

## Ginger Goodwin

Driving into Courtenay in the late 1990s, I would see a sign on the highway saying "Ginger Goodwin Way". It was an unusual sight. Goodwin, I knew, had been a major labour leader in the early twentieth century and a strong socialist. During WWI he had preached pacifism. He had antagonized many in society by his labour organizing and his opposition to the war. He had been shot and killed by the police, supposedly as a WWI evader. He seemed a strange person to be commemorated by a sign.

Ginger Goodwin image courtesy of Cumberland Museum

The labour movement, though, considered him a hero. The real reason for his death, they said, was not the war at all. Rather, it was that he was such a highly effective labour organizer. To many others he was (and is) a martyr to progressive causes.

Goodwin was obviously far more controversial than the sign would indicate. But feelings seemed to have mellowed, and Goodwin finally was getting his due. Appearances, though, were deceiving. In 2001 the provincial government changed, from a pro-labour to a pro-business party. And a few months later the sign was gone.

Who was this man who still aroused such controversy? Albert "Ginger" Goodwin was born in England in 1887. His father was a coal miner in Yorkshire, and young Albert joined him in the pits when he was fifteen years old. It was a hard and dangerous life. Men worked long hours underground for low wages. They would breathe in coal dust, and were often exposed to dangerous gases. Accidents were frequent, and there was always the possibility of cave-ins. Life was little better out of the pits. Housing and sanitation were bad and there were frequent outbreaks of typhoid. No wonder that Goodwin left England when he was nineteen, and sailed to Canada.

Canadian companies often tried to woo British miners to North America, promising rosy conditions. But the reality was much different. When Goodwin arrived in Glace Bay, Nova Scotia, he would have found conditions little improved from back home. The rapidly expanding population had outstripped the housing supply, resulting in poor water and sanitation. The men had long working days, often working ten or more hours. The United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) were attempting to organize the workers, but the employer adamantly refused to recognize them. It would only negotiate with the Provincial Workmen's Association, which was little better than a company union. The result was, as one writer put it, "one of the longest and most bitter strikes in Canadian history". It ended in a complete defeat for the union, and a blacklisting of those who had participated in the strike. Goodwin and others were forced to move west, to look for work in the coal mines of Alberta and British Columbia.

In coming to B.C. Goodwin was encountering some of the most dangerous mines in the world. The death rate per one million tons of coal mined was several times higher than in Britain or Pennsylvania. The mine owners were particularly lax about gas and coal dust. The result was several major explosions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, killing hundreds of miners. No wonder the miners began expressing interest in the UMWA. But they had to deal with owners like James Dunsmuir. To a Royal Commission in 1903 Dunsmuir said "I object to all unions, federated or local, or any other kind". He expressed himself more pungently to workers. When union delegates made a modest request that men be paid at the mine they worked at, rather than having to make a long train trip to Ladysmith, Dunsmuir replied, "To h\_\_ with the union, to h\_\_ with the committee, to h\_\_ with the men".

Goodwin came to work in the mines of Cumberland. As in Nova Scotia, tensions were building between the coal miners and their employers. In a familiar litany the workers would protest poor pay, unsafe working conditions and a host of other complaints. The owners would seldom listen. With the provincial governments mostly on their side they felt secure. Even when there were regulations about mine safety they were frequently ignored. In response the miners invited the UMWA to the Comox Valley in 1911. The company, of course, thoroughly disliked the union's activities, a sure sign they were being effective. The trigger for the strike was the firing of a worker. The company claimed he was fired for working underground unauthorized. The union said he was fired for reporting gas in mines. The workers walked off on Sept. 16, 1912. The strike did not end until Aug. 20, 1914.

Vancouver Island's Great Coal Strike, as it came to be known, was long and bitter. It began peacefully enough, but became increasingly confrontational. The companies started hiring strike-breakers, or "scabs" as they were called. They also forced the Chinese back to work with threats of deportation. Soon the mines were producing again. The companies, with the exception of the Jingle Pot mine in Nanaimo, adamantly refused to recognize the union. Jingle Pot mine signed a contract with the UMWA in August 1913, and the men there returned to work. The workers at the other mines grew increasingly desperate and frustrated. Riots broke out that month in Ladysmith, Extension and Nanaimo. In response the provincial government brought in the militia. Many men were arrested. The strike itself ground on for another year before the union was forced to call a halt. It was financially ruined.

