

WILLIAM NAHANEE

1866-1946

The longshoreman standing in the centre of the dock (with his bag of laundry at his feet) in this 1889 photograph titled *the Squamish Longshore Men at Moodyville Sawmill* is William Nahanee.

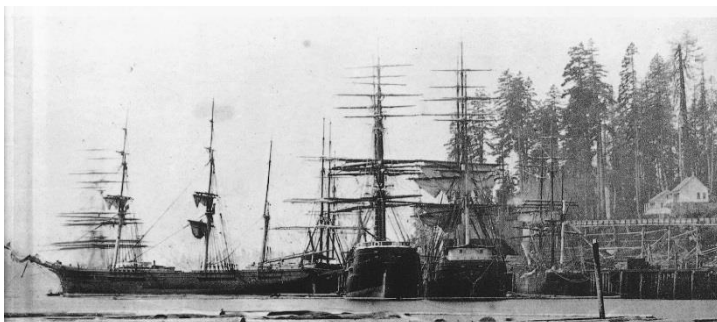


The list of notable longshore workers who worked on the Vancouver area docks would be must include William Nahanee. He demonstrated his commitment to the principle of fair pay for fair work over 130 years ago in the waterfront's first strike.

In the 1880s, Vancouver area loggers cut massive stands of virgin fir and cedar trees by the thousands each month from the forests surrounding the Salish Sea. These huge trees, most averaging over 500 years old, were renowned for their strength, size, and beauty around the world. Moodyville Sawmill, the Province's largest private employer at the time, turned these logs to lumber and loaded the lumber on sailing ships for Europe and Asia. Many of the longshore workers who loaded this lumber were from the Squamish First Nation who excelled at loading and stowing lumber quickly, securely and efficiently.

One longshore worker, William Nahanee, from the Squamish First Nation, worked as labourer on the docks at Moodyville Sawmill. The demanding labouring jobs of stacking and rigging the lumber loads were predominately filled by first nations men. They were paid less than the white men who filled the more prestigious and higher paid jobs on the docks such as foreman and operating the winches which moved the loads.

Nahanee was key in promoting teamwork of the loading gangs. When the winch operator failed to show for a shift, Nahanee stepped up and ran the winch. When gangs heard the winch operator had died, most assumed Nahanee would take that job, even if it has always gone to a white man.



Nahanee's foreman soon walked up to him on the dock and shook his hand, telling Nahanee that this was a historic day: Moodyville Sawmill had decided to ignore racial prejudice and give him, an Indian, the chance to operate the winch.

Nahanee smiled back at the foreman and quipped that it was time management started assigning jobs on the common-sense basis of ability. He agreed with his foreman that it was a historic day, remarking “After years of working harder and better than the white men, I will finally get paid the same as one.”

“Now hold on” said the foreman. “I said we are going to let you do a white man’s job. But you’re still an Indian. We can’t pay you like a white man, you’ll have to keep your labourer pay.”

“No, I won’t keep my labourer pay or any pay” said Nahanee, as he collected his gear and left the site. “I won’t work for a mill which pays me less for being Indian”.

Moodyville Sawmill assigned white which operators to load the ships but productivity dropped amongst the lumber gangs without Nahanee. Two weeks later, with complaints of ships sailing late every day, the foreman sheepishly came to Nahanee’s house to offer him the winch operator job at the full pay. Nahanee accepted and the previous pace of work resumed.

Nahanee’s courage to walk off the job and leave the province’s largest sawmill when the company insulted his dignity was the first waterfront strike in BC. Nahanee withheld his labour to make the company deal fairly with him. He showed the other longshore workers that a worker can have a voice and a company can be wrong.

Nahanee’s strike didn’t end racism or favouritism on the waterfront. It did not cause union hiring halls to suddenly spring up or start collective bargaining as later strikes did... but it was the first courageous step towards those achievements that other waterfront workers would later secure.

William Nahanee deserves a prominent position amongst BC’s most influential longshore workers: the leader of the first waterfront strike.



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