

The Standard of Living of British Miners on Vancouver Island, 1848-1900

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From 1848 through 1900 skilled and semi-skilled British miners were lured to Vancouver Island by recruitment agents, by attractive advertisements in village post offices, and by friends and relatives already out in the region. Those who made the arduous voyage — around Cape Horn, through malarial Panama, or across the Indian territories of the United States — were probably most influenced by the promise of high wages in the mines at Nanaimo, Wellington, and Cumberland. The shortage of industrial labour on the coast, coupled with the demands of the San Franciscan coal market, kept pay rates buoyant throughout this period. Nonetheless, virtually every industrial dispute which took place at Vancouver Island mines was partly fuelled by complaints about money. Was the promise of high wages in Vancouver Island collieries a sirens' song for immigrant miners?

This paper examines the question of Vancouver Island miners' earnings in the second half of the nineteenth century, particularly in terms of their comparability to contemporaneous British standards. It is important to discern whether the wages offered to British miners on Vancouver Island were, in *real* terms, significantly better than those obtained in Britain. Conditions on Vancouver Island's coalfield were seldom if ever homogeneous: wage rates could vary from year to year and from pit to pit depending on the market for coal, employers' policies on wages, and the response of miners' organizations. Nonetheless, an overall pattern can be detected. It is argued here that the real wages earned by individual colonial miners were higher than might have been reasonably expected in Britain but that the low household earning power of the average nuclear family in the coalfield mitigated this difference.¹

¹ The only study extant that examines British Columbian living standards is Eleanor Bartlett, "Real Wages and the Standard of Living in Vancouver, 1901-1920," *BC Studies* 51 (Autumn 1981): 3-62. See also Terry Copp, *The Anatomy of Poverty: The Condition of the Working Class in Montreal, 1897-1929* (Toronto, 1974) and Michael Piva, *The Condition of the Working Class in Toronto, 1900-1921* (Ottawa, 1979).

Methodology and Sources

Information on wage rates in the Vancouver Island coalfield can be obtained through a variety of sources. The British Columbian Sessional Papers registered general statements of wage rates set by each colliery from 1875. These figures fluctuate only slightly over nearly thirty years and must be treated as generalized averages.² Nevertheless, supplementary sources (local newspapers, mine managers' records, and miners' accounts) reveal that the government's reports were reasonable approximations and that they provide a particularly useful projection of how wages differed according to age, race, and employer. The use of piece-rates and daily wages provide further complications, but by focusing on the pay packets of a particular group, the British, some of the most dramatic differentials which might distort the average wage figures have been avoided. Observations can be made on the *real* incomes of colliers by juxtaposing wage figures against reports arising from pay negotiations during disputes, against accounts of the cost of living on Vancouver Island, and against information on retail prices found elsewhere. Overall, then, it is possible to build up a model of income movements through most of this period.

The other objective of this paper — to identify household income levels — is complicated by the shortage of good material on the wages of boys. Boys less than sixteen years old were being employed underground by their fathers, their uncles, or their older brothers, but the illegality of this practice — especially in the last two decades of the century — ensured that it was usually concealed from official eyes. This almost clandestine activity was in fact revealed by the disputes between miners and their employers. Such information permits some generalizations about household incomes. Nominal wages put against cost factors — food and rent — produce an indication of the cost of living and of real wages. These estimates are compared with the results of similar enquiries into living standards among colliers in contemporary Britain. Because the objective here is to demonstrate how wages were experienced and perceived by miners who had been recruited from Britain with promises of high incomes and good prospects for their children, qualitative evidence has been utilized to flesh out the quantitative findings.³

² British Columbia Sessional Papers, 1875-1900, *Minister of Mines Reports*, passim. For methods of calculating miners' wages, see Arthur L. Bowley, *Wages in the United Kingdom in the Nineteenth-Century* (Cambridge, 1900), 96-109.

³ An example of a more rigorously quantitative approach to a similar problem can be found in Peter R. Shergold, "Reefs of Roast Beef: The American Worker's Standard of Living in Comparative Perspective," *American Labor and Immigration, 1877-*

Wages

Fluctuations in market demand for coal led to important changes in the rate of pay for Island miners, but more fundamental were the numerous alterations in the methods by which wages were calculated. The greatest changes in the wage environment occurred when the Hudson's Bay Company ceased to play a role in the coalfield, although notable developments were also recorded with the growth of the Dunsmuir enterprise.

The first miners to make their landfall at Fort Rupert found that the promise of high wages was illusory and the method of payment unsatisfactory. The agreement between the Lanarkshire miners and the Hudson's Bay Company at Fort Rupert contained elements of the Scottish *darg* (that is, fixed pay for fixed output); the miners were engaged for five-year terms and were to be paid partly on a piece-rate basis.⁴ While other labourers under contract to the Hudson's Bay Company in these years could expect to earn only about £17 per annum, miners were employed in 1854 at £78 per annum plus 2s6d for "each ton of the weight of twenty-one hundred weight" won from the mine above a target of forty-five tons per month.⁵ "Assistant Miners" earned roughly half as much as hewers.⁶ Each miner was expected to work 310 days each year, performing whatever tasks were essential to the smooth running of the fort community and accepting company store credits or blankets instead of cash when necessary.⁷ The company, for its part, endeavoured to "furnish the rest of the [miner's] family with food at reasonable prices" and free "double screened" coal from the pithead.⁸ The wage system was restructured in 1856 so that miners were

1920s: *Recent European Research*, Dirk Hoerder (ed.) (London, 1983), 78-105; idem., "The Standard of Living of Manual Workers in the First Decade of the Twentieth Century: A Comparative Study of Birmingham, U.K., and Pittsburgh, U.S.A." (Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1976).

⁴ See H. Keith Ralston, "Miners and Managers: The Organization of Coal Production on Vancouver Island by the Hudson's Bay Company, 1848-1862," *The Company on the Coast*, E. Blanche Norcross (ed.) (Nanaimo, 1983), 42-55; Lynn Bowen, "Independent Colliers at Fort Rupert: Labour Unrest on the West Coast, 1849," *The Beaver* 69 (April/May 1989), No. 2, 28-30.

⁵ *Nanaimo Archives*, D3/17, Indenture between the Hudson's Bay Company and John Thompson of Brickmoor, 10 May 1854.

⁶ *Provincial Archives of British Columbia [PABC]*, Nanaimo Correspondence, Letter from James Douglas to Joseph McKay, 20 May 1853.

⁷ *Public Records Office [PRO]*, *Colonial Office Papers [C.O.]* 305(6), Letter from George P. Martin to Commodore Charles Frederick, 16 October 1854; *PABC*, *Captain Stuart Journal*, 1 November 1855.

⁸ *Nanaimo Archives*, D3/21, Indenture between the Hudson's Bay Company and William Incher of Dudley, 2 May 1854. The miners at Fort Rupert received a ration diet agreed upon in advance in discussions with Chief Factor James Douglas. Every month

paid as much as 4s2d per ton by the HBC and were provided with free housing, tools, and medicine.⁹ Wages improved again around the start of the 1860s. Company hewers in 1861 were reportedly receiving \$1.50 (6s) per day, although in 1862, another source asserts, the colliers were paid 5s2d per ton or 10s3d per day on shift work, in addition to a 1s4d *per diem* for food rations (similarly high rates prevailed in 1865).¹⁰ The HBC considered paying its miners an annual salary, but supplements based on additional coal outputs indicate that the company expected to reward productivity. This was partly a response to the disheartened state of the Fort Rupert miners who had agreed to a system of fixed pay for fixed output but found that the seams around the fort were essentially unremunerative.

As table 1 indicates, wages tended to stabilize during the 1870s, although some erosion of earnings — as much as 12.5 per cent — occurred in 1876.¹¹ In these years a hewer in a good place at Nanaimo might expect to be paid about \$3.50 per day. It was general practice at Nanaimo to switch from piece-work to daily rates when the mine encountered a shrinking seam.¹² The field manager of the Vancouver Coal Mining and Land Company wrote in 1879 that the geology changed so frequently “that it constantly leads to agitation about the rates”; a flexible wage system allowed the company to stabilize earnings in a badly faulted coalfield.¹³ Until July 1876 Robert Dunsmuir was paying his Wellington miners a prevailing rate of \$1.20 per ton but this (and conditions underground) deteriorated thereafter.¹⁴ It was also during this decade that Chinese miners began to make

they were entitled to 14 pounds of flour, 10.5 pounds of beef or venison or, in lieu, as much fresh salmon as should be equivalent, 1 pound of sugar, 4 ounces of tea, and 3 gills of rum per week. The miners were offered one shilling in lieu of rations, but this was rejected because the prices in the company store were so high. As well, the produce of the colony (e.g., potatoes) were provided free of charge to miners. *PABC, Andrew Muir Diary*, 82-83.