The miners were completely defeated. The companies refused to recognize the union and imposed a settlement the miners had to accept. Although the companies would not admit it, the strikers were blacklisted, and had to look for work elsewhere. The result did not surprise Goodwin. He had become active in the union under the mentorship of Joe Naylor, the local president. He had also become a committed socialist, and had joined the Socialist Party of Canada (SPC). He wrote in the SPC's journal "Western Clarion" that workers could never expect justice in such a strike. "In order to throw this system over we have to organize as a class and fight them [the capitalists] as class against class".

Goodwin had to leave Cumberland to find work. After two short mining jobs in the Interior he got a job as a smelterman in Trail. Now began his rise in the union. Goodwin had become very active in the Socialist Party of Canada. In consequence they decided to pick him as their local candidate in the 1916 provincial election. He had become a very good public speaker, and ran a vigorous campaign. He didn't win, but made a respectable showing. In the wake of the election came several union positions. In Dec. 1916 he was elected secretary of Trail Mill and Smelterman's Union, Local 105, and functioned as its business agent. A little later he was elected president of its District 6 (which included Trail), and also president of the Trail Trades and Labour Council. In early 1917 he attended the annual convention of the B.C. Federation of Labour. He was elected as its vice-president for the Kootenay District. So within a year he had acquired great prominence in the labour movement.

Goodwin quickly established himself as a strong, forceful presence on the Trail labour scene. His opponent on the company side was Selwyn Blaylock, in charge of labour relations for Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company (Cominco). Blaylock took a strongly paternalistic attitude to the workers, and was used to being treated with deference.

Goodwin's direct approach was not to his liking. As well, there were the usual workplace problems that Goodwin was all too familiar with: long hours, unhealthy working conditions and numerous others. Under Goodwin the union started moving towards a strike. The main issue was hours of work. The union wanted eight-hour days for all members of the smelter workforce. The company insisted that they had an agreement allowing longer hours. The union strongly disagreed, and on Nov. 15, 1917 the smeltermen walked off the job.

The smeltermen, though, had several obstacles to face. They had no support from the union's headquarters, and the miners at Rossland, who had been idled by their strike, urged them to return. Moreover mediators had determined that there was an agreement in place for the duration of the war. They urged the men to return, and lobby for legislated eight-hour days. Faced with this opposition, the smeltermen ended their strike in December.

Goodwin, meanwhile, was having trouble with the government. Years of working in mines had made Goodwin a chronically sick man. When the issue of conscription for the war came up in 1917 Goodwin was medically examined and put in category "D". That meant he was temporarily unfit, but subject to re-examination later. Suddenly, eleven days into the strike, he received a telegram from the local military tribunal. They ordered him back for re-examination. He was now declared to be in category "A", fit for fighting. This despite Prime Minister Borden's statement, six days before, that such men were not to be called up. The union denounced this as highly suspicious.

Goodwin fought his reclassification all the way to the final arbiter, Lyman Duff of the Supreme Court of Canada. Goodwin was too much a pacifist ever to have gone to war, even if he had been healthy. Duff rejected his claim, giving no reasons. Goodwin knew what he had to do. He left for Vancouver Island, and escaped into the wilds west of Cumberland. He was not going to fight.

Goodwin was not alone in his struggle. Conscription was massively unpopular in Canada, and Goodwin had company in the bush. Several other men were also holed up west of Comox Lake. They were helped by local people who smuggled supplies out to them. Even the local constable, Robert Rushford, blinked his eyes at this.

Not so the Dominion Police. This was a special force whose job it was to catch evaders. A small posse of them arrived in Cumberland, headed by Inspector William Devitt. With him was Constable Dan Campbell, formerly of the B.C. Provincial Police. Campbell had been fired from the B.C. Police for extortion. The Dominion Police, faced with manpower shortages, were forced to hire him. Campbell was also a crack shot and a superb outdoorsman, useful in this pursuit.

