

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

While Britannia's communities are known for having been 'one big happy family', there was still class segregation.

When it came to the employees, miners stuck with miners, surface workers, with workers, and professionals such as geologists and engineers as well as management onto themselves.

The division by class or profession was reflective of Canadian culture at the time.

Where Britannia was different was in its closed structure. Closed meaning the Company controlled who was living in the towns and what was permitted in the towns.



Read over these excerpts from our aural histories.



How does the level of class distinction found at Britannia compare to today?



Discuss how the high level of class consciousness amongst miners might have affected the relationship between workers and management?

THE NATURE OF THE COMMUNITY

Clair Bennet was born in Britannia. She moved away with her parents at age four. She was asked to comment on the quote ‘Britannia was a closed community, highly polarized, which isolated the workers and made them as dependent on each other above ground as they were below.’

Well it certainly was polarized, I suppose it was closed because of the isolation. But it was also closed in terms of, the people who worked underground only socialized with the people who worked underground and the wives and husbands of the miners themselves were a different group than say the people like my parents. Actually my dad didn't fit into any group. There were two strata, there were the mining engineers and their wives and the guys and their wives that worked underground. My dad and mom sort of fitted in the middle because my dad wasn't an engineer or miner. He was office staff, and there weren't that many of them so they tended to socialize with the engineering group because of course, the miners excluded him and so he, out of necessity – and that's how they knew the Brownings so well



Discuss how this description of Britannia's social groups compares to life today?

WHAT WAS THE MANAGEMENT LIKE UNDER MOODIE?

Donald was a UBC student hired on for the summer of 1919. He worked at Britannia while it was run by JWD Moodie - a man described as an autocratic leader who had exacting standards by which he expected people to work. Part of his legacy is if you broke the rules, you were fired. Here is Donald's recollection:

The mine was never what you called a slave driving operation. Nobody had to work his head off. As long as you did a reasonably decent days work, nobody ever said anything. You saw the foreman maybe once every 3 or 4 days; you saw the Superintendent about once every month; you saw the Shift Boss maybe once or twice. Personally I was always glad to see them because there may have been trouble coming up which they could solve. We certainly didn't know anything, but we learned a lot during the summer.

I don't know how true it was but the reputation was that the Company very seldom fired anybody. It had to be for very good reasons. If they ever fired anybody, they'd never take them back.

I never met Mr. Moodie. I think I saw him. He was an elderly gentleman. No doubt he was a good manager. He ran the mine, I presume as somewhat, as an autocrat but at a distance. They ran it on a fairly humane basis.



Discuss how Moodie could have become characterized as an unforgiving, demanding boss.

Discuss how generalizations of people can create misleading descriptions of them.

WHAT WAS THE MANAGEMENT LIKE UNDER BROWNING?

Jack worked at Britannia during what can be called 'the Browning Era'. C.P. Browning ran Britannia for 25 years, beginning in 1921. He is remembered as a caring manager who strove to provide a good place for his workers to live and work. He is also the man that oversaw Britannia become the largest copper mine in the British Empire.

Here is Jack's recollection from 1933:

There were union activities but during my whole regime there, there was no union. This was right after the depression and there was a lot of unemployment and management pretty well ran the show as they wanted to. It was standard knowledge at Britannia that if a certain shift boss didn't like the colour of your eyes why he could fire you and, you had no recourse to it.

There were many things that happened that were very unfair to labour. Management dominated the picture and they did what they wanted. They fired people without cause. They had stool pigeons and they would tell on certain people, and for personal reasons, they would fire you. It was unfair. There was never any incentive at all to encourage people. They didn't give the workmen too much chance.

They would do sneaky tricks like the boss would come in to the tunnel and turn off his lamp and if you stopped for a smoke and the boss caught you, "Down the hill you'd go!" (you were fired).



Discuss why the challenges of the Great Depression forced the Mine to operate efficiently. How could this have shaped the opinions of the workers?

Discuss how Browning could care for his workers and also be very strict.