⁹ Daniel Gallacher, “Men, Money, Machines: Studies Comparing Colliery Operations and Factors of Production in British Columbia’s Coal Industry to 1891” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of British Columbia, 1979), 73.

¹⁰ *Daily Colonist*, 10 June 1862; *PRO, C.O.* 305(3), Letter from J. H. Pelly to Earl Grey, 14 January 1852; *Nanaimo Gazette*, 21 August 1865. On exchange rates see *PRO, C.O.* 60(29), Letter from Henry Pellew Crease to the Colonial Office, 21 June 1867; W. H. Chaloner, “Currency Problems of the British Empire, 1814-1914,” *Great Britain and Her World, 1750-1914*, Barrie M. Ratcliffe (ed.) (Manchester, 1975), 202, 207; Arthur Harvey, *op. cit.*, 23.

¹¹ Lynn Bowen, *Three Dollar Dreams* (Lantzville, B.C., 1987), 149-50.

¹² *PABC, Diary of John Bryden*, 19 and 23 January 1878, 6-8.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 7 August 1879.

¹⁴ Paul Phillips, *No Power Greater: A Century of Labour in British Columbia* (Vancouver, 1967), 5-6.

TABLE 1
*Estimated Net Wages in the Vancouver Island Coal Industry,
 White Adults, 1853-1897*

Year	Net wages per day	
	(Cents)	(Sterling)
1848-51*	56	2s3d
1853	250-300	10s1d
1853*	77†	3s1d
1854*	121	5s
1860	300	12s
1861*	150	6s
1862	289	11s7d
1871	200-300	8s-12s
1872	400	16s
1875	200-500	8s-£1
1876	200-400	8s-16s
1878	200-375	8s-16s
1879	200-375	8s-15s
1881	200-375	8s-15s
1882	200-400	8s-16s
1883	200-375	8s-15s
1885	200-400	8s-16s
1886	200-375	8s-15s
1887	200-375	8s-15s
1888	200-500	8s-£1
1889	225-500	9s-£1
1890	250-600	10s-£1/4s
1892	250-500	10s-£1
1893	350-425	14s-17s
1894	200-350	8s-14s
1895	225-350	9s-14s
1896	225-350	8s-14s

* Gross wages where no estimate of other costs or bonuses can be made.

† 77¢ for each day in a 310-day contract, production bonuses not included.

SOURCES: British Columbia Sessional Papers, *Minister of Mines Reports*, 1877-1900, passim; B. A. McKelvie, "The Founding of Nanaimo," *British Columbia Historical Quarterly*, VIII (1944) No. 3, 176-77; Bowen, *Three Dollar Dreams*, op. cit., 185-86; Canada Sessional Papers, 1872, No. 10, *Report of the Hon. H. L. Langevin* (Ottawa, 1872), 13; *Nanaimo Free Press*, 5 September 1883; J. Audain, *From Coalmine to Castle: The Story of the Dunsmuirs* (New York, 1955), 19-20; A. Begg, *History of British Columbia* (Toronto, 1894), 461; A. Harvey, *A Statistical Survey of British Columbia* (1867), 18; *Daily Colonist*, 10 June 1862; British Columbia (Agriculture), *The Province of British Columbia: its Climate and Resources*, 55.

inroads into the workforce at Nanaimo and Wellington. Where it applied in 1880, piece-rates were said to be between 80¢ and \$1 per ton, depending on seam thickness.¹⁵ Severe geological obstacles at Nanaimo in 1881 and the effects of a fire at the Chase River Mine that broke out in January and smouldered on for over a month resulted in a 39 per cent loss in production over the previous year, with obvious implications for a workforce paid by tonnage.¹⁶ Partly as a consequence of this incident, wages did not increase noticeably again until the late 1880s, when the top end of the pay scale rose to about \$5 per day.

The 1890s witnessed additional changes in pay rates. The west coast depression of 1890-93 played havoc with demand for Vancouver Island coal, and the 1891 Wellington strike also affected earnings.¹⁷ During these years, as James Dunsmuir consolidated his father's empire, net wages for white employees at Wellington, Extension, and Union were rolled back to between \$2.25 and \$3.50 per day. At times Nanaimo's white miners earned less than the best paid Wellington miners, but their average was usually higher. In 1899 the wages for white Nanaimo hewers had crept back up to \$3-\$4.50, while white adult labourers earned between \$2.50 and \$3 per day and boys could expect to be paid between \$1 and \$2 per day. At the same time Dunsmuir's miners were earning 75¢ per ton (2,500 lbs.) or between \$3 and \$3.50 — "some as high as \$5" — per day.¹⁸ These variations reflected hugely different yields at the coalface and the effect which geological ruptures could have on working conditions.

The ways in which pay was calculated and dispensed influenced the miners' perception of their financial situation. It was this which provoked the Lanarkshire miners at Fort Rupert into a strike and then desertion in

¹⁵ Mark Lee Tweedy, "The 1880 and 1881 Strikes by the Miners of the Vancouver Island Coal Company" (Honours B.A. essay, University of British Columbia, 1978), 25. An average daily production rate of slightly more than two tons seems to have been reckoned as the norm.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

¹⁷ See Jeremy Mouat, "The Politics of Coal: A Study of the Wellington Miners' Strike, 1890-91," *BC Studies* 77 (Spring 1988): 3-29.

¹⁸ Canada Sessional Papers, 1885, No. 54a, *Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration*, 76. The Nanaimo strike of 1880/81 was a response to management's attempts to roll back tonnage rates as a means of softening the losses incurred at the Chase River Mine. Although the VCLMC's manager, John Bryden, resigned in disgust when the London head office turned his certain victory into a humiliating defeat, the Nanaimo miners were unable to advance their wages for the rest of the decade. Dunsmuir took advantage of the situation to cut his own operating costs and to poach dissatisfied Nanaimo miners in a period of labour scarcity. The tables would be turned in 1891.

1850.¹⁹ Hired on a basis that recognized customary arrangements of fixed wages for fixed output, the Scots were dismayed when they encountered serious problems in sinking a shaft to the coal seams. The resultant delay in reaching and raising the coal meant that the miners were not in fact entitled to be paid. The company's Fort manager maintained throughout 1850 that if the men desired wages at all they could either raise coal or perform manual tasks connected with the fur trade. Contracted and shipped around the globe to dig coal, yet unable to do so, the Scots refused to do any other kind of labour. Subsequently, piece-work, the customary arrangement in most British coalfields throughout the century, was adopted for the HBC's mines.²⁰ The advent of piece-work was also accompanied by wage deductions levied on hewers who left too much dirt or rock in the coal trucks. If an excessive amount of slack was found, the car would be confiscated by the company; in particularly bad cases the miner could face dismissal. Seam thickness could be more to blame than negligent mining for too much dirt in the tubs, a fact which the VCMLC recognized in 1880. In that year the company announced a plan to eliminate the economic consequences of working different quality seams. A three-tier system of wages took into account whether miners were working coalfaces less than five feet thick, between five and six feet, or more than six feet. Also related to the question of clean coal was the practice of sorting coal underground, something for which the miners had little enthusiasm.²¹

Geological characteristics of the Vancouver Island coalfield were influential in determining a miner's wage on the piece-rate system. So irregular were the seams that competition for well-paying places at the coalface was frequently a source of discontent and conflict between miners and management and among miners themselves. In many parts of Britain the practice of *cavilling* — essentially a lottery system of allocating places in the mines — protected miners against arbitrary mine deputies who could otherwise reward loyal friends with more remunerative stalls.²² On Vancouver Island,

¹⁹ Prior to the arrival of the Scottish colliers the HBC had employed Kwakiutl labourers, who were characteristically paid in shirts or blankets. *PRO, C.O. 305(6)*, Martin to Frederick, op. cit.; *PABC, Nanaimo Correspondence*, James McKay to James Douglas, 9 September 1852, TS.

²⁰ B. A. McKelvie, "The Founding of Nanaimo," *British Columbia Historical Quarterly* VII (1944), No. 3, 176-77.

²¹ John Douglas Belshaw, "Mining Technique and Social Division on Vancouver Island, 1848-1900," *British Journal of Canadian Studies* I (1986), No. 1, 45-65.

²² Martin J. Daunton, "Down the Pit: Work in the Great Northern and South Wales Coalfields, 1870-1914," *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, XXXIV (1980), No. 4, 585; A. R. Griffen, *Coalmining* (1971), 10; *British Columbia Journal of the Legislature*, 1890/91; *Report of the Select Committee on the Wellington Strike*, cclxii; *CSP*, 1903, No. 36a, *Report of the Royal Commission on Industrial Disputes in British Columbia, Minutes*, 353-54.

