's peculiar lifestyle, would picture them as reeling from beer parlour to beer parlour in a town which allegedly contained one for every hundred residents.

⁷⁶ *West Coast Advocate*, 19 January 1939. Many years later, when the gas industry boomed in the Peace River area, there was a marked increase in misdemeanour cases before the courts. People were reluctant to blame the rig crews because "demonizing those who worked for an industry that promised a bountiful future was an awkward proposition." Jon Swainger, "Breaking the Peace: Fictions of the Law-Abiding Peace Country 1930-50," *BC Studies* 119 (Autumn 1998): 20.

⁷⁷ *West Coast Advocate*, 23 November 1939.

⁷⁸ *West Coast Advocate*, 16 January 1936.

Furious repudiations of Dalziel's comments about the number of beer parlours soon commingled with antipathy towards the Salvation Army. One writer to the editor began by complaining about the "travesty of facts" but then objected to the Salvation Army itself. He was not surprised by such a mistake, given that it had "peculiar beliefs," and warned that trouble would ensue if City Council did not "evict these pseudo-religious upstarts." He pointed out that "Nobody asked these people to come here" and Port Alberni had no need of any new "cults."⁷⁹

When Percy Wills involved himself in the dispute by asking townspeople to avoid blaming the local Salvation Army workers and expressing his gratitude toward them for their help with the Strangers' Rest, the controversy grew to involve evangelists generally.⁸⁰ Another detractor of the Salvation Army apparently conflated it with the SCA. Despite his "deep respect" for Wills, he criticised him for not stepping in more quickly to dispute Dalziel's article, arguing that the "'delightful 'slap on the back' and...'cheerio old fellow' [of Wills' letter to the editor]" was not enough to satisfy local pride. The writer disapproved of Wills' "vapid form of evangelism" and of the attempts of the SCA and the Salvation Army to sidestep "controversy with a burst of insipid 'Alleluias.'" The city had welcomed Wills "with open arms," but it was not a suitable place for the Salvation Army to operate. First, "the 'beer-sodden' city" already had several

⁷⁹ *West Coast Advocate*, 5 December 1935.

⁸⁰ *West Coast Advocate*, 14 December 1935. Wills reminded the angry townspeople that the SCA had welcomed the Salvation Army's support and the City Council had agreed to the Army's involvement. According to "Salvation Army to Organize New Strangers' Rest, *West Coast Advocate*, 29 August 1935, City Council had been concerned when Percy Wills first made arrangements with the Salvation Army to provide caretakers because it did not want to appear to give preference to one denomination over others. However, Wills reassured them that "the institution would be undenominational in character." Although neither the Salvation Army nor the SCA were mentioned in that week's minutes, the newspaper headline explains why some in the community saw it as a Salvation Army institution.

churches; second, the local ministers had been around a lot longer and worked harder than Percy Wills, whose life as an "[i]tinerant evangelis[t was] a vacation compared to the life of a parish pastor." Port Alberni was bitter about outsiders impugning the city's reputation.⁸¹

Wills' supporters were quick to respond. They praised his integrity, his commitment, and his hard work. They pointed out that the Strangers' Rest originated with him, not with the established churches in the community, and that he had been modest about taking any credit for it. As for the Brigadier's remarks, these writers believed it was unfair to hold them against the local Salvation Army men who were working, without payment, to help the clients of the Strangers' Rest.⁸²

The public debate which began as reaction to an insult to the town's sobriety and which had deteriorated into polemic about the confessional identity of the Strangers' Rest's operators was abruptly terminated by the editor who refused to publish any more correspondence on the subject.⁸³ In the following months, it became obvious that the initially enthusiastic relationship between the city and the institution at the centre of the dissension was dissipating, as the city became wary of supporting the Rest and similar institutions. When Dalziel appeared at a council meeting in January 1936 to ask the city to give the Salvation Army a lot of its own, City Council was unimpressed by his expressions of "sincere regret," told him the Salvation Army had done itself no good by the article, and denied his request.⁸⁴ Over the next few years, when new Salvation Army

⁸¹ *West Coast Advocate*, 16 January 1936.

⁸² *West Coast Advocate*, 12 December 1935, 23 January 1936.

⁸³ *West Coast Advocate*, 23 January 1936.

⁸⁴ *West Coast Advocate*, 20 February 1936.

officers came to Port Alberni, they felt they "were not really welcome" because of the lingering resentment created by Dalziel's report.⁸⁵

The relationship between the SCA and the Salvation Army also deteriorated over the years, and in January 1939, the Salvation Army withdrew its services from the hostel. It told City Council it was "impractical" to continue working there because SCA practices encouraged "floaters" who looked upon the Rest as a "permanent abode," whereas the Army's policy was to help only those men willing to help themselves.⁸⁶ It was always suspicious of "permanent transients...floating back and forth across the country working the system."⁸⁷ The Army promoted self-esteem among clients by charging fees at its own shelters,⁸⁸ but the SCA persisted in offering free accommodation at the Strangers' Rest. By this time, the mayor thought the Salvation Army had the right idea, and when told of the Army's hopes to carry on this useful work "on slightly less liberal lines," he expressed his confidence in its ability and promised to look into providing the Army with its own building site.⁸⁹ Although City Council never did give it a site, this discussion marked a complete change in its attitude toward the Salvation Army.⁹⁰ It had been concerned about the Salvation Army's involvement in the Strangers' Rest during the construction stage and had needed reassurance from Percy Wills that the shelter would not be denominational. It

⁸⁵ Undated, unsigned letter in 30th Anniversary Album of the Port Alberni Salvation Army.

⁸⁶ *West Coast Advocate*, 26 January 1939.

⁸⁷ Collins, *The Holy War of Sally Ann*, 143.

⁸⁸ Crouse, *The Homeless Transient in the Great Depression*, 81-2.

⁸⁹ *West Coast Advocate*, 26 January 1939.

⁹⁰ The 1939 City Council included three members of the 1935 City Council, including the mayor, who was an alderman at the time the Strangers' Rest was built. There were four new members. Peterson, *Twin Cities*, 367.

had turned down several Salvation Army requests for land during the 1930s, always citing its policy of avoiding giving any denomination preferential treatment, yet now it indicated support for the Salvation Army to "carry on the work in their new building," that is, in what would be a denominational institution.

Regardless of its relationship with the Salvation Army, the Strangers' Rest was unabashedly religious in its orientation. An SCA historian wrote that "no man passed through that place without being presented boldly with the claim of Christ upon his life. So it became widely known as a Gospel centre as well as welfare post."⁹¹ Religion was not the only ambiguity surrounding the Rest. When an alderman suggested someone should build an institute for the use of sailors, the mayor reminded City Council that was the "original intention" of the Strangers' Rest and he was disappointed that "the institution had not developed along the lines desired at its inception."⁹² This exchange illustrated the confusion about the identity of the hostel's target clientele. In his first address to City Council, Wills mentioned only "fishermen etc. from the West Coast."⁹³ The majority of his contacts were with fishermen, so it was natural for him to see them as potential clients. He told City Council he had solicited funds from the Vancouver Seamen's Institute, and although he probably would have welcomed foreign fishermen as day users (presumably they would have slept on their ships,) he obviously did not intend it just for them.⁹⁴ However, newspaper articles suggested it was for "fishermen, miners, loggers, 'Knights of

⁹¹ Keller, *Splendour From the Sea*, 82; *West Coast Advocate*, 18 August 1955. The caretaker in charge from 1949 to 1955 was, like Percy Wills, a World War I veteran who considered he had been "saved" by God, and he devoted himself to the "physical and spiritual needs" of men, many of whom were "derelicts" he had "saved."

⁹² *West Coast Advocate*, 26 January 1939.

⁹³ Port Alberni City Council Minutes, 18 March 1935.

⁹⁴ *West Coast Advocate*, 28 March 1935.

the Open Road' and all homeless men."⁹⁵ When the Rest opened, Wills said space would be available to transients passing through Port Alberni who just wanted to spend an evening somewhere, too; they would not necessarily sleep there.⁹⁶ In spite of his early intention of naming the hostel the "Workers' Rest," he wrote that "[his] heart used to ache for the fellows on the boats and in the streets and boxcars..." Those words suggested that many of the "Workers" would be unemployed. Wills' ecumenical spirit and the inclusionary policies of the SCA ensured that any man "up against it" and needing free accommodation would be welcome at the Strangers' Rest.⁹⁷ Ambiguity about the hostel's purpose contributed to the negative attitude of the city's leaders.

