Memoirs of Nanaimo
Transcribed by Dalys Barney, Vancouver Island University Library
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By way of an introduction, this tape recording is a transcription in part of recordings spoken by Mr. Joseph Kneen in June of 1967. The subject concerns Mr. Kneen’s youthful years in England, his arrival at Nanaimo, in August 1907. Also, his activities and observations here over a long period of years. Mr. Kneen died at Nanaimo, November 5th, 1967. This recording was made by William Barraclough and Alan Burdock, on March the 17th, 1969. The next voice you hear will be that of Mr. Kneen.

Joseph Kneen
June 1967. My name is Joe Kneen. I have been asked several times in recent years to give a short story of my life and what I remember about Nanaimo 60 years ago. I am putting this on tape to pass along to my grandchildren and their children.

My name is spelt K-N-E-E-N, pronounced "NEEN" the "K" is silent. My father was a Manxman, born on the Isle of Man. My mother was English, born in England. I was born in the Lakes District of West Cumberland, England on the 20th day of November, 1883. We are the first generation of the Kneens, [the KN?] to [inaudible] means to come to Nanaimo.

I went to a little country school for a few short years. We had no frills at the school in those days, and we had only to speak when we was spoken to. At the age of 13 and a half, I left home to serve my apprenticeship as a wheelwright and cartwright. This is a trade which has died out. I would say I am one of the few alive today who learned this trade, rubber wheels have taken over.

I was number 2 boy in this shop, so I had all the chores to do. The wood we worked was hardwood: English oak, ash, elm, and beech. They are seasoned for at least seven years before using. By this time, it was pretty tough.

My first job was to milk cows and to be in the shop at 6:30 a.m. We worked 'till 6:30 p.m. 11 hours per day, eight hours on Saturday. 63 hours per week. Our pay: a place to sleep and too little to eat, and to bed by 10 p.m. If the boss and his wife went out on an evening, they would lock the pantry door, I know, because us boys tried it, more than once. They never forgot to lock it.

Arriving in the shop at 6:30 a.m., my first morning after milking two cows, I was shown an old plank, four inches thick, 14 feet long, with a pencil mark for length. I was given a hand ripsaw and was told to follow that line. One foot per hour was pretty good going. And this was when my education really started.
We also made pitch pine coffins at the shop, and if a distance was not too far, us two boys would pack a box down the street on our shoulders and put the corpse in. We would do this after we quit at 6:30 p.m. A corpse was always measured in those days and the box made to suit. It may be hard for you to believe this, but I was 14 and a half years old when I was sent out to measure my first corpse. Teenage problems were unheard of in those days. You were tired, hungry, and glad to get to bed before the 10 p.m. time limit for you.

I spent two and a half years at this place, and moved to a larger operation, quite a number of men, and three boys. It was steam powered equipment. A little quicker and easier than the last place. You see, I started at the very bottom. The pay, same as last place, lots of good food. The pantry door had no lock on it. And we worked 54 hours per week, 9 hours better than the last place. I finished my seven year term here and was kept on as a journeyman, until I left to come to Canada. A journeyman's pay in that part of England was sixpence, half penny per hour, about 13 cents. Could you blame me for looking for a better home?

On the 17th of May, 1907, I boarded the CPSS Empress of Britain at Liverpool, England and sailed for Canada. I did not know just where I was going, but kept going west. Made a few short stops, while crossing the country and arrived in Nanaimo about the middle of August 1907. The only work I knew anything about was woodworking. And the only place there was any construction work going on was at the Western Fuel Company mines. I saw the powers that be and was told to report for work the following Monday morning. This was my first and only time I ever asked for a job.

7:12

Nanaimo was a small mining town, population perhaps 3,500 - 4,000, just a guess. It was also a young man's town: 29 hotels, 2 boarding houses with anywhere from 16 to 26 boarders, each. And I should say that 75% of the homes were south of Albert Street. This is the old part of the town, not changed very much. You can tell by the style of the houses. I was here only a short few months when I was put in charge of about 30 Native sons, aged from about 25 to 60 years old. I was a wee bit scared of them at first, but when I was able to call them by name, I found them quite friendly. And we got along just fine, no trouble at all.