TABLE 2
Wages and Race in the Vancouver Island Coalfield, 1875-1897

Year	Daily Wages (in Cents)				
	Whites	Chinese	Amerindians	Boys	Japanese
1875	200-500	121-125	100-150	—	—
1876	200-400	100-125	100-150	—	—
1877	200-400	100-125	100-150	—	—
1878	200-375	100-125	100-150	—	—
1879	200-375	100-125	100-150	—	—
1881	200-375	100-125	100-150	—	—
1882	200-400	100-150	125-250	—	—
1883	200-400	100-150	125-250	—	—
1886	200-400	100-150	200	—	—
1887	200-375	100-125	200	—	—
1888	200-500	100-175	200	—	—
1889	200-500	100-137	—	100-175	—
1890	250-600	100-200	100-250	100-200	—
1892	240-350	100-150	—	100-200	100-125
1893	200-350	100-150	—	100-200	100-125
1894	200-350	100-150	—	100-200	100-125
1895	225-350	100-150	—	100-200	100-125
1897	225-350	100-150	—	100-200	100-125

SOURCE: BCSP, *Minister of Mines Reports*, passim.

however, this customary arrangement was not introduced.²³ Management's power to assign places was retained throughout the century as an important disciplinary weapon.²⁴ At Nanaimo in 1880 wage reductions were enforced by refusing access to the best places in the mines to miners unwilling to take the cut in pay.²⁵ Supervisory staff flexed similar muscles in the Dunsuir mines at Wellington in 1890/91.²⁶ This process of assignment had serious implications for miners' incomes. One English collier, John Greenwell, told an 1891 legislature inquiry that in an "average good place" he

²³ Some cavilling took place at the Northfield Mine on a three-monthly basis for several years in the 1890s, but for some unknown reason the practice was discontinued. CSP, 1903, op. cit., 354.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 353-54.

²⁵ *PABC, Bryden Diary*, op. cit., 26 February 1880.

²⁶ BCJ, 1891, op. cit., cclxiii-cclxiv, cccvii-cccviii.

could earn as much as \$6 in a day but in an "average fair place" he might make no more than half that amount.²⁷

As in Britain, unskilled labourers in Vancouver Island mines were frequently paid by hewers. Sometimes this work relationship also involved a familial bond, an older male taking on a son or nephew or younger brother as a "putter," or "driver" — an "oncost" worker — to improve the household economy.²⁸ On Vancouver Island, however, oncost workers were very often native Indians or (from the 1870s on) Chinese who subcontracted to white hewers.²⁹ Chinese colliers could expect to earn only about \$1 per day, a rate which was characteristically about half that paid to adult white miners and also usually below the wage paid to adult native Indian miners and white boys throughout the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s (see table 2).³⁰ Because these subcontracts were private arrangements it is impossible to say how well or how poorly oncost labour was paid, although testimony to the 1902 Royal Commission inquiry into Chinese and Japanese immigration contended that the white miners generally gave their Chinese labourers "a little more" than the \$1.25 per day offered by the mining company.³¹ The situation for boys was said to be better. Edmund Wilmer, a Belgian miner at Wellington, confessed to employing his underage son in the mine where he worked but denied cheating the boy on wages. "After paying him \$2.50, I was always making \$3 or \$4 myself — after paying the boy company wages," he claimed.³² Most boys in Vancouver Island mines worked either as pushers or hauliers in the mines, although some — particularly those at Nanaimo — aided their fathers at the coalface. In any event it cannot be determined whether wages went into the boys' pockets or directly into the family accounts.

²⁷ Ibid., cclxix-cclxxi.

²⁸ John Benson, *British Coalminers in the Nineteenth Century: A Social History* (Dublin, 1980), 68.

²⁹ It is worth noting that subcontracting or the 'butty' system had been abandoned in most British coalfields by 1850, though not in the Black Country. Ibid., 72.

³⁰ The vulnerability of Chinese wages should be noted. In 1899 James Dunsmuir anticipated that his campaign against Asian exclusion legislation would result in a large bill from the Privy Council and the provincial courts; consequently he ordered the deduction of a fifty-cent tariff from the monthly wages of all his Chinese employees. Likewise in the year that followed, Dunsmuir covered similar costs by deducting \$1 from the monthly pay of every one of his Chinese employees. In a curt message to his mine manager at Union, Dunsmuir wrote: "The coal mine arbitration cost us over \$3000.00. Take it off every chinaman irrespective of what he is working at." *PABC, Buckham Collection*, vol. XXI/1, Letter from James Dunsmuir to F. D. Little (Wellington manager), 19 September 1899, and to George W. Clinton (Union manager), 9 April 1900.

³¹ CSP, 1902, *Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration*, op. cit., 81.

³² BCJ, 1891, *Report on the Wellington Strike*, op. cit., cccxx.

Although daily wages give some indication of relative earnings it was by no means certain that a miner would be able to work, say, the full 310 days required in the Hudson's Bay Company's contract in the 1850s. And much later in the century there was a gulf between what the companies advertised as possible wages and what was actually paid. A report, which appeared in an 1898 promotional travel book on British Columbia and Vancouver Island, estimated that when they were in "full work" the miners of the VCMLC earned "as much as \$90 a month, the working shift being eight hours; but there are slack times, when the wages fall considerably."³³ Seasonal rhythms were imposed by the local and international market for Vancouver Island coal. During the spring and summer months, for example, the level of sales to Victoria — small at the best of times — declined enough to produce extensive unemployment in the coal-field.

The case of Robert Jarvies, a Wellington hewer, is instructive in this matter. In February 1890 Jarvies worked nineteen days; he worked the same number of days in March of the same year; in April 1890 he recorded twenty-four days of work; in May the number of days worked dropped to only twelve.³⁴ The average for these four months (two of winter and two of spring) is eighteen and a half days, from which we can extrapolate an approximate work-year of 222 days. This estimate coincides with what is known of the work-year in the Black Country in the 1870s, in British coal mines generally in the period 1850-1900, and in mainland mining camps around the turn of the century.³⁵

As well as the length of the work-year the length of the work-day could affect perceptions of earnings. Throughout this period hours of work in Vancouver Island pits were being reduced. Under the HBC the work-day was set at no more than ten hours, although in 1855 round-the-clock eight-hour shifts were recorded.³⁶ In 1869 the Edinburgh Geological Society

³³ Frances McNab, *British Columbia for Settlers: Its Mines, Trade and Agriculture* (1898), 200-03.

³⁴ BCJ, 1891, *Report on the Wellington Strike*, op. cit., cccxxxii; *PABC, Bryden Diary*, op. cit., 6-15 April 1878.

³⁵ Cole Harris, "Industry and the Good Life around Idaho Peak," *Canadian Historical Review* LXVI (1985), No. 3, 323; Colin P. Griffen, "The Standard of Living in the Black Country in the Nineteenth Century: a comment," *EHR*, 2nd series, XXVI (1973), No. 4, 510-13. See also George Barnsby, "The Standard of Living in the Black Country during the Nineteenth Century," *EHR*, 2nd series, XXIV (1971), 220-39; idem., "A Rejoinder," *EHR*, 2nd series, XXVI (1973), 514-16. Most recently the average work-year in British mining towns has been calculated to be 226 days in the last half of the nineteenth century. Roy Church, *The History of the British Coal Industry* (Oxford, 1986), vol. III, 560.

³⁶ *PRO, Hudson's Bay Company Papers 1/638*, Fort Rupert Journal, 27 November 1849; *Nanaimo Archives, D3/17*, op. cit.

heard that Vancouver Island miners "rarely" worked "a full day" so as to maintain some control over output levels.³⁷ The work-day was shortened at Wellington as a consequence of the 1890/91 strike to about eight and a half hours at the same time that Vancouver and Victoria workers began lobbying in earnest for a nine-hour day and the Nanaimo miners were initiating their campaign for an eight-hour day.³⁸ By the turn of the century Nanaimo miners had achieved their eight-hour target whereas Nova Scotian colliers were working as much as eleven hours per day (although at the International Colliery on Cape Breton Island miners worked eight hours and labourers ten).³⁹ Shortly thereafter, the Industrial Disputes Commission heard that Cumberland miners were clocking only seven and a half hours daily.⁴⁰

Comparisons with British wage scales can usefully be made at this point. Challinor and Ripley have argued that in the 1840s regional wage differences from coalfield to coalfield were great. They found it "impossible to state, with accuracy, what wages and hours actually were."⁴¹ Nevertheless, it is known that at mid-century the miners of Lanarkshire were among the best paid colliers in the British Isles, and it is equally certain that the Black Country miners, degraded by the truck system, did not fare nearly so well.⁴² Miners in other parts of Scotland and in South Wales improved their wage standing noticeably in the third quarter of the century, while earnings in the older industrial areas of Staffordshire declined.⁴³ In 1869,

³⁷ Robert Brown, *On the Geographical Distribution and Physical Characteristics of the Coal-fields of the North Pacific Coast* (Edinburgh, 1869), 11-12.