When Percy Wills applied for permission to expand, City Council complained that the Rest was "rapidly developing into a resort for undesirables."⁹⁸ Alderman J.M. Crossland reiterated that sentiment when he attended a meeting of the Strangers' Rest a few months later. He said the Strangers' Rest "tend[ed] to encourage an incursion of rather undesirable characters, with consequent trouble to the citizens generally."⁹⁹ City Council rationalised its refusal to give away public land by citing its experience with the Strangers' Rest. Some respectable local young men formed the Bivouac Club in an

⁹⁵ *West Coast Advocate*, 10 October, 31 October 1935.

⁹⁶ *West Coast Advocate*, 24 October 1935. The point was often made by various factions in the city that there was no place for young men to socialize outside the beer parlors and pool halls.

⁹⁷ *West Coast Advocate*, 14 December 1936.

⁹⁸ *West Coast Advocate*, 16 July 1936.

⁹⁹ *West Coast Advocate*, 28 January 1937. None of the men charged with vagrancy, public drunkenness, or other crimes were ever identified as clients of the Strangers' Rest. The only time the institution was mentioned in connection with crime was an instance of two drunken men fighting on the street outside. They may have been occupants of one of the nearby hotels or guests at a function at the Workers' Hall next door.

attempt to organise wholesome entertainment for the "better boys," the sons of the city's professional and businessmen. When they asked the city for a vacant lot on which to build a clubhouse with a reading room, billiards table, stage, etc., City Council offered little encouragement. It explained that it had an "unfortunate experience" with another group that was created to serve the same type of men but "had not developed along the lines anticipated."¹⁰⁰ Local businessmen also complained about having social institutions in the commercial district. A taxpayer described the Rest as "nothing but an eyesore."¹⁰¹ The city solicitor argued that the Municipal Act obliged the city to get the best possible price for its lots and therefore it could not legally give them away.¹⁰²

It was not only the councillors who withdrew their support from the Rest. When the annex was being constructed, there were no "showers" or flood of donations such as the original Strangers' Rest had experienced. The local newspaper printed no banner headlines describing its construction, no lists of donors, nor any stories about the opening.

In view of the Strangers' Rest policy that beds and meals were free to destitute men, it was hardly surprising that those who used it, being poor, were of questionable desirability to a city hoping to benefit financially from its increased population. Even poorly paid working men could afford to stay in the city's hotels; unemployed men could

¹⁰⁰ *West Coast Advocate*, 18 February 1937.

¹⁰¹ *West Coast Advocate*, 18 February 1937. Earlier, the city provided a free lot next to the Strangers' Rest to a group of unemployed men where they built the Workers' Hall. It was used for public meetings, political debates and union activities. *Port Alberni News*, 3 March 1932.

¹⁰² *West Coast Advocate*, 4 March 1937. The City never did give the Bivouac Club any land; a private donor gave them a lot on the edge of the downtown core. In the 1930s, the Bivouac Club was open for use by local men and boys during the days and evenings only. During the Second World War, the families of club members transformed it into a hostel for servicemen. Its homelike atmosphere made it "far more than a sleeping place for transients." *West Coast Advocate*, 16 March 1944.

not. The civic authorities and the business community were unlikely to welcome residents who neither paid taxes nor bought goods or services. Furthermore, the Salvation Army's contention that clients were taking advantage of the city's generosity suggests that some clients were seen as idlers and parasites who had no intention of working to support themselves. City Council's support of the Salvation Army's position indicates that both groups agreed the Rest was encouraging antisocial behaviour by catering to the needs of men unwilling to take responsibility for themselves.¹⁰³

Paradoxically, City Council was even more displeased when hostel clients found work. Alderman Crossland berated the Prayer League for trying to get "these [unemployed] men off their hands" by encouraging them to take "work...from local people."¹⁰⁴ In spite of his remonstrations, the Strangers' Rest continued to advertise "Skilled and unskilled labor available"¹⁰⁵ in the local newspaper. Absent from complaints about outsiders competing for local jobs was any discussion of the practice of undercutting wages. In some cities, the presence of a large number of unemployed workers who were willing to work for lower wages proved a boon to employers. Local residents resented them, because the transients were being supported by taxpayer-funded relief payments and/or local charity.¹⁰⁶ It is possible that employers who answered the Strangers' Rest's advertisements for unskilled workers paid them less than they would have paid long-time residents.

¹⁰³ The possibility that the Strangers' Rest might have been the site of political unrest was never publicly raised.

¹⁰⁴ *West Coast Advocate*, 28 January 1937.

¹⁰⁵ *West Coast Advocate*, 21 October 1937.

¹⁰⁶ Lawton, "Urban Relief in Saskatchewan," 133-34.

Whatever confusion surrounded the mission of the Rest, the city worried more about its role as a magnet for unemployed transients, and whether they continued to receive relief or got jobs at the expense of local residents, transients remained unpopular. After three years of declining relief figures, the peak number of local recipients had returned to winter 1935 levels. Given the recent instability of the local employment situation City Council's worries about outsiders getting local jobs while being supported by recently (or still) unemployed local taxpayers were to be expected. Protecting local men's employment was City Council's policy throughout the Depression. In the early 1930s, it actively promoted the hiring of local men at the mills.¹⁰⁷ It successfully lobbied APL to give preference to local men at the mill and associated logging camps. The Board of Trade also asked mill and camp operators to hire local men whenever possible.¹⁰⁸ The protectionist attitude of the city was confirmed by its much friendlier treatment of another group of outsiders.

Among the many unemployed transients who arrived in the Alberni Valley in 1937 was a group of a hundred men headed for a new provincial forestry camp several miles from town. The city initially balked at buying the land needed for a new road into Stamp Falls Park, but once it realized the resulting benefits of increased tourism it became enthusiastic about the project.¹⁰⁹ The city was delighted with the results of the men's efforts at clearing camp sites, building picnic tables, and establishing hiking trails. Residents considered that the camp workers had "turned it into [a] fairy spot."¹¹⁰ Over the years of the camp's operation, they treated the men as honoured guests. Local

¹⁰⁷ Port Alberni City Council Minutes, 11 October, 3 November 1932; 3 April 1933.

¹⁰⁸ *West Coast Advocate*, 23 March 1933.

¹⁰⁹ *West Coast Advocate*, 11 November, 18 November, 25 November 1937.

¹¹⁰ *West Coast Advocate*, 28 April 1938.

musicians "Heck Mearns and His Pals" played at a "very successful" dance at Beaver Creek School,¹¹¹ and Valley residents provided various entertainments to the camp workers as well as donating magazines and musical instruments to them.¹¹² The mayor went to the camp to show his "colored motion pictures of the May Queen celebrations...and other local events."¹¹³ The city found no reason to withdraw its support from the camp because the men lived in an isolated part of the Valley and did not compete with local men for work.¹¹⁴

City Council's worries that transients would benefit at the expense of the local unemployed were superimposed upon old fears, community traditions of self-preservation, and concern about Port Alberni's respectability. Respectability entailed industry, self-sufficiency, a stable family life, sobriety, honesty, and piety.¹¹⁵ In its role of protector of local unemployed, City Council may have been suspicious of transient jobseekers because they were competing for work, but it also held the attitude, common at the time, that idleness was immoral. That attitude was illustrated by its insistence on men working for their relief payments, its increasing distaste for the Strangers' Rest's clients, and its enforcement of vagrancy laws. The author of "Two Takers For Every Job Makes Port Alberni No Workers' Paradise" described the unemployed men driven to begging as

¹¹¹ *West Coast Advocate*, 20 July 1939.

¹¹² *West Coast Advocate*, 29 January 1939.

¹¹³ *West Coast Advocate*, 26 January 1939.

¹¹⁴ The tolerance of Port Alberni residents for the Stamp Falls camp residents is reminiscent of Vancouver's treatment of the striking relief camp workers when local residents "rallied to support the transients" because the strikers were not competing for jobs in the city. Lane, "Unemployment During the Depression: The Problem of the Single Unemployed Transient in British Columbia, 1930-1938."

¹¹⁵ Robert A.J. McDonald, *Making Vancouver: Class, Status and Social Boundaries, 1863-1913* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1996), 24.

"strong, earnest and single young men,"¹¹⁶ while City Council described the denizens of the Strangers' Rest as "undesirable characters."¹¹⁷ The first group was undesirable only because the town could not afford to help them, not because of any defect in their characters. Through no fault of their own, they had been deceived into coming to Port Alberni. The second group was undesirable because they caused "consequent trouble to the town,"¹¹⁸ although that trouble was never clearly defined. There was no suggestion by the City Council, the business community or the townspeople that situation of the latter group of men was not of their own making. The difference between these two groups of men probably resulted from their contrasting histories of unemployment. The "strong, earnest" men who had just arrived in Port Alberni, who had searched actively but unsuccessfully for jobs, and who had run out of money were slightly more respectable than the "undesirable characters" who had been in the city for a longer period of time, who appeared less eager to leave when they failed to find work, and who overstayed their welcome as charity cases.

