



A new video from the BC Labour Heritage Centre and WorkSafeBC shows the history of B.C.'s shoreworkers.

The evolution of safety for B.C.'s shoreworkers

By Tanya Colledge

The fishing industry has always played an important role in B.C.'s history.

From creating jobs to contributing to our economy, the industry has been a backbone in the creation of the province we know today. B.C.'s shoreworkers also took important strides to improve health and safety for future generations.

For many, working in the fishing industry wasn't just a job, it was a lifestyle. It was hard work, one that came with its fair share of risks — risks that workers often dismissed for a hefty paycheque.

Elise Roberts was one such worker who came out west in the late 70s when she heard about the great opportunities in the shoreworker segment of the fishing industry.

"I got a job working a 12-hour night shift popping herring roe," she says. "We worked standing on the line in the cold, with all the wet — it was really hard work." She adds that she and her fellow line workers simply accepted that hazards and getting injured were just part of the job. A part of the life.

The booming canning industry would change the fishing industry forever. Thanks to new technology, canned fish was now able to be produced very quickly

and employed thousands of workers throughout the province. Large canneries were setting up shop from the Fraser River to the shores of Prince Rupert and in trying to keep up with the demands of production, health and safety fell to the bottom of the list of things to be concerned about.

"The company wanted to get everything through the plant as fast as possible and [my job as fish plant manager] was to get that fish in from the dock in the least amount of time," says Joy Thorkelson, who began her career in the fishing industry at the age of 20 working in a fish plant in Prince Rupert. "Getting companies to stop and think about issues such as health and safety wasn't easy. If a worker got injured on the job, they just went home."

The pain of repetitive strain

At the peak of production, workers were moving millions of pounds of fish every day. While some machinery was involved in processing, it was mainly manual labour — using hands, repetitive motions, and a lot of strain to get the job done.

By the 1980s, there was a growing level of awareness that work with repetitive motion was onerous and posed many risks of musculoskeletal injuries (MSIs) to workers. Unions began to lobby WorkSafeBC, then

called the Workers' Compensation Board, to accept repetitive motion strains, without success.

"There's an acknowledgement that through the 80s and into the 90s, musculoskeletal claims were not accepted," says Bruce Logan, occupational safety officer for WorkSafeBC, explaining that, at the time, Board adjudicators simply didn't have any information on these types of injuries because there hadn't been any scientific studies conducted to establish the correlation between MSIs, carpal tunnel syndrome, and the workplace.

Applying research to minimize injury

With injury rates on the rise, the Workers' Compensation Board knew something had to be done. A study was commissioned with the University of British Columbia to identify the onset of upper MSIs in fish-processing workers and the risk factors in the work related to them. In looking at techniques used to extract the roe, the study found carpal tunnel syndrome and tendinitis was present in a huge percentage of the workforce. But when companies allowed their employees to choose their techniques or vary their techniques, they found a lower rate of injury.

"Did we eliminate all the injuries? No. Did carpal tunnel suddenly disappear? No. But rates went down and people were healthier," explains Jim Sinclair, VP and union organizer for United Fishermen and Allied Workers' Union.

Over the years, safety in the fish-processing industry has improved dramatically thanks to the active roles of safety committees and their work to ensure worksite injuries and hazards are dealt with by employers. The changes are also thanks to partnerships — employers, workers, unions, and WorkSafeBC working together and taking responsibility for keeping people healthy and safe at work.

"It took everybody. It took companies to take responsibility and own up to [safety risks], and it took [WorkSafeBC] to reinforce it. Because without enforcement and without consequences, nothing changes," says Sinclair. "It was all those things working together that saved lives."

For more information

A new video from the BC Labour Heritage Centre and WorkSafeBC tells even more of the story. Watch the "History of Health and Safety in B.C.'s Shorerworker Industry" video at labourheritagecentre.ca.

2019 Student Safety Video Contest

You're the employer.
How do you keep your young workers safe?

Deadline for original video productions is Friday, March 22, 2019.
Visit worksafebc.com/studentvideocontest.