³⁸ "The Coal Mining Industry in Canada," *Labour Gazette* I (November, 1900), No. 3, 127; CSP, 1903, *Royal Commission on Industrial Disputes*, op. cit., Exhibit 17a, p. 761; British Columbia, *General Review of Mining No. 19*, 127. For the struggle to reduce working hours in Britain's coal mining industry see B. McCormack and J. E. Williams, "The Miners and the Eight-Hour-Day, 1863-1910," *EHR*, 2nd series, XII (1959), No. 2, 222-38; Henry Pelling, *A History of British Trade Unionism* (Harmondsworth, 1981), 105-06.

³⁹ Phillips, *No Power Greater*, op. cit., 19; Canada, Department of Labour, *Wholesale Prices in Canada, 1890-1909* (Ottawa, 1910).

⁴⁰ H. H. Bancroft, *History of British Columbia 1792-1887* (San Francisco, 1887), 577-78; Martin Robin, *The Rush for Spoils: The Company Province, 1871-1933* (Toronto, 1972), 74.

⁴¹ Raymond Challinor and Brian Ripley, *The Miners' Association: A Trade Union in the Age of the Chartists* (1968), 54. See also the survey of early nineteenth-century wages in Britain in Michael W. Flinn, *The History of the British Coal Industry* (Oxford, 1984), vol. II, 1700-1830, 374-95.

⁴² Alan B. Campbell, *The Lanarkshire Miners: A Social History of their Trade Unions, 1775-1974* (Edinburgh, 1979), 326-27; T. J. Raybould, *The Economic Experience of the Black Country: A Study of the Dudley Estate* (Newton Abbot, 1973), 211-12. Benson, *British Coalmining*, op. cit., 77.

⁴³ E. H. Hunt, *British Labour History 1815-1914* (1981), 101-02.

miners at Motherwell in Lanarkshire were paid as much as 10s a day on the strength of demand for steel spurred by the Franco-Prussian War.⁴⁴ This was, however, something of a zenith. Alexander MacDonald's answer to the subsequent decline in Scottish wages in the early 1870s was to propose a minimum daily wage of 3s6d (about 88¢), well below the pay level of Vancouver Island's Chinese oncost workers.⁴⁵ The butty system of the Black Country (to which the subcontracting practice at Wellington bears a resemblance) coupled with that region's notorious truck system meant that colliers in villages like Brierley Hill received much lower wages than their former neighbours and relations in Nanaimo.⁴⁶ In South Wales, where money wages almost doubled between 1869 and 1873, hewers' earnings peaked at an average weekly rate of 48s9d and tonnage rates of 4s10d in the Rhondda.⁴⁷ J. W. F. Rowe estimated that the average wages of putters across Britain in 1888 was about 3s7d per day; in the same year Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire colliers, whose wages ranged between 3s5d and 5s4d, were the highest paid in Britain.⁴⁸ These figures represent about 75 per cent of the wage earned contemporaneously by Vancouver Island hewers working on piece rates.

During most of this period, then, Vancouver Island miners received considerably more money each month than their opposites in British coalfields. Even the California goldfields, with the widespread introduction of hydraulic technology after about 1856, offered wages of only around \$3 per day.⁴⁹ In the 1860s Vancouver Island miners were said to receive four

⁴⁴ Fred Reid, "Alexander MacDonald and the crisis of the Independent Collier, 1872-1875," *Independent Collier: The Archetypal Proletarian Reconsidered* (Sussex, 1978), 158-59. Bowley estimates that Lanarkshire miners earned on average 3s9d from 1861 to 1870. Bowley, *op. cit.*, 107.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁴⁶ Barnsby, *Social Conditions in the Black Country, 1800-1900* (Wolverhampton, 1980), 27, 212; Eric Taylor, "The Working Class Movement in the Black Country 1863-1914" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Keele, 1974), 121; Staffordshire Country Council Education Committee, "Coal mines in Staffordshire," *Local History Source Book* (1968), No. 3, 32.

⁴⁷ In South Wales timbermen were paid more than hewers. See Brinley Thomas, "The Migration of Labour into the Glamorganshire Coalfield (1891-1911)," *Economics X* (November 1930), No. 30, 282-83; E. D. Lewis, *The Rhondda Valleys: A study in Industrial Development, 1800 to the Present Day* (1959), 234-35; J. H. Morris and L. J. Williams, *The South Wales Coal Industry 1841-1875* (Cardiff, 1958), 219-20.

⁴⁸ J. W. F. Rowe, *Wages in the Coal Industry* (1923), 72. See also British Parliamentary Papers, 1887, LXXXIX, *Return of Wages Published Between 1830 and 1886*, 24-26, 134-45; Benson, *British Coalminers*, *op. cit.*, 69; E. H. Hunt, *Regional Wage Variations in Britain, 1850-1914* (Oxford, 1973), 72.

⁴⁹ Rodman Paul, *Mining Frontiers of the Far West, 1841-1880* (New York, 1963), 35. Figures for other American mining areas can be found in Ronald C. Brown, *The Hard-Rock Miners: The Intermountain West, 1860-1920* (1979), 20-35; R. D. Eller,

times the wage paid to Pennsylvanian colliers.⁵⁰ An 1892 British parliamentary report claimed that miners' nominal wages on Vancouver Island were as high as or higher than anywhere else in the British Empire.⁵¹ So, whether measured against colliers in Auld or Nova Scotia, South Wales or New South Wales, or against gold miners south of the border, the Vancouver Island miners' wages appear to have been superior, at least in money terms, throughout all but the very earliest years of the period under study. What remains to be demonstrated is the extent to which this nominal advantage was a real advantage.

Cost of Living

The real wage of Vancouver Island colliers and their families was probably never calculated in the nineteenth century. Money wages, along with losses through fines and gains through perquisites and bonuses, were at issue in industrial disputes, but little concern was given (publicly, at least) to changes in the cost of essential items. The quality of information about prices on Vancouver Island in this period varies although *average* prices for goods sold in the coalfield and all over the province can be obtained. "Provincial" figures were almost certainly weighted towards the situation in nearby Victoria and (later) Vancouver, where price lists could be more easily and accurately compiled. These figures have nonetheless proven useful. The price of a small selection of goods appears in table 3 for several sample years. The 1853 price of beef was also available and has been included.

These figures suggest that Vancouver Islanders witnessed a general decline in food prices from 1865. Sugar provides a good example, almost halving in price from 1865 to 1891. A similar observation could be made of coffee prices, which fell somewhat less precipitously. A group of foodstuffs — a "basket" containing a pound each of beef, sugar, coffee, and tea and one gallon of beer — cost approximately \$2.90 in 1865, \$2 in 1870, and \$1.38 in 1891. Whatever the situation with wages, there were perceptible changes in the cost of living, although these did not always constitute improvements.⁵² On the coalfield itself there was a lack of homo-

Miners, Millhands and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930 (Knoxville, 1982), 182-98.

⁵⁰ *PABC, John Helmcken Papers*, vol. 14, folder 12, items 1 and 2.

⁵¹ BPP, 1892, LVI, *Reports on Hours of Adult Labour (Colonies)*, 7-16.

⁵² In 1900 the Nanaimo colliers' union reported that an improvement in the industry's fortunes and in wages had been matched by an increase in the cost of living. "The Coal Mining Industry in Canada," *Labour Gazette* I (November 1900), No. 3, 127.

TABLE 3
Food Prices for Selected Years, British Columbia

Item*	Prices in Cents for the Years						
	1853	1865	1870	1872	1887	1888	1891
Beef	12-13	18	20	18	—	8-15	12.5-15
Wheat	—	4	3	—	—	—	—
Sugar	—	16	14	—	20	8-10	9
Coffee	—	44	38	—	50	—	25
Tea	—	60	75	—	190	37-125	50
Beer	—	130-195	50	—	—	—	40
Butter	—	—	50	63	75	30-50	35-40

* All goods measured by pounds except for wheat (bushels) and beer (gallons).

SOURCES: PRO, C.O. 305(6), Letter from George P. Martin to Commodore Frederick, 16 October 1854; M. Macfie, *Vancouver Island and British Columbia*, 500-01; CSP, 1872, *Report of Langevin*, 134-35; PABC, *Manson's Store (Ledgers)*, Add. MSS 806, vol. II; *Scottish Records Office, Department of Agriculture and Fisheries for Scotland: Emigration Files, AF 51/90*, Emigration Circular and Poster, October 1888; British Columbia, *British Columbia as a Field for Emigration and Investment* (Victoria, 1894), 53.

generity in prices.⁵³ This last situation derived largely from differences in the retailing arrangements of each mining town.