Even more important to City Council than protection of local unemployed was protecting all local taxpayers from people unable or unwilling to support themselves. It was on their behalf that City Council was incensed by the presence of non-taxpayers such as the floathouse dwellers. Exempt from municipal taxes because they neither owned land nor paid rent to a landlord who did, "Toonerville" residents were eligible for relief and used other taxpayer-funded city services, including schools for their children. The belief that migrants came to British Columbia because of its "relatively generous" health and

¹¹⁶ *West Coast Advocate*, 3 January 1935.

¹¹⁷ *West Coast Advocate*, 28 January 1937.

¹¹⁸ *West Coast Advocate*, 28 January 1937.

welfare services proved to be justified.¹¹⁹ The role of the Strangers' Rest in "bring[ing] outsiders here on the strength of there being an institution where they would be kept, and later work found for them, was certainly discriminating against local labor" according to Port Alberni City Council.¹²⁰ The municipality's experience was complicated by new provincial regulations that meant it must "be responsible for all and sundry," and it feared "an inundation of relief seekers" from the mainland.¹²¹

Even a community accustomed to a mobile workforce valued stability more highly than transience. This common prejudice against mobile segments of the population had its roots in sedentarism. Sedentary societies look back to the shift from travelling to making permanent homes as a positive shift towards becoming civilised.¹²² Sedentary people confuse and conflate the categories of mobile people. They confuse nomads and vagrants, for example, with gypsies and migrant workers.¹²³ Canadians labelled the people who travelled during the Depression as gypsies, travellers, nomads, migrant workers, hobos, bums, floaters, vagrants, tramps, transients, and vagrants. In his report, "The Mobility of Labour in Relation to Unemployment," sociologist Leonard Marsh asserted that inexpensive transportation exacerbated the problem of excessive mobility of labour and created "the 'gasoline gypsy' who [was] the despair of constructive charitable

¹¹⁹ H.M. Cassidy, "Relief and Other Social Services For Transients," in *Canada's Unemployment Problem*, L. Richter (Toronto: MacMillan, 1939), 194.

¹²⁰ *West Coast Advocate*, 28 January 1937.

¹²¹ *West Coast Advocate*, 22 October 1936.

¹²² Robbie McVeigh, "Theorising sedentarism: the roots of anti-nomadism," in *Gypsy Politics and Traveller Identity*, ed. Thomas Acton (Hatsfield, Hertfordshire: University of Hertfordshire Press, 1997), 9.

¹²³ McVeigh, "Theorising Sedentarism," 16.

agencies."¹²⁴ This observation of the Canadian scene reflected the change in British attitudes towards migrant workers; formerly considered to be entirely "respectable," their travels to find work became unacceptable due to development of the government welfare system and the organization of labour because both institutions wanted to control workers.¹²⁵

Sedentarists do not readily differentiate between travellers who are similar to themselves in ethnicity, occupation, etc. and those who are very different. British anti-modernists of the nineteenth century might romanticise gypsies,¹²⁶ and Port Alberni moviegoers could enjoy watching a movie about a "Lovable [sic] Vagabond,"¹²⁷ because these travellers appeared to be exotic, free spirits, but neither gypsies nor vagabonds of any type were welcome to stay. Itinerant folk who resembled the majority of permanent residents were not welcome, either. English-speaking, ethnically mainstream "New Travellers" caused moral panic in 1990s Britain,¹²⁸ and underemployed seasonal workers in nineteenth-century Canadian Maritime cities disturbed residents who were frightened of poverty themselves.¹²⁹ North Americans trying to convince themselves that the

¹²⁴ Leonard Marsh, "The Mobility of Labour in Relation to Unemployment," *Papers and Proceedings of the Canadian Political Science Association* III (31 May 1931): 17.

¹²⁵ Colin Clarke, "'New Age' Travellers: identity, sedentarism and social security," in *Gypsy Politics and Traveller Identity*, 126; McGahan, *Killers, Thieves, Tramps and Sinners*, 136.

¹²⁶ McVeigh, "Theorising Sedentarism," 14.

¹²⁷ *West Coast Advocate*, 14 May 1936.

¹²⁸ Sinéat Shuinéar, "Why do Gaujos hate Gypsies so much, anyway? A case study," in *Gypsy Politics and Traveller Identity*, 28.

¹²⁹ Fingard, "The Relief of the Unemployed Poor in Saint John, Halifax and St. John's, 1815-1860," 33.

Depression was temporary found transients frightening *because* they were so similar.¹³⁰ Port Alberni had experienced unemployment and poverty themselves in the early 1930s. For them, the presence of destitute unemployed men was uncomfortably reminiscent of their own recent problems.

Because stability was a fundamental factor in respectability, the presence of transients was problematic for certain elements in Port Alberni. Some people would not even admit there were transients there. The *West Coast Advocate Progress Edition* claimed "this city, unlike many, ha[d] no very large floating population."¹³¹ The mayor was pleased to welcome former relief recipients from other parts of the country who had come to Port Alberni "in a desire to find work and thus rehabilitate themselves as good citizens," but he was talking about prospective homeowners¹³²-- presumably family men with plans to stay in the city permanently -- not about single, transient workers who lived in bunkhouses nor about single, transient men unable to get jobs or homes immediately upon their arrival.

Transients had been passing through Port Alberni since its inception as a supply depot for miners. During the 1930s, when it was a "rapidly growing city...in the awkward adolescent period," it was still described as having "a largely transient population."¹³³ Miners on their way to workings stopped in the city for supplies and recreation. Fishermen passed through, selling fish and repairing their boats. Hundreds of sailors on foreign ships came and went every few days. Loggers may have been less transient than other workers

¹³⁰ Crouse, *The Homeless Transient in the Great Depression*, 226-7.

¹³¹ *West Coast Advocate Progress Edition*, 25 November 1937.

¹³² *West Coast Advocate*, 9 December 1937.

¹³³ *West Coast Advocate*, 3 March 1938.

because they worked a stable circuit, but few were permanent residents of Port Alberni.¹³⁴ Many skilled sawmill workers became permanent city residents, but unskilled workers came and went. It was one of those millworkers who described Port Alberni as "a three-way town: those coming; those here; and those going; in other words a shanty town."¹³⁵

Even those residents who were willing to admit that Port Alberni had a large population of transients and thus could not be completely respectable were not pleased to have outsiders see the city as rough. The city's attempts to clean up the waterfront by evicting squatters, dismantling shacks and removing floathouses echoed the efforts of Vancouverites to do the same thing in the mid 1890s.¹³⁶ During Port Alberni's period of greatest growth, the mayor described Port Alberni as going through "a transitional period."¹³⁷ The newspaper, too, saw the city as "discarding [its] swaddling cloths" and having to pay a "penalty for progression."¹³⁸ The penalty mentioned was financial, but the city paid a social penalty, too, when it tried to eradicate its poorest neighbourhoods.

When transience was combined with inebriety, respectability was impossible. In resource industry communities such as Port Alberni and many other British Columbia cities, the status of transient loggers and miners hinged on their work history. A drunken logger could maintain at least a vestige of respectability, even though he lived as a single man, because he was acknowledged to be a hard worker.¹³⁹ Like the Vancouver

¹³⁴ Hak, "On the Fringes," 117-8.

¹³⁵ Hak, "On the Fringes," 123.

¹³⁶ McDonald, *Making Vancouver*, 236.

¹³⁷ *West Coast Advocate*, 9 December 1937.

¹³⁸ *West Coast Advocate*, 24 March 1938.

¹³⁹ McDonald, *Making Vancouver*, 24.

residents who supported recreational facilities for such transient workers, Port Alberni residents recognized that " 'people who had been out in the woods all the year did not want to go to the Free Library and church all the time' ".¹⁴⁰ An unemployed transient, however, could never drink and remain respectable in anyone's opinion. For one thing, he had not earned his beer money: it came from the pockets of local taxpayers and/or philanthropists. Neither had he earned the right to rest: he had not been working. He might even spend all his time drinking instead of looking for work. To townspeople accustomed to the habits of a mobile workforce, a well-earned Saturday night spree could remain within the bounds of respectability, but drunkenness among idlers could not.