I think that generation has all passed on by now to their happy hunting ground. I hope. Few months later, I took charge of all construction work of the Western Fuel Company, and was put on a monthly salary. Two or three years passed and I was promoted again and put in charge of all surface operations. Quite a big job. And it really kept me busy. I held this job until the fall of 1928.

At the peak of the coal mining in Nanaimo, the Canadian Western Fuel Company had 1,800 men on the payroll, with a payroll of about $280,000 per month. They had 50 miles of railway, 4 locomotives, a large machine shop, bunker storage for 10,000 tons of coal, four loading berths: 2 for deep sea ships; 2 for scow loading. They were situated along the waterfront, north of the
CPR ferry, 1967 ferry, to Cameron Island, which is at the north east corner of the CPR property and was an island.

Board and lodging in the hotels and boarding houses: $26 per month. I boarded in a private home, coming home clean, $24 per month. I can't tell you what the pay down the mine was. There was such a variety of jobs, such as diggers, motor men, mule drivers, winch drivers, pump men, stable men, etc. Skilled surface men: 33 and one third cent per hour. White labour: 25 cents per hour. Boss chinamen: 15 cents per hour. Pick and shovel: 12 and a half cents per hour. The chinamen all had long pig tails and wore two large straw hats to shed the rain. Their diet: pork and rice boiled together, they would not eat bread. There was a lot of chinamen here in those days.

By 1910, the coal company started to expand their operations. The city was also beginning to grow up at this time. Our sidewalks were all wood. And very fortunate that the young ladies did not have spike heels in those days. By the end of 1911, or early 1912, they had been replaced by concrete. A little later came along the sewers, followed by the paving of Comox Road, from the corner of Wallace Street to Front Street, Church Street, Commercial Street, Victoria Crescent, Winfield Crescent, Nicol Street to the corner of Crace Street, Wallace Street from Comox Road to Albert Street was also paved, one block on Fitzwilliam Street, from, excuse me, one block on Machleary Street, from Fitzwilliam Street to Franklyn Street.

With the growing up of the city and the Western Fuel Company expanding, came a water problem. The only water supply at this time was Chase River, and in a very dry summer, there would not be enough to go around. Two small storage dams, at the south west corner of Harewood Road were not now large enough. In 1910, the Western Fuel Company started to build a storage dam downstream below the city dam for their own use. I did not start this job, but I finished it, and turned the water into the coal company's line on the first day May, 1911.

The first gasoline cement mixer to come to town was for this job. Dam is now the swimming pool in the Five Acre lot park. The city went farther afield, about 16 miles, to the South Fork of Nanaimo River, put in a wood stave line and threw a few logs across the river, just enough to fill the pipe. Still a shortage of water in summer time. If my memory serves me right, I think it was 1932 the city started to build a high, concrete dam across the South Forks River, finished in 1933. And over a number of years, replaced the wood stave line by a steel line and concrete line. Quite a lot of folks here think our water supply comes from Nanaimo Lakes or Nanaimo River, this is not so. I mentioned before, our only supply was Chase River, and about a quarter of a mile above the storage dam is a valley through which Chase River flows. And there is quite a large farm in this valley. They have their milk cattle, and their horses, and pigs, sheep, etc. And they had full range of Chase River. We had no chlorination or fluoridation in those days, but quite a number of us were able to survive. Today, our water is, today our source of water is one of the best in the country.
In 1910, the Western Fuel Company started on plans for a new mine south of Nanaimo River. I named it the Reserve Mine. It was partly on the Indian reserve. This was quite a large and expensive undertaking. Three miles of railway to be built, partly through rock, then mostly on bridges and piling. There were two heavy, 150 foot Howe truss spans to be built over Nanaimo River; two shafts to be sunk, 10 feet by 30 by 1,000 feet deep; 750,000 feet of timber went into each shaft; two 96 foot high head frames, plus tipple building, screening plants, etc.; hundreds of piles to be driven to carry the concrete foundations for hoist engines, boilers, compressors, etc. A large sum of money was spent here with the expectation of it being a large operation. It was a great disappointment. I very much doubt if ever it paid for itself.