Before 1864, the HBC was able to profit from not only the trade in furs and fuels but also from food sales, first by paying its employees partly in rations, then by providing a truck shop.⁵⁴ One Englishman who arrived on Vancouver Island in 1852 complained soon afterwards that "two dollars in that Store of the Companys' [*sic*] at the Fort don't go half as far as two shillings at home."⁵⁵ Around this time it was also observed that the quantity and quality of food available to miners in the colony was frequently poor.⁵⁶

⁵³ One writer claims that nineteenth-century settlers on Vancouver Island found a lower cost of living, although he offers no evidence on this score. Patrick Dunae, *Gentlemen Emigrants: From the British Public Schools to the Canadian Frontier* (Vancouver, 1981), 110. In 1903, an Extension/Ladysmith miner reported that food costs were lower at the former town and that the Dunsmuirs' control of the stores at Ladysmith was detrimental to the welfare of the miners and their families. CSPP, 1903, *Royal Commission on Industrial Disputes*, op. cit., 52.

⁵⁴ PRO, C.O. 305(3), Letter from J. H. Pelly to Earl Grey, 12 June 1851.

⁵⁵ PRO, C.O. 305(6), Letter from George P. Martin to Commodore Charles Frederick, 16 October 1854.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*; PABC, *Nanaimo Correspondence*, Letter from Joseph McKay to James Douglas, 19 May 1852; Patricia Johnson, *A Short History of Nanaimo* (Nanaimo, 1958), 11.

The sale of the Nanaimo mines to the Vancouver Coal Mining and Land Company weakened the truck system. Having lost their trading monopoly and ownership of the coal mines the HBC store closed down and was sold off within three years of the takeover.⁵⁷ The VCMLC was uninterested in establishing a new truck shop, and Nanaimo miners soon benefited from competition among a number of small independent retailers. As for the Dunsmuirs, they could not completely exclude independent shopkeepers from opening businesses in and around Wellington, Extension, and Union. Nevertheless, Robert and James Dunsmuir retained sufficient control over their towns to be able to put even independent shops to effective use during strikes.⁵⁸

The 1880s and 1890s saw an extension of Vancouver Island's agricultural sector, which helped stabilize food prices.⁵⁹ Wheat and flour were still imported from Oregon and California but dairy, poultry, orchard, and garden vegetable enterprises did very well around Saanich and even in the coalfield area. Nonetheless, the difficulties experienced by mine operators in attracting and retaining skilled labour were periodically shared by farm owners (wages for local farm workers were said to be twice the level paid on eastern Canadian farms).⁶⁰ On the other hand, the wildfowl and fish stocks of Vancouver Island ensured that at least one source of food during this period would remain relatively indifferent to labour costs. Likewise, the abundance of wild fruits and berries could have helped keep household food costs low, at least in summer and autumn.⁶¹ In 1888, however, the overall cost of food in British Columbia was higher than anywhere else in Canada. Progress in the local dairy industry notwithstanding, a pound of butter sold for almost twice as much on the Pacific coast as it did east of the Rockies.⁶²

How do these costs compare with the situation in contemporary British coalfields? George Barnsby's detailed study of the cost of living in the Black

⁵⁷ A. W. Currie, "The Vancouver Coal Mining Company: A Source for Galsworthy's *Strife?*," *Queen's Quarterly* LXX (1963), No. 1, 57.

⁵⁸ Desmond Morton with Terry Copp, *Working People: An Illustrated History of Canadian Labour* (Ottawa, 1980), 52. For a dissenting view of the role played by truck shops in mining towns see Price V. Fishbeck, "Did Coal Miners 'Owe Their Souls to the Company Store?': Theory and Evidence from the Early 1900s," *Journal of Economic History* XLVI (December 1986), No. 4, 1001-29.

⁵⁹ *Canada Census 1880/1*, III, 228-29, 248-49; *Canada Census 1891*, IV, 8-9, 116-17, 224-25; *Canada Census 1901*, II, 64-65.

⁶⁰ H. A. Innis and A. R. M. Lower, *Select Documents in Canadian Economic History, 1783-1885* (Toronto, 1933), 794.

⁶¹ [G. M. Sproat,] *British Columbia, Information for Emigrants* (1873), 19-20.

⁶² *Scottish Records Office, Department of Agriculture and Fisheries for Scotland: Emigration Files, AF/90*, Emigration Circular and Poster for October 1888.

Country indicates that prices there were consistently lower than on Vancouver Island in the second half of the nineteenth century. South Staffordshire beef prices, for example, fluctuated between 4d per pound in 1850 and a peak of slightly more than 7d in 1882/83, whereas prices on Vancouver Island climbed as high as 8d per pound and never dipped below 4½d.⁶³ Barnsby also found that the cost of basic commodities in the Black Country was rising from 1850 until the mid-1880s, when the index reversed and slipped back to the mid-century mark. Colonial costs therefore were staying above those in an inflationary English market.⁶⁴ The prices for beef in these two coalfields for 1853, 1865, 1870, and 1891 are reproduced in table 4. In some years (1865 and possibly 1891) the difference was as much as 50 per cent. New settlers from the Black Country at almost any time in the period under study would have been struck by sharp price differentials of this magnitude.

TABLE 4
*Beef Prices in British Columbia and the Black Country
for Selected Years (in cents per pound)*

	1853	1865	1870	1888	1891
British Columbia	13	18	20	8-15	12-15
South Staffordshire	10	12	14	11	10

Housing expenses in British Columbia were another important factor in cost of living estimates. What accommodation existed from 1849 to 1863 was provided to the miners at the employer's expense, although at Nanaimo sometimes only the lumber and nails were supplied.⁶⁵ After the VCMLC arrived the old company housing was sold off, but new construction remained inadequate. The small three-room woodframe houses were being let to miners by the VCMLC at £4 to £5 per month during the 1860s.⁶⁶ By British Columbian standards these were very low rents.⁶⁷ Subsequently the VCMLC operated a system of five-acre lot properties on which em-

⁶³ Barnsby, *Social Conditions*, op. cit., 251.

⁶⁴ Ibid. It is worth noting that Barnsby's base year of 1850 was well below the whole of the mid-century but well above the figures for 1880-1900 and was probably, therefore, not an ideal choice for an index base.

⁶⁵ PRO, C.O. 305(3), Letter from J. Pelly to Earl Grey, 14 January 1852.

⁶⁶ Matthew Macfie, *Vancouver Island and British Columbia: Their History, Resources and Prospects* (1865), 501.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

ployees took a twenty-one-year lease with an option to purchase outright after ten years. The lots were designed as "crofts," and management estimated (reasonably or not) that after eight to ten hours of work underground the miners would still have sufficient energy to put in an average of two hours per day on their small holdings.⁶⁸ Costs for the five-acre lots were calculated to be \$2.50 per annum in rental for the first five years, \$12.50 per annum over the following six years, with a purchase price of \$125 to \$250 per acre thereafter.⁶⁹ By any British standard it was exceptional that for an average rental of \$7.50 per year for the first ten years a Nanaimo miner could provide himself and his family with shelter and a piece of property which was very large by Old Country colliery town standards. In the 1880s other rented accommodation — both company- and independently-owned housing — was being let out at the much higher rate of about \$5 per month, rising to \$7 per month for better locations and facilities.⁷⁰ Although the VCMLC played an important role in housing its miners, the company was almost as disinterested in profiting from the sale or rental of homes (or using accommodations as a strike tool) as it had been about continuing the HBC's truck system.

The contrast between Nanaimo and the Dunsmuir towns was marked. While Nanaimo's outward appearance improved, descriptions of the Dunsmuirs' villages were consistently grim.⁷¹ Both Robert and James Dunsmuir pursued policies of controlled housing for their workers, primarily so that they could turn accommodations into an instrument for breaking strikes. For example, in the 1877 dispute Robert Dunsmuir (with the assistance of the navy) evicted striking employees from the large number of company houses at Wellington.⁷² The train of events surrounding the development of James Dunsmuir's mine at Extension, a few miles south of Wellington, provides further commentary on housing in the coalfield. In 1897, several hundred of Dunsmuir's Wellington miners and their families had begun building their homes at a new townsite about two miles from the pithead. Expressing fears over the contagion of labour militance at nearby Nanaimo, Dunsmuir ordered the relocation of his employees to a more completely

⁶⁸ McNab, *British Columbia for Settlers: Its Mines, Trade and Agriculture* (1898), 200-03.

⁶⁹ CSP, 1903, *Royal Commission on Industrial Disputes*, op. cit., 298-99.

⁷⁰ *PABC, Manson's Store (Nanaimo)*, Add. MSS 806, vol. II, Ledger, 1885-1956.