Beer-drinking vagrants, however, not only proved *themselves* to be less than destitute, they made people think that *all* transients took money under false pretences. Studies have shown that members of the established group attribute to themselves the virtues of its most exemplary members, who are industrious, clean, thrifty, etc. and attribute to the outsiders the shortcomings of its worst members, who are lazy, dirty, extravagant, etc.¹⁴¹ The story of just one beggar who refuses to work for his food becomes proof that all beggars are lazy and undeserving.¹⁴² According to this concept, the established residents of Port Alberni would have thought of themselves, even the hard-drinking but hard-working loggers, as being virtuous and would have concluded that the outsiders were shirkers, drunkards, or criminals just because some of them remained unemployed, drank beer, or committed the crime of begging. The initial generosity of the city towards the users of the Strangers' Rest and the sympathy for the "earnest" jobseekers

¹⁴⁰ McDonald, *Making Vancouver*, 187.

¹⁴¹ Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson, *The Established and the Outsiders: A Sociological Enquiry into Community Problems*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage, 1994), xix.

¹⁴² McGahan, *Killers, Thieves, Tramps and Sinners*, 132.

expressed in the "Two Takers For Every Job" article show that not all transients were seen in a bad light, but this idea does help explain the city's inconsistent attitude.

Unemployed transients were also the indirect cause of at least one attack on Port Alberni's piety and thus on another facet of its respectability. Brigadier Dalziel told the nation-wide readership of the *War Cry* that Port Alberni made "no provision at all for the [lumbermen and sailors] to met [sic] in a helpful, Christian environment."¹⁴³ When he credited the Salvation Army with trying to provide such an environment, local residents decried the need for another denomination because there were already "several religious bodies" in town¹⁴⁴ including churches that "were the pioneers of the Christian faith."¹⁴⁵ Even after that controversy died down, Port Alberni remained sensitive about its reputation as less than respectably pious. When reports that a Presbyterian minister in Victoria had described Port Alberni as an ungodly place in desperate need of an evangelist, another series of letters to the editor defended the city's piety.¹⁴⁶ Unfortunately, Port Alberni had no answer for the Salvation Army's misappropriation of credit for establishing the hostel except to say it was done by a different missionary organization; none of Port Alberni's "historic churches" had taken the initiative to house transients.

Port Alberni's knowledge that "several religious bodies struggl[ed] to get along"¹⁴⁷ and that drunkards regularly spilled out of the beer parlours onto city streets on Saturday nights was likely responsible for the city's sensitivity about its reputation. Sociologist Jean-Pierre Liégeois has studied gypsies and other migrants in Europe. His

¹⁴³ *West Coast Advocate*, 28 November 1935.

¹⁴⁴ *West Coast Advocate*, 5 December 1935.

¹⁴⁵ *West Coast Advocate*, 16 January 1936.

¹⁴⁶ *West Coast Advocate*, 23 February 1939.

¹⁴⁷ *West Coast Advocate*, 5 December 1935.

explanation of hatred of those groups goes some way to explaining the antipathy towards the poorest and newest strangers to Port Alberni: the transient, unemployed men attracted by the city's industrial activity. "The image of the stranger and of the strange, updated every few years, exposes the fears and worries of those who create it, by giving shape to the group's idea of its 'opposite'; this idea is then -- like a film -- projected away from the group, so they can see it clearly and distance themselves from it...The worries projected onto this image are the worries on the mind of the group at any give time."¹⁴⁸

For a city that had some trouble keeping its churches full, the inference that it was not a Christian environment hurt. For a city that tolerated, even welcomed, the presence of drunken loggers and sailors, the exaggeration of its drinking establishments was embarrassing. And for a city that had struggled with unemployment so recently, the presence of so many destitute, unemployed strangers was a painful reminder of its own past.

¹⁴⁸ Shuinéar, "Why do Gaujos hate Gypsies so much anyway?" 27.

Chapter 5

"The City Daren't Stagnate"¹

Financial Drawbacks of Growth: 1934-1939

While Port Alberni's rapid growth and the expansion of employment opportunities in its industries and business benefited the residents who went back to work, as well as the owners of mills and businesses, not all its effects were positive. The city's infrastructure showed the effects of being ignored during the early 1930s, when there was too little money to maintain it properly. The growing population demanded more water lines, sidewalks, and properly drained streets, but the civic government continued to experience financial difficulties. Just when the city was facing exceptional demands from old and new residents, the provincial government's practice of reducing grants to municipalities while offloading the cost of new programmes onto them combined with inadequate taxation levels to undermine the city's financial viability. These problems resulted in tension among City Council members, inconsistent budget outcomes, and persistent animosity toward transients.

Port Alberni's income from its taxpayers had suffered because unemployment and lack of business resulted in arrears of taxes, water rates, and trade licences in the early 1930s. As early as 1931, City Council was complaining because the province reduced its portion of government revenue.² In 1933 municipalities also lost their share of pari-mutuel receipts,³ and the city's share of liquor profits, traditionally based on population as

¹ *West Coast Advocate*, 5 January 1939.

² *West Coast Advocate*, 26 March 1931.

³ *Port Alberni News* 23 March 1933.

evident in school attendance figures, dropped from more than \$4,000 in 1931 and 1932⁴ to \$1,200 in 1933.⁵ Then the provincial government ended the programme entirely.

The city's infrastructure failed to meet the demands placed on it by the population growth of the 1920s. During the hard times of the early 1930s, the Works Department budget included increased labour costs because the city required relief recipients to work for their relief. Although they worked diligently, their manual labour was less efficient than machinery would have been, and the city continued to spend as little as possible on materials. Proof of the resulting inadequacy of Port Alberni's services was evident during a discussion about repairs to the First Avenue water main when an alderman confessed that he "would not feel right if he walked toward the wharf and did not see a leaking main."⁶ The city was ill-prepared for another doubling of its population.

Even though Port Alberni was well established before the Depression, its increase in population in the 1920s and 1930s came close to that of a boomtown.⁷ Between 1921 and 1941, the population of Port Alberni increased by 334%.⁸ Its growth between 1931 and 1936 averaged 13% per year.⁹ This cumulative growth rate meant that Port Alberni experienced many of the same problems as boomtowns.

⁴ *West Coast Advocate*, 20 August 1931; *Port Alberni News* 5 May 1932.

⁵ *West Coast Advocate*, 20 April 1933.

⁶ *West Coast Advocate*, 16 November 1933.

⁷ A boomtown has more than 15% growth per year. Gary W. Malamud, *Boomtown Communities*, (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1984), 1.

⁸ Jean Barman, *The West beyond the West* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 375.

⁹ *West Coast Advocate*, 3 December 1936.

Port Alberni's unique situation of booming during the Depression meant it suffered from demands relevant to its growth. In *Boomtown Communities*, Gary Malamud discusses how a boom affects a town's City Council and its longtime residents. Initially, they are "enthusiastic" about any new project because local residents will get jobs. During the second phase, civic administrators begin to wonder what public services will be necessary to meet the demands of the expected growth. In the third phase, "near panic," they realize the expense of accommodating so many new residents, construction workers and jobseekers, and the probable difficulties in borrowing enough money to expand services. New industries do not start paying taxes until they are operational. The fourth phase involves asking the government or the industry for help to meet its special expenses.¹⁰

The first "enthusiastic" phase was evident in Port Alberni's reception of BSW's announcement in April, 1934 to build a large, new sawmill. The knowledge that BSW had the confidence to make a major investment in the city was especially gratifying because it came in the midst of the Vancouver Island loggers' strike.¹¹

The second phase of a boom involves acknowledgement that population growth and industrial expansion will necessitate action by the city. Although the *West Coast Advocate* urged the civic administration to make plans to ensure the city's expected population growth did not create an ugly sprawl,¹² City Council seemed surprised by the rapid population growth and the concomitant problems.

¹⁰ Malamud, *Boomtown Communities*, 4-5, 131. Not until 1956 did the province create the New Towns Act to help towns finance "sudden growth of demands on municipal services" by allowing them to borrow from the province to provide infrastructure.

¹¹ *West Coast Advocate*, 19 April 1934.

¹² *West Coast Advocate*, 31 May 1934.

Boomtowns inevitably experience housing shortages. Local residents often take advantage of the situation by renting out buildings not intended for human habitation and by increasing rents dramatically, while newcomers throw together jerry-built structures.¹³ Those manifestations of boomtown life were evident in Port Alberni. If newcomers had neither friends with whom they could stay nor funds to pay for shelter, they made do with crowded and/or unconventional quarters. A group of 19 lived together in a "small shack" in Port Alberni,¹⁴ and several young men lived in the old Alberni jail.¹⁵ When the Chalifour family came in 1935, housing was so scarce they moved into the old ice-plant office on the waterfront and combed the beach for driftwood to use for heat. When the feedstore beside them became available, they moved in and immediately took in eight lodgers.¹⁶ Squatters moved into empty buildings, built shelters on empty lots or in parks, and made their homes in old boats.¹⁷ A contractor who hired a couple of male newcomers in late October let them camp in his yard. When he left town, he traded his one-room house for their car and tent. The tiny house was too small for the family of ten, so the men dug out a basement and partitioned the main floor into three rooms.¹⁸ City Council was pleased with the employment created by the surge in residential construction, but it took no responsibility for the situation and made no provision for a building

¹³ Malamud, *Boomtown Communities*, 3.

