

Britannia - The Story of a Mine

by Bruce Ramsay

Extract from book about J D W Moodie

Leach's health gave out in 1911 forcing him to give up his post, and on November 22, 1911 a successor was appointed. He was a big, tough, unsmiling mining man who was as colorful in himself as was his name, John Wedderburn Dunbar Moodie.

The board of directors named him vice-president and general manager, but above and beyond these positions, he was Barney Schley's man and of that there was no doubt in anyone's mind.

On his arrival in camp a long deep tunnel was started 1200 feet lower than the old one beginning half-way up the tram line, near the "transfer station." To reach this new scene of operations, Moodie built a surface electric tramway, and also under his direction work got underway on a new storage dam as well as a concentrator which was to be the largest in the province.

During Moodie's first year at Britannia the labor force was increased to between 650 and 700 men and an auxiliary steam plant was erected at the Beach, along with a large number of cottages and an up-to-date hospital. The Mining Report for 1912 says a large store was in course of

construction "and the company's aim is to have everything needed on the ground for the employees benefit."

The store, near the site of the present "Met" building, was a three storey department store, which indeed, carried everything needed, but its public relations needed a stiff shot in the arm. The residents of the Beach thought prices "outrageous," but what particularly rankled them was that they were not permitted to buy anything from the "outside." Thus the Woodward's, Eatons and Spencer's catalogues were like forbidden fruit; to be admired but not touched. One employee had a brother who was a foreman at Pat Burns packing house in Vancouver, and while in the city the miner was given a ham which he put into his suitcase. As ill-luck would have it, as he stepped off the boat at Britannia, the suitcase flew open and out rolled the ham and Moodie saw it. Despite the protestations that it was a gift, Moodie wouldn't believe him. "You can't tell me you got that ham for nothing," he is reported to have said, "Pack up and get back to town."

"Pack up and get back to town" seems to have been a common phrase in the mine in those days. If you disputed a bill at the store, the debate often ended with "if you don't like it, pack up and get back to town."

During Moodie's regime, the first attempts to organize a union at Britannia took place. This was attempted by the Industrial Workers of the World, the I.W.W., but known more familiarly as the "Wobblies." To those who showed interest in the movement Moodie had but one phrase, "Pack up and get back to town."

If Moodie didn't like something, out it went, and there were two things at Britannia Beach which J.W.D. Moodie didn't like. First there was the "temple of Bacchus" in the hotel, a room fitted with a long mahogany bar, and as per style, a large glass mirror. Moodie did not approach it with an axe and smash it up as Carrie Nation might have done, but his technique was just as effective. He ordered it closed, and when Moodie ordered something there was no argument. He converted the premises into a billiard room.