Number 1 Mine in town had been sunk in the late 1870s or the early '80s and was later referred to as the Grand Old Mine of B.C. It was sunk on the waterfront, between Farquhar Street and Dickson Street, might be named Milton Street now. Milton stopped at Victoria Road, and Dickson from there to the Esplanade. Two round shafts were sunk here, the main shaft 16 feet in diameter. The air shaft, 12 feet diameter, 620 feet deep. It was the largest, single producer in British Columbia. Closed down 1938.

You could go down Number 1 shaft, walk under the harbour to a shaft on Protection Point. From there, turn north and walk under Protection Island, then under Newcastle Island, and climb out to daylight on the east side of Newcastle Island near Kanaka Bay. In the early days before oil took over, thousands of tons of coal were [shot?] here in Nanaimo every spring for shipping to Alaska in the summertime. The Western Fuel Company also had control of the Seattle and 'Frisco market. There are two 6,000 ton steamships, the Thorpe, and the Titania. And one 3,000 ton hulk, the Acapulco which done nothing but ply between here and 'Frisco. The Seattle market was delivered by scow, quite a large tonnage between the two places.

19:52

Until 1913, Nanaimo was the best mining camp and the most law abiding city on the North American continent. And someone across the border to the south of us did not like the idea of Nanaimo having this Seattle and 'Frisco business. So they sent a few tough boys up from the south and right out of the blue came the 1913 strike, plus the loss of these markets. Seattle market gradually came back, the 'Frisco market was lost for keeps. As I mentioned early, this was a law abiding city, and all we had was one policeman. The story you might read on page 28 of Nanaimo Scenes from the Past, published 1966, does not give you the whole true story. I know, I was here.

There were several old workings closed down before my time: Number 5 shaft; Cedar; a slope at Southfield; a shaft in the depression at the south end of Victoria Road; Extension; a shaft on the second or third lot south of Finlayson Street on the west side of Nicol Street; a shaft under the Malaspina Hotel; a slope at Harewood opened up again 1918, operated about six years; there were two shafts behind the high school on Five Acres, which were sunk about 1916-17. I
had charge of sinking of these shafts. The Dunsmuirs never had control of this block at Nanaimo.

Number one owners: the Hudson's Bay Company, British capital; number two owners: the New Vancouver Coal Company, British capital; and number three owners: the Western Fuel Company, 1904-1917, U.S. capital; number four: the Canadian Western Fuel Company, 1917-1928, U.S. capital; number five, the Canadian Collieries, 1928, British capital. And this was the beginning of the end of coal mining on Vancouver Island.

These mines mostly closed down about 1940, in fact, 1938, the Grand Old Mine of B.C. closed down. And the CPR bought the waterfront, as you see it today, from the Canadian Collieries. The CPR were not in the coal mining business.

Dunsmuir's name brings back memories, this is why my story gets a little mixed up. Coal was discovered at Extension in the late 1890s. This property was in the E&N belt, granted to Dunsmuir when he built the E&N Railway. His shopping point for the North Wellington mines were in the northwest corner of Departure Bay. So he tried to build a railway from, his railway, about where it crosses, the Townsite Road to Departure Bay.

He was getting along quite well with his grade, when Mr. Robins, the manager of the New Vancouver Coal Company, caught up with him, and told him to stop. He would not allow him to put a railway through New Vancouver Coal Company property. A short piece of that grade, can still be seen, 1967, across the road from the Tideview Motel. Now the only way Dunsmuir could look was to the south. And he found this harbour where Ladysmith is today.

The Boer War was on at this time, and Ladysmith, South Africa, was being besieged. And that is how Ladysmith, Vancouver Island got its name. And you will find some of the streets called after the generals of the South African war. The only one I can recall just now is Buller Street, after General Buller.