¹⁴ Port Alberni City Council Minutes, 6 September 1935.

¹⁵ *West Coast Advocate*, 25 October 1934.

¹⁶ Comité du 50e, *The French-Canadians of Port Alberni Celebrated 50 Years 1935-1985* (Port Alberni, BC: Centre Francophone d'Alberni, 1991, 3, 86, 87.

¹⁷ Port Alberni City Council Minutes, 11 May 1936; *West Coast Advocate*, 7 January, 25 November 1937.

¹⁸ Comité du 50e, *The French-Canadians of Port Alberni*, xviii.

inspector until 1937.¹⁹ In the meantime, the newspaper noted that "many more [homes would] be needed to meet the demand" and berated Port Alberni landlords for being greedy.²⁰

Another boomtown problem shared by Port Alberni was aesthetic. Boomtowns generally look "uncared for." Their streets are dirty, there are broken sidewalks, and garbage lies in the streets and empty lots. The increased population puts a strain on infrastructure, and water supply, electricity, sewage removal, etc. become "inadequate."²¹ A jungle habitué called City Council's priorities into question when it announced its plans to remove the hobo jungle beside the railway tracks. His letter detailed many examples of dirt and neglect in the downtown core, including garbage on empty lots and the smell of "cesspool[s]" that pervaded several blocks of businesses and residences. He said he would rather live on the waterfront, where the tide kept the beach clean.²² City Council received several other complaints about malodorous open ditches, which were deemed to be dangerous to public health, and about the "dust menace" of the unpaved streets.²³ The city continued to postpone proper maintenance and desperately needed improvements to the city's infrastructure because they were too expensive.

Infrastructure was traditionally City Council's first priority, but social costs in the form of education, hospital grants, relief, and other welfare programmes consumed an increasing portion of its budget. Grants for education fell from 45% of total teachers'

¹⁹ *West Coast Advocate*, 28 January 1937.

²⁰ *West Coast Advocate*, 21 February and 4 April 1935.

²¹ Malamud, *Boomtown Communities*, 3.

²² *West Coast Advocate*, 14 February 1935.

²³ *West Coast Advocate*, 25 July 1935; 5 March and 30 April 1936; 24 August 1939.

salaries in 1931 to 37% in 1932.²⁴ A couple of years later, overcrowding in local schools was the first indication of the population increase,²⁵ and by September 1935, fully 25% of the new elementary level students in Port Alberni were new to the city.²⁶ The capacity of the Alberni Valley's only high school was 160 students, but the enrolment increased to the point that the school board worried about where they could put the 235 to 250 students they expected in the fall of 1938.²⁷

There were too few teachers and classrooms to accommodate the influx of students, so new schools were built and the city came close to panicking over increased education costs. The ethnicity of many of the new students caused problems for the children and the civic administration. While some French-Canadian men believed they were hired at APL *because* of their ethnicity, their children complained that teachers treated them unfairly by singling them out for punishment and giving them poor marks, and other children instigated fights with them.²⁸ The presence of so many children who were not fluent in English caused the mayor to describe Port Alberni's school funding problems as "peculiar" to the city.²⁹

In 1933 the province reduced its hospital grant to municipalities from 70 to 45 cents per day per patient.³⁰ Over the next few years, the hospital needed more money to

²⁴ *West Coast Advocate*, 28 January 1932.

²⁵ *West Coast Advocate*, 2 July 1936, 8 September 1938.

²⁶ *West Coast Advocate*, 5 September 1935.

²⁷ *West Coast Advocate*, 21 July 1938.

²⁸ Comité du 50e, *The French-Canadians of Port Alberni*, 7, 8, 89.

²⁹ *West Coast Advocate*, 5 January 1939.

³⁰ *Port Alberni News*, 23 March 1933.

pay for equipment and an increasing level of unpaid service for a growing population, especially since many patients were single men who had no families to care for them at home.³¹

Even healthy newcomers often required help. The Alberni Valley offered hope to large numbers of jobseekers, but the vagaries of the forest industry (intermittent embargoes, cyclical shut-downs because of weather, and other factors) meant that employment opportunities were inconsistent. In spite of the large number of jobs that were created in the long term, many unemployed transients failed to find work immediately, and permanent residents also experienced periods of unemployment.

Malamud notes that in many boomtowns, companies built mills or other operations outside city limits to avoid municipal taxes, but the town had to accommodate the influx of workers.³² The workers at the rural mills did not necessarily strain Port Alberni's infrastructure, but the unemployed transients who stayed in the Valley did. They could not stay in company-owned housing at the rural mill sites, so they returned to Port Alberni and applied for relief.

Even though exports from Port Alberni were setting records, the cost of relief caused City Council to exclaim it had paid "almost a dollar for every man, woman and child in town!"³³ The presence of transients from elsewhere further complicated the practice of caring for the poor. British Columbia's Residence and Responsibility Act defined a resident as one who had dwelt in the area one year; he remained a resident until he lived elsewhere for the same period.³⁴ The province directed municipalities to offer

³¹ *West Coast Advocate*, 2 March 1939.

³² Malamud, *Boomtown Communities*, 4.

³³ *West Coast Advocate*, 03 January 1935.

³⁴ *Revised Statutes of British Columbia, 1936* (Victoria, BC: Province of British Columbia, 1936), 3575.

transients the same level of relief as local residents but let them bill the municipality of the recipient's last permanent residence for the amount of relief plus the cost of transporting him home.³⁵ However, as the Depression lingered, men who left their homes moved too often to establish residency anywhere.

British Columbia's position as the favoured destination of the unemployed from other parts of Canada was a major factor in the municipal-provincial-federal dispute over accountability for relief, and shifting government policies made the cost of the "provincial single" or non-resident category vary widely. Early in the 1930s, the provincial and federal governments funded single transients, while the city was responsible for transients with dependants.³⁶ However, in April 1933, the city was forced to begin paying a third of the cost for single transients. Unfortunately for the cities, because the province was waiting for the federal government to take over that responsibility entirely, it did not send any money to the cities for its share.³⁷ In May, the federal government did take responsibility for single transient men but married ones remained the city's responsibility.³⁸ After another period of 100% provincial funding, cities again found themselves paying a third of the costs for single transients in January 1935. Relief costs increased as a result of "drastic pruning" of the relief list by provincial agents and the transfer of transients to municipal responsibility. When the federal government closed the relief camps indefinitely in 1936, the province refused retroactively to pay for any transient cases which had not been validated by the government agent. A number of men in Port Alberni were initially

³⁵ *Revised Statutes of British Columbia, 1936*, 3576-77.

³⁶ *Port Alberni News*, 24 November 1932.

³⁷ *West Coast Advocate*, 6 April 1933, 3 January 1935.

³⁸ *West Coast Advocate*, 11 May 1933.

classified properly according to government regulations, but the province retroactively disqualified them for provincial relief with the result that the number of "provincial single" men on the relief rolls rose from eight in August to twenty-five in September,³⁹ the largest single increase that year for that category.⁴⁰ When the provincial government reneged on its \$300 portion of Port Alberni's September accounts, the city considered it had again been "soaked" by the province's refusal to live up to its responsibilities.⁴¹ However, it was helpless in the face of the government's "adamant...determination to compel the transients to return to their home province."⁴²

City Council was furious at being made responsible for non-municipal residents and claimed that the frequent and rapid changes in government policy were characterised by "such startling eccentricity that it would take a Solomon to understand the various contradictory *ukases* issued from Victoria." It was especially worried because they expected an "inundation" of unemployed.⁴³ When the province disallowed any new names on the relief lists in March 1937, the category of "single provincial" men remained stable in Port Alberni.⁴⁴ The *West Coast Advocate* attributed the dramatic drop in that category from twenty-five cases in September 1936 to two in September 1937 to "more restrictive provincial policies."⁴⁵

³⁹ *West Coast Advocate*, 10 September 1936.

⁴⁰ *West Coast Advocate*, 8 October 1936.

⁴¹ *West Coast Advocate*, 22 October 1936.

⁴² *West Coast Advocate*, 12 November 1936.

⁴³ *West Coast Advocate*, 22 October 1936.

⁴⁴ *West Coast Advocate*, 1 April 1937.

⁴⁵ *West Coast Advocate*, 2 September 1937.