⁷¹ Isabelle Davis, "Forty-Ninth Parallel City: An Economic History of Ladysmith" (Honours B.A. essay, University of British Columbia, 1953), 42; McNab, op. cit., 200-03.

⁷² J. N. G. Bartlett, "The 1877 Wellington Miners' Strike" (Honours B.A. essay, University of British Columbia, 1975), 20; Morton and Copp, op. cit., 52.

organized company town: Ladysmith. In the new village, miners who were not living in tied housing were probably tenants on Dunsmuir property.⁷³ Land at Ladysmith could be obtained almost exclusively from Dunsmuir's Esquimalt and Nanaimo Railway Company at \$1 per foot for a 100-foot lot or about \$500 for a small house on a 100-foot lot.⁷⁴ Dismantling and relocating houses from Extension to the new village took as long as two months in some instances, and the cost (borne entirely by the miner's household) could prove ruinous.⁷⁵ The 200 families involved stood to lose between \$150 and \$300 each; in the end many did find themselves financially degraded by the transfer.⁷⁶

To summarize the housing situation for colonial coalminers, they were either living rent-free in tied housing, putting aside an average of about \$3 weekly to the eventual purchase of semi-rural land from the VCMLC, or renting at between \$5 and \$7 per week. Any comparison between the more senior hewers who bought five-acre farmsteads and those who rented (either in Britain or on Vancouver Island) reveals that the former were paying out a far lower proportion of their earnings on accommodations.⁷⁷ This cost factor mitigated food price rises and was a key feature in what might be loosely described as the VCMLC's social policy or town plan. The hardships suffered by the Dunsmuir's employees in tied accommodation underlines the variations in the living standards of Vancouver Island miners.

Along with the basic costs of food and shelter were expenses associated directly with mining. Miners had to bear the cost of lamps, explosive powder, boots, and very often tools as well.⁷⁸ Insurance against industrial accidents was another bill to be paid monthly. Offsetting some of these were the small perquisites enjoyed by colliers. Although there is no evidence to suggest that the colliers received free pints of ale (a common payment in kind in the Black Country), the white miners were entitled to the customary free coal throughout most of this period.⁷⁹ Free housing, as indicated above,

⁷³ CSP, 1903, *Royal Commission on Industrial Disputes*, op. cit., 46-49.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 65-66.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ See Ben Moffat, "A Community of Working Men: The Residential Environment of Early Nanaimo, British Columbia, 1875-1891" (M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1981), 109.

⁷⁸ In each of February and March 1890 one Wellington hewer was deducted \$9.25 from his wages for powder and 30 cents for oil. In April these costs increased to \$13.87 and 60 cents respectively but in May fell to \$4.64 for the explosive powder and no charge for oil. BCJ, 1891, *Report on the Wellington Strike*, op. cit., Exhibit A, cccxxxii.

⁷⁹ Benson, *British Coalminers*, op. cit., 78; Tweedy, op. cit., 40.

became increasingly rare at Nanaimo as the century progressed, although the Dunsmuirs provided this "service" for many of their miners. Whatever bonuses of this kind were available, their continuance was zealously guarded by the miners, an indication of the importance such perquisites were perceived to have in the household economy.

The ability of British miners to take their sons into pitwork constituted one of the chief advantages of employment underground and an important source of additional household income.⁸⁰ On Vancouver Island, however, white youths were in competition with low-waged Chinese labourers for places in the mines throughout the last quarter of the nineteenth century and were virtually eliminated from underground work from 1870 to 1877 and 1882 to 1888. Because boys were not always hired on sub-contracts but, instead, were paid directly by the company, household incomes among white miners suffered accordingly. Likewise, white women were faced with unusual competition in those service occupations that were, in Europe, considered female preserves. At Nanaimo in 1885, for example, there were 168 Chinese of whom six were merchants, eighteen cooks and servants, six storekeepers, four barbers, thirteen farm labourers, and eight "washermen."⁸¹ But for the Chinese, the cooking, domestic service, and laundry jobs would probably have been seized upon by white women.⁸²

In terms of actual losses to household incomes, an instructive comparison might be made with a budget drawn up by John Burnett for a Northumberland miner and his family for 1875. The figures for Vancouver Island whites are approximations based on daily earnings calculated over a 222-day work-year and adjusted to an eleven-day working fortnight. These appear in table 5.⁸³ As can be seen in this model, the adult Vancouver Island miner earned a great deal more than his Geordie counterpart in 1875, but the earnings of secondary or auxiliary breadwinners were closer. Unable to find work for sons under fourteen years of age in the local mines, the Nanaimo family could nevertheless earn, in nominal terms, about 134 per cent more than the Northumberland family. However, colonial miners' families sometimes could not find work of any kind underground

⁸⁰ Belshaw, "Mining Technique," *op. cit.*; *idem.*, "British Coalminers on Vancouver Island, 1848-1900: A Social History" (Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1987), chapter IV.

⁸¹ CSP, 1885, *Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration*, *op. cit.*, 363-66.

⁸² This was certainly the sentiment of white miners who testified to Royal Commissions in 1885 and 1902 on the effects of Asian immigration. *Ibid.*, 158; CSP, 1902, *op. cit.*, 81-82.

⁸³ In 1881 the average number of children per family headed by a British collier was exactly three. Miners from the U.S.A. and British North America had smaller households.

for teenage boys. In such cases the Vancouver Island miner with either completely dependent or lower-paid teenage sons would have to budget with a household income that was much closer to that of the Northumberland family.

Reduced household income, however, could be tolerable for the well-paid adult miner if nominal wages were enhanced by low costs. Also in

TABLE 5
*Approximate Household Budgets, Northumberland (1875)
and Nanaimo (1870s),* in dollars*

	<i>Northumberland</i>	<i>Nanaimo</i>
I. Fortnightly Earnings:		
Father	11.00	33.00
Son, putter (17-18)	9.16	16.50
Son, labourer (14-16)	3.41	11.00
Son, labourer (10-14)	2.29	0.00
TOTAL INCOME	25.86	60.50
II. Fortnightly Food Expenditures (sample) :		
Flour (5 stone)	3.25	3.50
Butter (2 lbs.)	0.66	1.00
Mutton (14 lbs.)	2.30	3.00
Milk (14 qts.)	0.84	1.25
Bacon (14 lbs.)	2.34	3.40
Coffee (1.25 lbs.)	0.75	0.48
Tea (0.25 lb.)	0.38	0.20
FOOD BUDGET	10.82	12.83
RENT	0.00	2.50
BALANCE	15.86	45.17

* Incomes calculated for 1877 and expenditures for 1870.

SOURCES: John Burnett, *Plenty and Want*, 191-92; BCSP, passim; *Public Archives of Canada, Canada Census 1880/1*, nominal returns; CSP, 1872, *Report of Langevin*, 134-35; *Nanaimo Free Press*, 28 April 1877.

table 5, a comparison of food prices and rents for the Northumberland family and a similar Nanaimo family indicates that although a basket of selected goods cost more in the colony, the gap was not as great as the wage differential. It should particularly be noted that some food prices were subject to violent fluctuations over time on Vancouver Island, especially imported items like raisins, nuts, and some meats. Against this must be placed the knowledge that any miner could augment his family's protein consumption through hunting and fishing around Nanaimo to an extent unavailable to colliers in most parts of Britain. Nonetheless, if work was not available for teenage sons or the miner's wife (and no more than a half dozen girls admitted to having jobs in Nanaimo or Wellington in 1880/81), then the adult white miner's total family income proved to be not much greater than that of his Northumberland counterpart. The Vancouver Island miner's income under these circumstances would cover the cost of his basket of goods, with only \$1.79 more left over than his contemporary from the northeast.⁸⁴ When the expense of insuring the life of the hewer is added, the differential is reduced further. Benefit societies on Vancouver Island charged \$2-\$4 per month for premiums in the 1890s, while British miners might pay as little as 20¢ monthly towards accident policies.⁸⁵ The important feature here must be underlined: although nominal wage rates for white miners were in some cases as much as treble what was earned in British coalfields, the difficulty of finding employment for more than one breadwinner per household in certain years and the slightly higher cost of living reduced and could even eliminate this advantage.

Quality of Living

The general impression, then, is that high nominal wages in the Vancouver Island coalfield translated into somewhat higher real wages. But were improved real wages enough to satisfy the colonists? Was it not the case that the quality of life in nineteenth-century Nanaimo, Wellington, and Union was so rudimentary as to constitute a considerable psychic loss to immigrant miners? The colliers of Brierley Hill, after all, could make the trek to Dudley or even to Wolverhampton for diversion, and in the closing years of the century seaside resorts like Blackpool, with their theatres and

⁸⁴ *Public Archives of Canada, Canada Census Enumerators' Books*, Microfilm No. C-13285.