24:58

The manager of the first company I worked for, the Western Fuel Coal Company, was an American named T.R. Stockett. Stockett Junction on the E&N Railway was named after him, that is just behind Chase River. And he was always referred to him, as T.R. The Bowen brothers, G.W. and Jim came here in 1917. G.W. was the president of the Canadian Western Fuel Company, so I will refer to him as G.W. The head office of the Hudson's Bay Company, and also the New Vancouver Coal Company were in London, England. The Western Fuel Company's head office: San Francisco. The Canadian Western Fuel Company head office: right here in Nanaimo, which seemed to bring things close to home. You could get an answer 'yes' or 'no' to your problems, right here, instead of having to go 6,000 or 1,200 miles away and wait weeks for an answer.
Early in 1918, Mr. Bowen called me to his office. I will refer to him now as G.W. and to myself as J.K.

G.W.: I am looking for information, perhaps you can help me. As you know, the Canadian Western Fuel Company bought out the Western Fuel Company a few months ago, 1917, and on our books are certain parcels of land claimed by the city. Can you tell me what you know about this?

J.K.: When I came here in 1907, I boarded in a private home in the name of Ed Gibson, who had worked under Mr. Robins, the manager of the New Vancouver Coal Company, in the late '80s and '90s and always referred to him as "Old Man" Robins. He said he was a very friendly gentleman, and this is one story I still remember.

The city fathers would ask Mr. Robins to meet with them to discuss some of the problems of the city at this time. And at one of these meetings they asked him if he would donate certain parcels of land to the city for parks, playgrounds, school grounds, etc. He said, "Yes, my boys, you can have it." But he never gave them the title to it, nor did he write it off the New Vancouver Coal Company's books. So it has just been passed down from one company to another. And this fight has been going on for 11 years I know, and quite a few years before that.

I have a map dated 1891, and it shows these parcels put out from the surrounding lots. One is Deverill Square on Haliburton Street. One Milford Crescent, on the corner of Selby and Robins Street and Hecate. And another parcel on the south side of Comox Road, between Wallace Street and Prideaux Street.

As I mentioned earlier, the head office of the New Vancouver Coal Company was 6,000 miles away, a long way from home, in those days. Now you take over, and it is on your books, with this difference, we are right home here. Now president and head office in Nanaimo.

G.W.: Just what difference should that make? Having the head office in Nanaimo? What would you suggest we do about it?

J.K.: Mr. Bowen, you called me in to give you some information. Now you ask me what we should do about it. We don't have to go to 6,000 miles away for an answer. The city has spent a little money on these places, they think they own it. It is not of great value to the Canadian Western Fuel Company, and you're the president, living right here, among our people. I think it would be a very nice gesture, on your part, if you gave it to the city.

30:33

[tape stops and restarts]
...[take?] counsel to that [effect?]. And if another company should come in here in the meantime, it would not be on the books. Now what else do you want to give away?

J.K.: Could you take time off and go for a short drive and look over just what you have given away.

He phoned for his car, an old seven passenger Packard, Bob Humphries was his driver. I told Bob where we wanted to go. Deverill Square, Milford Crescent, and the playground on the south side of Comox Road, between Wallace and Prideaux Street.

Bob says, “Where now?”

“Just keep on, Bob, and stop at the cemetery.” G.W. was a tall man, and he was kind of lounging in the back seat, facing the cemetery.

G.W.: Why are we stopping here?

J.K.: G.W., turn and look over to your right. There is a piece of property, bounded by the Millstone River on the north, the Comox Road on the south, and it reaches from the E&N Railway to the Quarterway.

G.W.: You want to give this away, do you? I think it will be a very valuable piece of property someday. How many acres did you say?

J.K.: About 100 acres, and don't you think, G.W., it would make a nice park for Nanaimo some day?

I said to Bob, our driver, “I think you better take us back to the office”.

G.W. did not speak until we, until he got out of his car, and all he said then was, "Come and see me before you go home." I thought he was going to fire me. I called in his office later in the afternoon. He pointed to a chair across his desk, and I sat down facing him. He gave me a pretty hard look for a few minutes before he spoke.

G.W.: I am going to give that parcel of land to the City of Nanaimo as a park with one reservation, it must never be used for commercial purposes.

J.K.: Thank you Mr. Bowen. I am sure that one day the city will appreciate this gift from you. Now you will understand what I meant by having the head office and president in Nanaimo instead of 1,200 or 6,000 miles away.