The province criticised the federal government for forcing the province to support nonresidents. The Hon. George S. Pearson, Minister of Mines and Labour and Commissioner of Fisheries, who was also Port Alberni's MLA, urged the dominion government to institute an unemployment insurance scheme as the only possible cure for the "destitute, poor and sick fund" that relief had become as a result of the province being forced to support men from other parts of Canada.⁴⁶ In a diatribe against the dominion government, he quoted statistics to show that British Columbia could have employed all its own residents in 1937; he insisted that transients created the unemployment problem.⁴⁷ This complaint was identical to the one made by Port Alberni.

Government policy changes and subsequent adjustments to the relief rolls created difficulties for Port Alberni's Works Department. After budgeting for a specific number of men, paying for materials, and scheduling workers, the loss of men suddenly made ineligible for municipal relief work disrupted planned programmes. When provincial authorities cut off 17 married men out of a total of 45 relief workers, the City Council remembered how a "former attempt to dispense with the services of [some] relief workers had proved disastrous."⁴⁸ It was most likely the prospect of unfinished public works being harmed by oncoming winter weather that made City Council desperate enough to suggest employing some of the men on current projects, even though it would have to pay the entire cost of labour itself. The changes in policy and funding formulas seriously affected the city's financial status. In January 1935, the province's decision to force the city to pay

⁴⁶ *West Coast Advocate*, 21 January 1937.

⁴⁷ *West Coast Advocate*, 30 June 1938.

⁴⁸ *West Coast Advocate*, 8 July 1937; 10 August, 24 August 1939.

a third of the cost for transients meant that it did not have enough money to pay the next month's relief costs.⁴⁹

Port Alberni City Council's sympathy for the unemployed was tempered by its conviction that protection of the taxpayers was its first priority and the knowledge that many of those taxpayers were experiencing periods of unemployment. Therefore, its allowances for relief remained minimal. One taxpayer described the 1936 allowances of \$12.60 for a single man and \$18.75 for a married man as a "miserable pittance."⁵⁰

An entirely new responsibility for municipalities involved Mothers' Pensions. In 1920, the province instituted allowances designed to give temporary financial help to mothers whose husbands had died, deserted them, been imprisoned, or who were physically or mentally disabled.⁵¹ In 1932, the province compelled cities to pay 50% of those costs.⁵²

The rapid population growth and the prosperity of its workers may have made Port Alberni unique among Canadian cities during the 1930s, but its struggle to balance its yearly budgets was an experience common to most municipalities. The two factors that caused the most obvious strains on Port Alberni's budgets -- rapid growth and the Depression -- masked another cause of its civic financial woes: taxes that were inadequate for its new responsibilities.

During the 1930s, many Canadian cities found themselves desperately short of money because they were already "in a fiscal squeeze."⁵³ The exigencies of the

⁴⁹ *West Coast Advocate*, 3 January 1935.

⁵⁰ *West Coast Advocate*, 4 June 1936.

⁵¹ Alison Prentice et al, *Canadian Women: A History*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Harcourt Brace, 1996) 236, 295.

⁵² *Port Alberni News*, 14 April 1932.

⁵³ John H. Taylor, "Sources of Political Conflict in the Thirties: Welfare Policy and the

Depression were not the sole cause of their distress. Rather, the economic slump exacerbated longstanding financial problems caused by the reluctance of municipal governments to increase taxes and the eagerness of senior governments to offload costs onto them. From the turn of the century to the First World War, cities grew exponentially. Property values soared and income from taxes increased substantially. This bonanza of newfound money from a larger tax base was politically dangerous because cities could finance local improvements without raising the mill rate. Then, when property values fell and then stabilised, cities found themselves increasingly pressed by the debts they incurred for infrastructure necessitated by their growth. By the time of the Depression, they were already struggling.

The assessor hired by the City Council in 1939 understood this concept. He noted that Port Alberni's municipal tax levy had grown from \$28,000 in 1928 to \$62,000 in 1938 and its school tax levy from \$20,000 in 1928 to \$44,000 in 1938. During that time period, its expenses for social services (hospital costs, unemployment relief, and other welfare schemes) had increased from \$870 to \$24,500 in 1938. He told the Board of Trade that the population increase had helped to "offset" the new expenses because the city's income had increased, too, but it was insufficient.⁵⁴ Port Alberni had many other sizeable expenses related to its growth: construction of new water lines, sewers, and sidewalks in residential and commercial districts.

Municipalities across Canada experienced different levels of difficulty meeting their relief expenses. The larger cities housed about 30% of the country's population but were

Geography of Need," in *The "Benevolent" State: The Growth of Welfare in Canada*, Allan Moscovitch and Jim Albert (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1987), 147. Most of this discussion pertains to large cities, but the theory is relevant to Port Alberni.

⁵⁴ *West Coast Advocate*, 20 April 1939. The assessor's assertion that Port Alberni's population growth had mitigated its financial problems somewhat undermined his attempt to explain the problem to the Board of Trade.

home to about 50% of the unemployed. They paid about 70% of the total cost of relief.⁵⁵ Of the smaller communities in British Columbia, the hardest hit paid out the most relief. For example, Glenmore paid 27 cents per capita in public welfare costs in 1937 or 0.14% of its budget, while Fernie paid \$10.42 per capita or 20.22% of its budget.⁵⁶ Donald Smiley pointed out in his 1963 introduction to the Rowell-Sirois Report that even before trying to pay relief, municipalities were experiencing "distressing deficits." To pay the total relief costs, Canadian municipalities as a whole needed 50% more tax revenue.⁵⁷

Some Port Alberni politicians recognized that not all the city's financial problems were new. During the debate about imposing an improvement tax, the chairman of the Finance Committee declared that "the city had never lived within its income."⁵⁸ The mayor noted in 1936 that, while it seemed like the extra revenue from the sale and subsequent taxation of city lots should help cover expenses, that revenue was "by no means equal" to paying for the "extra service and public works...which are necessary" for the city.⁵⁹ The *West Coast Advocate*, too, wondered how services could expand for a growing town without tax increases.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ John Taylor, "Relief from Relief: The Cities' Answer to Depression Dependency," *Journal of Canadian Studies* Vol. 14, No. 1 (Spring 1979): 18.

⁵⁶ Harry M. Cassidy, *Social Security and Reconstruction in Canada* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1943), 81.

⁵⁷ Donald Smiley, ed. *Royal Commission on Dominion Provincial Relations: The Rowell-Sirois Report*, Donald Smiley (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1966), 175, 176.

⁵⁸ *West Coast Advocate*, 12 January 1933.

⁵⁹ Port Alberni City Council Minutes, 24 January 1936.

⁶⁰ *West Coast Advocate*, 5 January 1939.

During the good times of 1928, the *Advocate* noted that the city's high mill rate discouraged new investors who were unaware of the low assessment values.⁶¹ It was hardly surprising that City Council was reluctant to increase the mill rate in the early 1930s, when so many residents were unemployed or underemployed and struggling to pay their taxes. City Council was prepared to go to great lengths to maintain the mill rate⁶² and avoid an improvement tax, although at least one alderman thought taxpayers would realize the city's trouble only when their taxes doubled with an improvement tax.⁶³ It took at least two years, a new mayor, and pressure from the Inspector of Municipalities to get the tax passed.⁶⁴ Vancouver, Victoria and several other cities taxed the full 50% of improvements that was allowed. Other municipalities taxed smaller portions of improvements and 8 municipalities had no improvement tax at all.⁶⁵ Port Alberni taxed only 20% of improvements at a rate of 35 mills and land at 55 mills and maintained those rates for the remainder of the 1930s.⁶⁶

During those years, the commercial district expanded by several blocks, and many businesses had moved up the hill to Third Avenue. Property was assessed in 1930, but although the price of commercial lots rose substantially because of the increased demand, another assessment was not scheduled until 1939.⁶⁷ There was so much opposition to it

⁶¹ *West Coast Advocate*, 22 November 1928.

⁶² *West Coast Advocate*, 26 March 1931.

⁶³ *Port Alberni News*, 14 April 1932.

⁶⁴ *West Coast Advocate*, 30 April 1931, 7 May 1931.

⁶⁵ *Manual of Provincial Information: Province of British Columbia, 1930*. Victoria: Provincial Bureau of Information, 1930.

⁶⁶ *West Coast Advocate*, 16 April 1931, 11 May 1933, 11 April 1935, 27 April 1939. The mill rate for 1931 was debatable and figures for 1937 are unavailable.

⁶⁷ *Port Alberni News*, 1 May 1930.

that the *West Coast Advocate* felt the need to calm taxpayers by telling them re-assessment was not "a smart ruse to extort more money from [them]." ⁶⁸ Unlike some boom towns where the major industry was outside the city limits, two of the Alberni Valley's larger mills were within the city limits. Despite some concessions given to attract them to the city and to maintain operations, they did pay taxes. The mills outside the city, of course, did not pay taxes to Port Alberni, but most of their residents lived at mill sites, which included schools, and so did not receive any services from the city.