Policemen had been searching for the evaders since the spring of 1918. Campbell arrived there in early July. He told several people he was going to "get" the deserters. On the morning of July 27th a small group consisting of Devitt, Campbell, and Constable George Roe headed down Comox Lake, guided by trappers Thomas Anderson and George Janes. They went to Alone Mountain at the end of the lake. The trappers left the party, and the policemen headed into the bush. Devitt and Roe took one trail, and Campbell another. At 4:30 p.m. a shot rang out from Campbell's trail. Devitt and Roe hurried over. They found Goodwin's lifeless body. Campbell had shot him dead.

Campbell claimed that he had shot in self defence. He said Goodwin was raising a rifle towards him. Devitt ordered Campbell back to Cumberland, to surrender to the Provincial Police. He then attempted to have the body buried at the site. Two undertakers, though, refused the request. When Goodwin's friends heard about it, they insisted the body be brought out. When it was finally retrieved it was examined, not by either of the Cumberland doctors, but by a doctor brought over from Courtenay. Then a coroner's inquest was held. The coroner's jury, though empanelled in a mining town, had no working miners on its panel. After deliberations they came down with a neutral verdict: Albert "Ginger" Goodwin had been shot to death by Constable Dan Campbell.

Next a Preliminary Inquiry was held in Victoria, to see if Campbell should stand trial for manslaughter. The deciding factor in this turned out to be witnesses brought by the prosecution. Five of them testified that Campbell had said he would "get" the evaders "dead or alive", that they would never get away. One witness said he had said "shot" rather than "get". On the strength of this the magistrates committed him for trial in higher court.

But by law the final recommendation had to come from a grand jury (this has since been repealed). The proceedings of this body were secret, and no record was kept. They did not detain Campbell for long. On Oct. 1, 1918 they began hearing witnesses. By the next day they were finished, and issued their recommendation: he was not to go to trial. Campbell left a free man.

The question is often asked: was Goodwin's death a conspiracy? There is no easy answer to that. Certainly the reclassification of his military status is too suspicious to be anything but deliberate intervention. But after that ambiguities abound. The physical evidence from the shooting did not indicate it was an ambush. But neither did it support a claim of self-defence. Devitt and his colleagues were certainly protective of Campbell. But that doesn't mean they were part of a plot. Campbell himself, according to statements from witnesses, had few scruples as to how he would capture the evaders. But lack of scruples was consistent with his previous conduct as a policeman. Besides, given the unusual wartime conditions and his superb skills as a hunter, he may have been inclined to shoot first and not fear the consequences. Certainly a sensible conspirator would hardly talk the way Campbell did.

It might further be asked, was there any real need for a conspiracy? With his reclassification Goodwin was effectively out of the way. The real puzzle is the grand jury. This being wartime, were they told or directed in some way we know nothing about? Wartime sentiment, though, would certainly have been on Campbell's side. They may simply have felt it was their patriotic duty to let him go.

And what of Goodwin's legacy? His career was very short, less than two years. If he had not been conscripted we might know little about him. But conscription changed everything. Goodwin's belief that the war was a capitalist plot against the workers would never have allowed him to fight. His death, caused ultimately by the military call-up, has made him a martyr. Is it justified? The answer to that lies in the struggle he was waging. Working conditions of a century ago were terrible. Owners had little incentive to do anything about it, and governments backed them up. Goodwin's writings on the class struggle, while they seem extreme today, describe the situation very well. Goodwin was more moderate than some on the left. He wrote, for example, "the weapons [in the class struggle] are education, organization and agitation", methods that are perfectly acceptable in a democracy. He was also willing to work with government and owners to improve workers conditions, a position that some on the left denounced. But he certainly stood up to owners and managers, and injected new militancy into situations that were unacceptable. There really should be no controversy about his stature in our history. His ideals were fine, and his conduct was proper. There was certainly no justification for him to have been hunted like an animal and killed. It's time he completely entered the mainstream as one of our icons of the past.

## For further reading:

[Fighting For Dignity: The Ginger Goodwin Story](#) by Roger Stonebanks

Call number : 923.3188 GOO

[Ginger: The Life and Death of Albert Goodwin](#) by Susan Mayse

Call number : 923.3188 GOO

[Rebel Life: The Life and Times of Robert Gosden, Revolutionary, Mystic, Labour Spy](#) by Mark Leier

Call number : 923.371 GOS

This book has an interesting essay on the Goodwin case.

The library also has a clipping file on Ginger Goodwin in our [Local History Room](#).

Stephen Ruttan, Local History Librarian

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