G.W.: Now I think we’d better look to our own business. You see those wheels over there? They are not moving. And don't think of anything else to give away. The wheels were on Number 1 pithead, so I thought I’d better look on and see what was the trouble.
William Barraclough
This is part two of Mr. Knee'n's story.

Joseph Kneen
[Klahowya. Hya kloshe tumtum.]

We will just take a little walk around town, mostly north. The south of Nanaimo is the old part of the town and, as I think I mentioned before, it has not changed very much, with the exception of the waterfront. I arrived in Nanaimo about the middle of August 1907, aboard the small CPR, S.S. Joan, tied up at a wharf down below the old post office, now a parking lot for the new post office. This wharf had been built by a man by the name of Gordon, I don't know the date, but it is in the old map of mine of 1891. Then owned by A.R. Johnson, when I came here. Then later, the CPR bought it, I think about 1910. The CPR did not have their own wharf until this time.

We walk up a very steep hill to Front Street. On our left, the old jail, with the whitewashed fence around it. On our right, the old post office, now a parking lot for the new post office. Going north, on our left, a rock bluff, then a small brick building, more rock bluff, three old Hudson's Bay houses, standing on top of it. Then, the provincial courthouse. Next, the Globe Hotel. On our right, stretching from the old post office north about 800 feet, vacant lots belonging to the Western Fuel Company.

Well, it had a band stand and several benches. This is where you would meet your friends on a fine summer evening if they were not beer drinkers and watch the Indians paddling and racing their canoes back and forth.

In 1911, there was a little real estate boom in town and before the coal company put this on the market, they offered to the city for $10,000. The city turned it down. Now, we turn onto Comox Road, and go west. On our right, a foundry, now a machine shop. On our left, the Newcastle Hotel, and one old house. Now, we turn north on Bridge Street, on our right, a small sawmill, on our left, the gasworks. Now we are on the wood bridge of the Millstone River, looking west up the river, the old Electric Light plant. Now, we are on Stewart Avenue, still going north, we come to First Street, now Dawes Street. We must not pass without turning to our right, and knocking on door 6-0, one on the oldest houses on Townsite, and shaking hands, with an old friend and gentlemen, Billy Lewis. When I met, when I first came here, Billy Lewis was 44 years old, I was 24 years old. That was 60 years ago.

I visited him a few days ago and he was just as bright and witty as when I first met him, 60 years ago. When I was leaving him, we shook hands, and he said, "Joe, we will meet again on the 17th of July."
And I said, "We sure will." He will be 104 years old, and lived in the same house 76 years. Back on Stewart Avenue again, still going north, on Block Number 5, on our left, a building in the centre of the block, a large house named the Eldorado. Built by a man called Bill Sloan, left Nanaimo in the gold rush age, and was one of the first to come out of the Klondike with a full poke. There is an iron gate and part of the stone fence along the Stewart Avenue side, still standing.

Two blocks north, we pass out of the old city limits. On our right stood the old provincial penitentiary, now the Shell Oil Company plant. One or two blocks north, on our left, was the old Chinese cemetery. In the old days, at a funeral, the Chinese would take a roasted pig with them and leave it on the grave to feed him on his way away. When the Chinamen were out of sight, the Natives would go and pick up the pig and have a potlatch. By and by the Chinamen got wise to what the Natives were doing and after the burial they would take the pig back home with them.

Still going north, we come to Pimbury Point. Better known today as Brechin Point, where Evans, Coleman & Evans Ready-mix plant is situated, was quite a large mine, closed down when the Western Fuel Company lost the 'Frisco market in 1913.

Looking over the bay in the southwest corner was a powder manufacturing plant, closed down 1925, moved to James Island off Victoria. Look to the northwest corner of the bay, Dunsmuir’s wharfs and shipping point for the North Wellington mines, out of use and falling down when I came here.

A little to the east, the federal biological station was just in the building stage, 1907, and still being extended today. Looking north of the hump is Page’s Lagoon, known now as Piper’s Lagoon, was a whaling station opened up, you could smell it quite a distance away, closed down after a few years’ operation.