Each successive City Council took its fiscal responsibilities seriously. Protection of the taxpayers was its first priority, but in the early 1930s that level of protection benefited landholders and speculators far more than homeowners. Then, during the mid and late 1930s, protection of the taxpayers proved detrimental to the operation of the city. There was no getting away from the fact that the city needed more money to maintain the infrastructure at a level that protected its citizens' health and safety as well as the interests of its business owners. The inconsistent rates of tax arrears, however, showed that Port Alberni enjoyed only a short-lived opportunity to collect more tax revenue. Whether taxpayers were unable to pay their taxes or unwilling to pay more, City Council's efforts to balance the budgets focused more on cutting expenses than raising revenues.

One result of that strategy was political survival. Most of the city's aldermen and mayors were businessmen who sympathized with commercial taxpayers. In 1934, the year of the greatest growth, the mayor and three of the six aldermen were involved in the building trade. ⁶⁹ Superficial analysis of 1930s municipal elections shows that, except for

⁶⁸ *West Coast Advocate*, 10 August 1939.

⁶⁹ The information on council members' occupations comes from Port Alberni City Council Minutes 13 August 1934; *West Coast Advocate Progress Edition* 1937, 24 February 1938, 17 August 1939; *Greater Vancouver Island Telephone Directory* 1938; *Place Names of the Alberni Valley* (Port Alberni, BC: Alberni District Historical Society, 1988) 81; Jan Peterson, *Historic Walking Tour: Southport Area* (Port Alberni, BC:

Mayor John Kendall's failure to win re-election in 1932, when he received only 52 votes after a stormy year in office,⁷⁰ Port Alberni had confidence in its mayors. First-time candidate David Warnock won the mayor's chair in 1932 in a race against three former aldermen and kept it, by acclamation, until 1935, when illness forced him to retire from civic politics. W.C. (Mike) Hamilton, who had served as alderman at intervals since 1929, was elected mayor in 1936. He kept that position until December 1947 and served eight more years as alderman in the 1950s.⁷¹ Although the election of five new aldermen in 1934 looked like an upset, the voter turnout was so low (37%) that its meaning was unclear.⁷² In spite of the greater turnover of aldermen, several of whom moved away, fourteen of the twenty-one members of City Council during the 1930s served three or more uninterrupted years.

New and returning civic politicians resented the city's increased obligations and complained of its poverty. On occasion the *West Coast Advocate* mocked City Council for its rationalisations. When a relief worker approached City Council for an increase in relief allowance, the editorial paraphrased the event in Biblical terms: "The matter is too weighty for us. We can do nothing of ourselves. Have we not to further recompense the teachers in the temple and the lawgiver, besides making due provision for necessary public

Alberni District Historical Society, n.d.); Jan Peterson, *Twin Cities: Alberni-Port Alberni*, (Lantzville, BC: Oolichan Books, 1994) 147; Jan Peterson, *Journeys: Down the Alberni Canal to Barkley Sound* (Lantzville, BC: Oolichan Books, 1999), 218. Two aldermen were former foremen of the city's Works Department. In 1928, Mayor John Kendall fired Joseph Humphries, Sr. and replaced him with Walter Harris. Harris served as alderman in 1932 and 1933, Humphries in 1939. Peterson, *Twin Cities*, 68.

⁷⁰ *West Coast Advocate*, 21 January 1932.

⁷¹ Peterson, *Twin Cities*, 367-369.

⁷² *West Coast Advocate*, 13 December 1934.

works?"⁷³ The *West Coast Advocate* also published letters supporting the view that City Council was exploiting relief workers. One pointed out that Port Alberni paid only \$200 of the last \$1,295.55 relief bill and that the Works Department paid relief workers only \$3.20 per day. "Oliver Twist" argued that City Council should increase the relief rates, not only because there were fewer recipients, but because the Works Department was short of labour.⁷⁴

The line dividing City Council's civic duty to get the most value from money spent on relief and exploitation may have been a thin one. When City Council discontinued a subsidy to a private night patrol business taken over by a non-resident, it was expected he would return to relief. The *West Coast Advocate* reminded readers that under current funding formulas the provincial government paid 100% of non-residents' relief and pointed out that the practice of making non-residents work for their relief meant that the city benefited from their work without having to pay them.⁷⁵

The city's quasi-boomtown status also spurred requests for financial help. Throughout the decade, City Council complained to the provincial government about its difficulties in funding schools, but the province refused any special help necessitated by "extraordinary school expenses" resulting from rapid growth of enrollment and the large number of students whose first language was not English. Although Port Alberni's school tax levy was the highest in British Columbia at the time,⁷⁶ having risen from \$20,000 in 1928 to \$44,000 in 1938,⁷⁷ the Minister of Municipal Affairs told City Council to raise an

⁷³ *West Coast Advocate*, 4 June 1936.

⁷⁴ *West Coast Advocate*, 4 June 1936.

⁷⁵ *West Coast Advocate*, 20 June 1935.

⁷⁶ *West Coast Advocate*, 10 December 1936.

⁷⁷ *West Coast Advocate*, 20 April 1939.

improvement tax if it needed more money.⁷⁸ The mayor complained that the city was "saddled with...a high powered modern mode of education with only a horse and buggy revenue to provide for it."⁷⁹

As the Depression decade ended, the mayor continued to complain about dramatically increased hospital and school costs that the city could not refuse to pay. The fire department had been "sadly neglected," there were too few hydrants, and the city needed a new reservoir. Mayor Hamilton reminded voters of City Council's "almost...daily dread of the main wood [water] pipe collapsing altogether, thus paralyzing the city." His primary concern was to provide "material services and at the same time cope with the ever-increasing costs of education and social services" in addition to satisfying the requirements of the Sinking Fund.⁸⁰ Like other municipalities at the time, Port Alberni felt it had no choice but to seek help from the provincial and federal governments. Its need to pay unprecedented amounts of relief and its conviction that the senior governments should bear those costs encouraged the city to seek their assistance. City Council urged the provincial government to assume responsibility for education,⁸¹ forwarded requests for more money from the Alberni District Protection Association that lobbied on behalf of the unemployed,⁸² and requested a \$66,000 federal loan for a major waterworks project, even though such a vital project had to be given a lower priority than social services, including relief.⁸³

⁷⁸ *West Coast Advocate*, 30 April 1936.

⁷⁹ *West Coast Advocate*, 5 January 1939.

⁸⁰ *West Coast Advocate*, 30 June 1938, 7 December 1938.

⁸¹ *West Coast Advocate*, 10 August 1939.

⁸² *West Coast Advocate*, 20 October 1933, 21 November 1935.

⁸³ *West Coast Advocate*, 5 January 1939.

Worries about civic finances led to more than complaints to senior governments and its own taxpayers, it created tension and infighting on City Council. Members of the Finance and Works Committees got into a "verbal tiff," in which Alderman A. Kneen accused the Works Department of caring for nothing but repairs to Argyle Street, its main street, while other aldermen countered that "if the finance committee would loosen up a little with more money the hands of this committee would not be so securely bound."⁸⁴ When Port Alberni received a government grant designated for parks, the new committee chairman, Alderman J.M. Crossland, had to assure his fellow aldermen that the money would not be used for anything else. Apparently there was "an erroneous impression that the Works Committee...had been making raids on these funds."⁸⁵ Some aldermen remained unconvinced. Two months later Alderman C.F. Cook suggested putting the parks grant aside, "smilingly intimating that he didn't want Alderman J. Woodford and his works committee to get their hands on it, " but the city clerk assured him the money was "safe."⁸⁶ By that time, the mayor had placed Alderman Woodford on the Finance Committee in the hope of stopping his "persistent pestering" for more money for his "beloved Works Department."⁸⁷ Frustration caused Alderman Watson to snap at Alderman F.H. Steede's request for money for water main repairs, "For the love of heaven...carry on somehow until the end of the year." He hoped that the next year's council would be able to find the money. The lack of funds increased the burdens of civic administration. When Alderman Crossland summarised his 1939 activities on City

⁸⁴ *West Coast Advocate*, 15 November 1934.

⁸⁵ *West Coast Advocate*, 20 July 1939.

⁸⁶ *West Coast Advocate*, 14 September 1939.

⁸⁷ *West Coast Advocate*, 5 January 1939.

Council, he noted he had attended fifty-one routine Finance Committee meetings, four full committee meetings, and six other meetings, as well as regular City Council meetings.⁸⁸ The attitude of aldermen had changed little since the hard times of the early 1930s.