⁸⁵ Naturally the danger varied from coalfield to coalfield, but even in Britain's most explosive mines premiums were typically a fraction of those on Vancouver Island. *PABC, Ancient Order of Foresters*, Add. MSS 913; John Benson, "The Thrift of the English Coal-Miners, 1860-95," *EHR*, 2nd series, XXXI (August 1978), No. 3, 417.

bright lights, were accessible to English miners; Nanaimo's pitmen would seem to have had nothing comparable.⁸⁶ Was it enough that Nanaimo presented "little of that sooty, opaque appearance, either physical or moral, so common to the colliery villages of England"?⁸⁷ Did the high wages of the British coalminers on Vancouver Island purchase a better all-round quality of life?

The calibre of essential goods offers one point of departure. In Britain in the nineteenth century, food was increasingly packed and processed to supply massive urban industrial populations, often with consequent deteriorations in quality.⁸⁸ As one author has observed, "food adulteration is essentially a phenomenon of urban life"; it follows that, in the absence of a large regional urban centre and with fresh foods available most of the year, the quality of the Vancouver Islanders' diet probably did not suffer any parallel decline.⁸⁹ Hunting in the foothills and forests flanking the colliery towns was both a form of recreation and an important source of fresh meat for the miners' families. The abundance of game — deer, bears, rabbits, wildfowl — meant that this manner of obtaining food could provide welcome variations as well.⁹⁰ Likewise fishing, particularly for salmon, was a source of both food and relaxation for settlers all along Georgia

⁸⁶ Although it lacked the pleasure pier, Victoria was something of a summertime resort for Nanaimo area miners. The Gulf Islands were also popular as retreats. To all of these locales the miners had regular access via weekly and twice-weekly boat lines. See Harry Forester, *Ocean Jottings: England to British Columbia in the S.S. "West Indian" and Scenes from the Chilean Revolution* (1891), 103; Cole Harris, "Moving Amid the Mountains, 1870-1930," *BC Studies* 58 (Summer 1983): 5-7; *PABC, John Wood Coburn Diary for 1886*, Add. MSS 783, vol. I, 2 September 1886.

⁸⁷ H. H. Bancroft, *op. cit.*, 574. A contemporary report on Nanaimo concurred: "Although one of the collieries is practically in the town, the workings extending all around the harbour, Nanaimo is the brightest, cleanest, sunniest and most cheerful little place imaginable. . . ." C. F. J. Galloway, *The Call of the West: Letters from British Columbia* (1916), 89-90.

⁸⁸ Hunt, *British Labour History*, *op. cit.*, 83.

⁸⁹ Burnett contends that the availability of employment for women outside the home hindered the development of culinary skills among British working-class women in the nineteenth century and that this was a further detrimental factor in the feeding of the British industrial proletariat. On Vancouver Island the usurpation of these female job prospects by Chinese males suggests the corollary: that the colonial white miner's housewife had an opportunity to become a better cook than her Old World counterpart, thereby better nourishing her male relatives. John Burnett, *Plenty and Want: A Social History of Diet in England from 1851 to the Present Day* (1979), 99.

⁹⁰ *PRO, C.O. 305(10)*, Survey at Nanaimo, Report of the Engineer in Charge, in letter from J. D. Pemberton to James Douglas, 22 July 1859; *PABC, Charles Alfred Bayley*, TS, Reminiscences: "Early Life on Vancouver Island" [1878?], 29. *The Times*, 26 May 1864, reported that "the principle [*sic*] food of the [Leech River gold miners] is venison, which is very abundant and good on the island." At Comox deer, wild duck, and geese were caught by the local Amerindians and sold to nearby communities of white prospectors, miners, and settlers.

Strait.⁹¹ Vegetables and a small amount of livestock (in particular, poultry, swine, and goats) could be accommodated on Nanaimo's five-acre lots; one contemporary newspaper report commented on how, attached to each of the small miners' cottages "with their neat gardens in the rear," one could find "cow-houses and piggeries, etc., and nearly every man can boast of having his cow. . . ."⁹² The Cedar River Valley to the south of Nanaimo was an early and reliable source of market vegetables and dairy products. Nanaimo residents also took advantage of the wide variety of shellfish that could be harvested nearby as well as the produce of sheep farms closer to Victoria and grains grown in Puget Sound, in Oregon, or in northern California.⁹³ A Sunday 1896 menu from Nanaimo's Central Hotel (a haunt of local colliers) illustrates how regional food resources were utilized:

Soup:

St. Julian

Choice of:

Stuffed Salmon
Baked Ham with Champagne Sauce
Lobster Salad and Celery

Entrées:

Oyster Patties
Chicket Giblet Pie
Breaded Pork Chops Spanish Style

With Choice of Vegetables:

Boiled or Sweet Potatoes
Stewed Tomatoes
Green Peas

Or:

Sirloin of Beef with Yorkshire Pudding
Venison with Cranberry Sauce
Roast Chicken with Dressing

Dessert:

English Plum Pudding,
Green Apple Pie, or
Lemon Pie

⁹¹ CSP, 1872, *British Columbia*, op. cit., 138-40, 235.

⁹² *Daily Colonist*, 8 June 1859, 3.

⁹³ PRO, C.O. 305(10), *Survey at Nanaimo*, op. cit.

Along with coffee, tea, or milk this meal cost only twenty-five cents (about one shilling), roughly the equivalent of one hour's work in a local pit.⁹⁴ A family of Nanaimo shipowners who had settled there initially as miners recalled that in their native Shetlands meat once a week was considered a luxury, whereas in the colony meat twice a day was not uncommon in the 1870s and 1880s.⁹⁵ The evidence at this stage suggests that the diets of Vancouver Island miners contained larger proportions of protein-rich lean meats and seafoods, fewer fatty or starchy foods, and more variety throughout the year than did those of their British counterparts.

As regards housing, the wide variety of British miners' dwellings and their costs makes general comparisons difficult. Although the vast majority of colliers in England, Scotland, and Wales did not reside in company housing, it was the form of accommodations familiar to perhaps as much as one-third of the mines' workforce in the last half of the century.⁹⁶ South Staffordshire and Scottish miners were sometimes able to buy houses, although it is impossible to say how broadly this extended or how early in the nineteenth century it first occurred.⁹⁷ The sentiments of British mine operators on the issue of home ownership among their workforce are unknown, although it is true that Alexander Macdonald's Scottish miners' union in the 1870s encouraged colliers to acquire their own homes, and one suspects that this ran counter to management's preferences.⁹⁸ The areas with the worst housing standards overall were to be found in Scotland, where the Commissioner of Mines in 1844 described what he found as "rather a hovel than a cottage, having nothing but ground floor."⁹⁹ Sanitation may have improved in many parts of working-class Britain by the 1870s, but in colliery towns it was still common to find high levels of over-crowding and poor water supplies.¹⁰⁰ One study of accommodations in Britain during the last century claimed that miners' household furnishings were "usually sparse" and that the "line between such houses and those of the poor was a thin one."¹⁰¹

⁹⁴ *Nanaimo Archives, Industry, Box 3, G-2, Code 16, B16/16.*

⁹⁵ E. B. Norcross, *Nanaimo Retrospective: The First Century* (Nanaimo 1979), 101-03.

⁹⁶ Robert Moore, *Pitmen, Preachers and Politics: The Effects of Methodism in a Durham Mining Community* (Cambridge, 1974), 81; Benson, *British Coalminers*, op. cit., 105-06. See also Ernst Duckershoff, *How the English Workman Lives* (1899), 29-49.

⁹⁷ Benson, *ibid.*, 106-10.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Quoted in Challinor and Ripley, op. cit., 50-51.

¹⁰⁰ Benson, *British Coalminers*, op. cit., 106-07; Hunt, *British Labour History*, op. cit., 88-89.

¹⁰¹ John Burnett, *A Social History of Housing, 1815-1970* (1978), 171-72.