Coming back to town, I’m turning west up Comox Road, on our left, Nanaimo’s first cemetery. Going west, and looking north down Prideaux Street is a large, brick building, Mahrer’s Brewery, now soft drink bottling plant. Still going west of the E&N to Kennedy Street, were two more breweries, one on each side of Kennedy Street. The Hasenfratz on one side and the Weigles on the other. Just the foundations left when I came here. On the site where now stands the City Hall was the Union Brewery, operated a number of years after I came here, closed down in the late teens. I dismantled the old building in 1944.

44:44

Coming back to the waterfront, we walk south on Front Street, Wharf Street, Commercial Street, Victoria Crescent, Winfield Crescent, and the Esplanade to the Indian reserve boundary. The
high water mark was along the street boundary line, some places beyond the boundary line. That's why to a stranger it looks such a crooked mess.

When I arrived here, it looked to me that the downtown part of Nanaimo had been made up of three islands. And in talking with the old of the Indians whom I had charge of when I first came here, some of them born in the 1850s, told me they used to paddle their canoes around these three islands.

At high tide, a great amount of this was under water when I came here. Before they filled in what they called "the long bridge" on Commercial Street, I would say it must have been about 4 to 500 feet long. Across what is now Terminal Avenue, there was quite a large, stone arch built, across Commercial Street, between, somewhere between Fletcher's and Nash's store, to let the tides flow back and forth. There were no stores there then, the arch is still there, you cannot see it.

Believe it or not, but things begin to pass through this old brain of mine I can hardly believe myself. The saloons had no set time for opening or closing. They just kept open. We had two handmade cigar factories in town, if we might call them factories. I think they employed about eight men between them. One was the Enterprise by Al Davis, and one the Cuban Blossom by Joe Booth. Cuban Blossom closed out a great many years ago. Al Davis carried on until the late 1930s. I used to visit Al in his little workshop up Skinner Street. He was all alone at this time. I was always very much interested in watching him cut the outside leaf. It was a peculiar shape. He would always make me a special cigar and I had to stay and keep him company until I smoked it. We would shake hands and he would say, "Come and see me tomorrow." You know, I miss those days gone by and my old friends.

We had two passenger trains a day between North Wellington and Victoria. The railway ended at North Wellington in those days and started to go north, Courtenay, Alberni, about 1911 or 12. We had two daily newspapers, The Herald in the morning, Free Press in the evening. And we certainly got all the local goings on in those days. We also had more daily papers delivered in Nanaimo than any city in Canada, seven all told. Two of our own, Seattle, Vancouver, and Victoria papers coming in to town, some of them, two come in the same day.

Our old hospital, which was of timber construction, was a nurses' training school. The matron, the staff, the matron, the head nurse, six to eight students. I think the last class was, oh, somewhere 1916, 1919, somewhere just about the '20s anyhow.

We had no one cent pieces here. I can't remember when the cent arrived. Five cent was our lowest coin.

I think the Imperial Oil Company was the first oil company to open up in Nanaimo, alongside the railway at the corner of Campbell and Prideaux, on the southwest corner, 1908. The first garage, and it was the first building on the property I mentioned earlier, was offered to the city
for $10,000. It was built by a local boy, Bill Sampson, about 1912. He had the Ford agency. You could by a new Ford for $750, a four-gallon can of gas, can thrown in, one dollar. I bought my first car in 1914, an old car, I paid $175 for it. My first driver's license was for life. When the new system came in, I was foolish enough to throw it away. I drove on the left hand side of the road for six and a half years. I think we changed over to the right at 6 a.m. on the 1st of January 1922. I won't tell you anything about the cranking and changing of tires in those days, it just would not be fit for print. We could buy anti-rattlers to push in around the doors, fenders, or any old place you could find room for one. No windshield wipers, gravity feed from your tank under the front street. If you came to a steep hill and your tank was not pretty full, you just turned round and backed up.