Besides arguing among themselves, City Council campaigned vigorously against the local Hospital Board. The Hospital Act linked government funding to treatment of indigent patients. Until 1932, Port Alberni paid a fixed annual sum to the hospital, a method of payment allowable under the Hospital Act by mutual consent of the hospital board and the City Council. The Hospital Board, an institution independent of the city's administration, declined to continue the arrangement because the yearly grant was too small. Because the municipalities were responsible for hospital costs for destitute residents and because those costs amounted to a consistent percentage of the hospital's budget, the province decreed the city should pay 70 cents per patient per day to pay the total annual bill for indigent patients. Although the agreement was made between the Hospital Board and the provincial government, City Council limited its lobbying to the Hospital Board, presumably because that was the institution that billed the city. This method of calculating the city's financial obligations created confusion and consternation in Port Alberni City Council.

Some aldermen apparently did not understand the rationale behind this method of collecting funds to subsidise indigent patients, so they disputed the amounts owing. They believed that the 70 cents applied to individual, indigent patients only, so objected to paying that sum on behalf of insured or self-paying patients.⁸⁹ Alderman E.A.D. Jones, the City Council's representative on the Hospital Board, claimed the hospital was letting insured members of hospitalisation schemes take advantage of "free" treatment. He also

⁸⁸ *West Coast Advocate*, 14 December 1939.

⁸⁹ *West Coast Advocate*, 23 June 1938.

charged the hospital with inefficiency, arguing it was unfair that the city was being billed, while other debtors were not.⁹⁰ It was pointed out to him that there was little use in the hospital sending monthly bills to people who had no means of paying and that a hospital's purpose differentiated it from regular businesses.⁹¹ However, Alderman Jones continued to complain about the hospital's "very feeble attitude" about collecting debts and accused it of using government regulations to "take advantage of the law."⁹² The city claimed it did not have the money to pay its bill,⁹³ so offered to reduce water rates if the hospital reduced its bill to the city. When told the city should "accept its responsibility,"⁹⁴ Alderman Jones offer his resignation in the belief it was "futile" for the city to have a representative when the Hospital Board Chairman had such "autocratic powers."⁹⁵ City Council then suggested to the hospital that Port Alberni should get special consideration because it served the West Coast.⁹⁶ Alderman Jones finally advised the mayor to appeal to the province to force the hospital to correct its unsatisfactory administrative methods.⁹⁷ Alderman Jones' persistent efforts to evade government restraints were admired by his colleagues, and the mayor refused to accept his resignation. The city's auditor explained

⁹⁰ *West Coast Advocate*, 23 June 1938.

⁹¹ *West Coast Advocate*, 30 June 1938.

⁹² *West Coast Advocate*, 21 July 1938.

⁹³ *West Coast Advocate*, 21 July 1938; 31 August, 23 November 1939.

⁹⁴ *West Coast Advocate*, 2 March 1939.

⁹⁵ *West Coast Advocate*, 9 March 1939.

⁹⁶ *West Coast Advocate*, 23 March 1939. The hospital already received federal funds to pay for treatment of aboriginal patients, many of whom lived on the west coast.

⁹⁷ *West Coast Advocate*, 30 March 1939.

that government regulations made the hospital powerless to change the 70 cent charge, and he reminded Council that a hospital that "refuse[d] to admit any patient on account of his indigent circumstances" would receive no government aid.⁹⁸ The city had no choice but to pay an annual bill that had grown from \$600 in 1930 to almost \$7,000 in 1939.⁹⁹

Fewer and smaller government grants, when combined with increased costs of funding the city's schools and hospital, the need to expand its infrastructure to accommodate new residents and industry, and its obligation to support unemployed workers led to incongruent financial results. In view of the prosperity of the forest industry in 1934, it was not surprising Port Alberni managed to make up the deficit left from 1933 and end the year with surplus.¹⁰⁰ However, in 1936, City Council worried that "the whole relief situation [was] very unsettled,"¹⁰¹ and its net relief expense of \$7,000 helped it accrue a \$9,000 deficit.¹⁰² The 1937 deficit was even larger.¹⁰³ City Council foresaw a "gloomy picture" for 1938,¹⁰⁴ but in spite of a lack of accountability and organisation that allowed the Works Committee to spend its entire budget by September, it ended the year with a "small surplus."¹⁰⁵ The increased income enjoyed by the city and its individual residents did not translate into civic financial security.

⁹⁸ *Revised Statutes of British Columbia*, 1605.

⁹⁹ *Port Alberni News* 25 January 1930; *Corporation of the City of Port Alberni, B.C. Report and Accounts 1939*.

¹⁰⁰ *West Coast Advocate*, 17 January 1935.

¹⁰¹ *West Coast Advocate*, 30 April 1936.

¹⁰² *West Coast Advocate*, 13 January 1938, 12 December 1935.

¹⁰³ *West Coast Advocate*, 6 January, 13 January 1938.

¹⁰⁴ *West Coast Advocate*, 24 March 1938.

¹⁰⁵ *West Coast Advocate*, 12 January 1939.

Port Alberni's initial enthusiasm for industrial expansion was short-lived. Its hopes for full employment of its residents were undermined by an influx of newcomers competing for jobs. After years of financial shortfalls that were caused partially by the provincial government's reduction of municipal grants made them postpone infrastructure maintenance and improvements, Port Alberni faced increased demands for the traditional civic services and new and expanded social programs. When it realized the costs of providing services for its new population, City Council cried poverty for the rest of the 1930s. Although it complained about the inequities of senior governments' practices, it singled out transients as the primary source of its financial difficulties rather than acknowledging its tax rates were inadequate. The ability of the city's residents to pay more taxes was no doubt problematic, but a better grasp of the deficiencies of common municipal taxation practices might have made City Council less antagonistic toward the newcomers that fuelled its economy and the "disappointed transients"¹⁰⁶ who were unable to capitalise on the city's prosperity.

The boom and bust cycles that made Port Alberni's financial situation so unpredictable were exaggerated by the decade-long impact of the international Depression and the local growth concentrated in the mid 1930s. Even to a city accustomed to dealing with the cyclical changes of its major resource industries, the collapse of the forest industry was so threatening that the civic administration remained anxious even in more prosperous times.

The vital importance of international markets was proven by the abrupt shift between 1933 and 1934 from widespread unemployment to the creation of new jobs. Port

¹⁰⁶ *West Coast Advocate*, 7 February 1935.

Alberni was fortunate that the large, well-capitalised, and efficient companies that operated locally were in a position to take advantage of new opportunities that developed because of the trade agreement between Canada and Britain. The city found itself an anomaly among Canadian cities, and whether or not it was a "workers' paradise," the withdrawal of its support from the Strangers' Rest hostel for unemployed transients reveals how uncomfortable Port Alberni felt about its role as a magnet for unemployed workers from across the country. The poverty it had experienced, however briefly, and persistent self-interest shaped the attitude of the city's leadership toward the economic migrants. Even those newcomers who supported themselves had a negative impact on the city's finances because of their need for city services, and City Council found itself trying to protect the interests of more taxpayers than ever. Its efforts to maintain financial stability continued to be stymied by an inequitable system of taxation. Municipalities suffered disproportionately because senior governments refused to use their broad powers of taxation to ease the burden of those with the fewest sources of revenue, and cities had misunderstood the relationship between taxation and growth.

Using the 1930s as a time frame for a study of this particular municipality contributes to an understanding of the effects of growth and prosperity, as well as the effects of poverty, on a city. Examining a community where experiences differed so markedly from those of many other small cities shows how inconsistent were the effects of the Great Depression and validates the notion that it was more fragmented, more time- and place-specific than has been described. The interplay between international, national, and municipal issues is shown here to be critical to the experiences of Canadian communities. Studies of more communities during this time period might reveal that Port Alberni was not as unique as it believed itself to be. Those studies would also show how other places managed their finances during periods of growth. For Port Alberni itself, more detailed financial analysis and attention to the experiences of individuals would help

the city understand the strengths and weaknesses of its strategies for dealing with a boom and bust economy.

Port Alberni experienced the same problems as many other Canadian cities during the Great Depression: unemployment and deficits due to increased responsibilities and decreased income. However, the economic boom that resulted from its ability to benefit from trade agreements with Britain had mixed results for the city's finances when an influx of unemployed workers fleeing more depressed areas put added strains on its treasury. The fears experienced by the city's leadership in the early 1930s made it antagonistic toward transients and ambivalent about newcomers. Its traditional vulnerability to external economic sources, its role as destination for unemployed transients drifting westward, and its inadequate municipal tax practices combined to make Port Alberni's Depression era boom a mixed blessing.

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