On Vancouver Island accommodations for miners were seldom satisfactory, particularly under the HBC regime. One feature of tensions at Fort Rupert had been the low standard of shelter provided for the Lanarkshire miners and their families; in 1854 it was still the case that the colony badly needed a carpenter and an efficient sawmill for producing building materials.¹⁰² In 1862 it was reported that the Hudson's Bay Company's eighty-four dwellings at Nanaimo gave the place "an air of substantial comfort" with their whitewashed squared timbers, but only a few months later the *Daily Colonist* observed that the growing number of cabins in Nanaimo were so loosely built "that the wind would whistle through the logs with a shriek of triumph, their chimnies [*sic*] bulged and tottered and here and there a cask [was] fitted on the top as a substitute for a chimney pipe."¹⁰³ Unsatisfactory housing was a contributory factor in an 1865 strike, and in 1866 the *Nanaimo Gazette* described the village as "still in its primitive state." Housing was said to be "poor" and "uncomfortable" while the interiors were "dark dingy cribs . . . with furniture and utensils so few and so rude as barely sufficient to minister to the animal wants."¹⁰⁴ It is likely that housing quality on Vancouver Island varied with fluctuations in the coal trade, but white impressions of Asian housing in the last quarter of the century suggest that hewers had become accustomed to considerably improved conditions.¹⁰⁵

Other social amenities which may have influenced Vancouver Island miners' perceptions of their quality of life can be briefly enumerated. The Nanaimo Philharmonic Society was established in the first decade of settlement, and the Nanaimo Literary Institute followed soon after.¹⁰⁶ The Nanaimo Concert Band was created around 1872, and although it was dominated by the colliery company's management it did contain a few miners.¹⁰⁷ Like most English and Scottish pitmen, the Vancouver Island colliers particularly relished gambling, and races of any kind were the focus of atten-

¹⁰² *PRO, C.O. 305(6)*, Letter from George P. Martin to Commodore Charles Frederick, 16 October 1854; *ibid.*, 305(4), Letter from A. Barclay (HBC Secretary) to James Douglas, quoted in H. Merivale to Lord Newcastle, 18 February 1853.

¹⁰³ *Daily Colonist*, 31 January 1863, 3.

¹⁰⁴ *Daily Colonist*, Letter from "A Miner" to editor, 28 January 1865; *Nanaimo Gazette*, 29 January 1866.

¹⁰⁵ CSP, 1902, *Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration*, testimony of William Stocker, 1901 President of the Miners and Mine Labourers Protective Association, 87.

¹⁰⁶ *Nanaimo Gazette*, 27 December 1865; *Nanaimo Archives, Societies, Box 1, F-4, Code 8, D8/1a.b.*

¹⁰⁷ *PABC, Buckham Collection*, vol. 162/7, Letter from James Dunsmuir to H. Murdock, Bandmaster, Cumberland, 3 April 1902.

tion in summer fêtes.¹⁰⁸ Prize money of as much as \$500 drew competitors and punters from as far afield as Portland, Oregon.¹⁰⁹ Opportunities for work stoppages on holidays were ample in the warmer months. Along with the Queen's Birthday, which held a special significance for the British settlers, Dominion Day and Independence Day were both celebrated on the coalfield.¹¹⁰ Thanksgiving Day was also marked each year (sometimes on both the Canadian and American calendars) and the annual celebration of Labour Day at Nanaimo began in 1890.¹¹¹ Ethnic holidays, like the Welshmen's St. David's Day, were celebrated as open, public events.¹¹² "Saint" or "Blue" Monday was an unofficial holiday irregularly claimed by Island miners; these self-imposed long weekends were a fragment of a British working-class custom which had come under siege in many English coalfields in the 1850s and 1860s but which was able to survive in British Columbia somewhat longer.¹¹³ English football was a popular sporting diversion, and Nanaimo fielded competent teams against touring British sides.¹¹⁴ Cricket was introduced by English miners in the 1860s or 1870s, as were quoits and bowling — regular features of the sports days and weekend competitions which provided an opportunity for the sparse settlements to interact socially.¹¹⁵ These activities, along with the possibility of obtaining land, free access to hunting areas, and improved diets, constituted part of a psychic income which is, of course, impossible to quantify.

¹⁰⁸ *PABC, Garrard Papers*, 65.

¹⁰⁹ *PABC, Ebenezer Robson, 1835-1911: Diary, 1885, Original*, 28 August 1885.

¹¹⁰ Walter N. Sage, "The Critical Period in British Columbia's History, 1861-1871," *Pacific Historical Review* I (1932), 430.

¹¹¹ *PABC, Vertical Files; Nanaimo Free Press*, 23 and 27 May 1874, 1 July 1874.

¹¹² *Nanaimo Free Press*, 4 March 1876, 3.

¹¹³ It is possible that the long-standing connection with the Black Country, where Saint Monday traditions remained strong and violent longest in England, was one explanation for its persistence on Vancouver Island. See Douglas Reid, "The Decline of Saint Monday 1766-1876," *Past and Present* 71 (May 1976): 78-88, 96-97; Hugh Cunningham, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution, c. 1780-1880* (1980), 64. For examples of unofficial voluntary holidays see *PABC, Captain Stuart Journal*, op. cit., 24-31 December 1855, 3 January 1856, 25 December 1858, 1 April 1858.

¹¹⁴ James Hawthornthwaite, whose name was later to acquire greater political than athletic resonance, moved to Nanaimo from Victoria around 1889 and promptly established a football team. The side he assembled included one "all-England" player, two experienced Scots, a veteran of Devonshire County football and a handful of others who had played better calibre football in Britain before emigrating. *PABC, Garrard Papers*, op. cit., 65-68.

¹¹⁵ The popularity of bowling, rowing, cricket, and quoits among Island miners may have been derived from Northumberland colliers in the region. See Alan Metcalfe, "Organized Sport in the Mining Communities of South Northumberland," *Victorian Studies* XXV (1982), No. 4, 470-82.

Apart from the small number of miners who were born and raised on Canada's west coast, the colliers shared in a degree of worldliness. Some had travelled as far afield as Australia, New Zealand, Mauritius, and South America; others had arrived via the cosmopolitan goldfields of California; still others had migrated directly from their homes in Britain, the Maritimes, or the eastern United States through cities like Glasgow, Manchester, London, Montreal, Toronto, Philadelphia, and Chicago. To these individuals, the hastily built mining villages of Vancouver Island must have appeared crude and uninviting. Nevertheless, the British settlers achieved a kind of comfort in the colonial wilds. Rough-hewn the communities certainly were, but they were not entirely devoid of familiar cultural institutions. The popularity of quoits tournaments, local football teams, Saint Monday, and cricket testifies to the vitality of Old World working-class cultural forms in the region. Once the difficulty of providing food year-round had been remedied and the shortcomings of local housing had been redressed, the colonial coalfield permitted the miner and his family an existence which was far from barren, one which was in some ways undeniably superior to what had been left behind.¹¹⁶

Conclusion

British miners were attracted to Vancouver Island by the promise of high wages. In large part this promise was kept. Nominal wage rates were as much as three times as high as those awarded to miners in British coalfields. The work-year was comparable, and to a certain extent prices were

¹¹⁶ A useful indicator of living standards would normally be the infant mortality rate. On Vancouver Island, however, the inclusion of a large, bacteriologically vulnerable Amerindian population probably distorts the figures. In 1880/81 and 1891 the deaths of under-5s per 1,000 live births was 412 and 679 respectively. These levels were extremely high by contemporary British standards: around 150 for England and Wales in these years. By contrast, in 1901 the Vancouver District figure fell to only 112 while the English and Welsh figure was still in the area of 155. In 1911 infant mortality among British mining families was estimated to be 162 per 1,000 live births; another study cites figures as high as 213 per 1,000. The change on Vancouver Island may indicate that the situation of white settlers was improving, that the demographic crisis among Salish and Kwakiutl communities had nearly run its course, or both. Without access to detailed death records at this stage these conclusions can only be conjectural. P. D. Logan, "Mortality in England and Wales from 1848 to 1947," *Population Studies* IV (September 1950), No. 2, 134-35; T. H. C. Stevenson, "The Fertility of Various Social Classes in England and Wales from the Middle of the Nineteenth Century to 1911," *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* LXXXIII (1920), 405; Michael R. Haines, "Fertility, Nuptiality, and Occupation: A Study of Coal Mining Populations and Regions in England and Wales in the Mid-Eighteenth Century," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* VIII (Autumn 1977), 9, 248-49; BCSP [Various Ministerial Reports], 1874-1900, passim; *Canada Census 1880/1*, II, 380-81; idem., 1891, II, 70-71; idem., 1901, II, 278-81.

comparable. But white household incomes in the colony fluctuated with the use of Chinese miners underground and the consequent reduction in jobs for white teenagers. In the 1870s, for example, one of Nanaimo's British mining households with two employable boys could have earned, on average, as little as \$15 per week or as much as \$30 per week, depending on management's willingness to favour white youths over Chinese adults. Changes in the employment prospects of boys had serious repercussions for the real wages of miners' households; female members of working-class families (being even more marginalized economically) could provide little relief to this position. The findings of this study suggest that explanations for labour volatility in the coalfield town might best begin from an appreciation of the apparent lack of consistency in the employment of boys, the implications of this development for British-trained hewers, the consequent reduction in household wages, and difficulties encountered in attempts to diversify the sources of household incomes.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ This argument has been developed in Belshaw, "British Coalminers on Vancouver Island," *op. cit.*, chapter IX.