52:45

[tape stops and restarts, seems to repeat an earlier portion of recording]

....was in the E&N grant to Dunsuir when he built the E&N Railway. His shipping point for the North Wellington mines were in the northwest corner of Departure Bay. So he started to build a railway grade from his railway about where it crosses Townsite Road to Departure Bay. He was getting well along with his grade, when Mr. Robins, the manager of the New Vancouver Coal Company, caught up with him and told him to stop. He would not allow him to build a railway through the New Vancouver Coal Company property. A short piece of that grade can still be seen, 1967, across the road from the Tideview Motel. Now the only way Dunsuir could look was to the south, and he found this harbour where Ladysmith is today. The Boer War, South Africa, was on at this time, and Ladysmith, South Africa was being besieged, and that is how Ladysmith got its name. And you will find some of the streets called after the generals of the South African war. The only one I can remember now is Buller Street, called after General Buller. Where there are other names, I can't remember.

54:50

The city boundaries of Nanaimo from an old map, 1891, not much changed until 1952. Starting at the foot of Robins Street and the west boundary of the Indian reserve; going west on the north side of Robins Street for three blocks; then [partly] northwest to the east side of the E&N Railway to Pine Street; along the east side of Pine Street to the north side of Comox Road, now Bowen Road; east to about 100 feet east of the E&N Railway; then north across the Millstone River to Union Avenue, now Terminal Avenue, Canadian Highway 19; along the east side of Highway 19, to the south side of Townsite Road; then east on the south side of Townsite Road to high water mark; following high water south to Commercial Inlet, now parkade, where it seems to have got lost here. Then came to life again at the north end of the Esplanade, about 100 yards north of the bridge entrance to the Assembly Wharf. Going south along the high water mark to the north boundary of the Indian reserve; then west to the foot of Sebastian [Sabiston] Street, then south along the east boundary of the, the west boundary of the Indian reserve, to the foot of Robins Street. The east side of Commercial Street and Victoria Crescent was a surveyor's headache for years. From Wall Street to the foot of Nicol Street the lots are
frontage on the street and the buildings were mostly standing on piles or posts beyond high water mark, which was federal property.

The property from Commercial Inlet to the Indian reserve on the east side of the Esplanade was taxed by the federal government until about 1920-22, when the Canadian Western Fuel Company and the federal government and the City of Nanaimo got together and made an arrangement so that the coal company could pay their taxes to the city, which went through. And they paid a blanket tax to the city. I've seen the high water mark creeping out from the Esplanade, Commercial Street, Victoria Crescent to where it is today, that is the reason you don't see any large, unsightly mine refuse dumps around here.

58:45

One day, a long time ago, a navy boat drifted into the inlet. The surveyor and his helper took out a transit box, etc., and came over to me and said, "Mister, I feel lost around here. Anywhere I have landed from here south to the mine, the last survey map I have looks as if the island was growing east, and pushing the high water mark along with it. What can you tell me about it?" I'd had quite a little to do with pushing the high water mark up when I was with the coal company, so I thought I'd better act just a little stupid, and tell him I didn't know anything about it, and said goodbye.

In 1922, two aldermen came to see me. One was Alderman Dave Jenkins, an old friend of mine. I can't remember the name of the other alderman. They told me they were in trouble with Bastion Street Bridge, which was a wood structure at the time. The city were paying a gentleman a retaining fee for advice, and he had condemned Bastion Street Bridge to vehicle traffic. Would I examine it and see if it could have some repairs done to it, and opened up again. It had been closed for two years by this time. It was a very high bridge, or should I say, low. It went down a long way in what was known as the ravine. And all I could say to them was I am working for a company and I cannot do anything like that. And also the man who condemned it was a very good friend of mine, with a few letters behind his name.

A few days later, G.W. called me into his office and told me two aldermen had been in to see him and told him what they had asked me to do, and I had said no. G.W. told me to take all the time I wanted and give the city any help I possibly could. I climbed over this structure for about three days, and told the city fathers what I would do if it was on company property. With spending about $1,800 and put on a five ton load limit, it would be good for six years. They took my advice and spent $1,600 on it, it lasted for 12 years.

Now getting back to this ravine, which made that part of the city practically an island. It was the garbage dump for anyone around that part of town. And did it stink.

[tape stops and restarts]
...Coal Company had a right of way through this ravine down to Departure Bay, and when Commercial Street was paved, in the early teens, the coal company, to protect this right of way, laid their rails across Commercial Street, before the paving was done.

[end of recording]