

Allen Robertson, interviewed by Imbert Orchard, 1965

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Well, you weren't supposed to, but when I spoke to my parents about it, they said, we will give you our permission, but we will not state what your age is. And when I went to the 6th DCOR in Vancouver in August of 1914 to join up, the old colonel got five of us to stand around the table and put our hands on the Bible as we took the oath of allegiance. He gave about two sentences, I suppose, of it. Then he turned to me and looked me straight in the eye, and he said, Robertson, are you 18 years of age. I managed to say yes, but he did that three times during the administration of the Oath of Allegiance. The worst spot I think I'd ever been in my life up until that. But then after that there was never any question of it.

I imagine you had a pretty, well, a strenuous life in the woods, and it made you look a little older, possibly, than you look today. Is that so? Yes, I think so. Physically I never had any difficulty until... **You were able to land in one way.** Yes. Yes, I could hold my own with most of the men that did axe work or sawing or anything of that sort. **Do you remember this first logging trip that you made away?**

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Did you like to... did you feel proud that you were earning a living?

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Yes, very much so. I turned my wages in to my mother when I got them. And, yes, I thought I was doing very, very well. **You were 14, right?** Yes. 14. The last year or so before I joined up, I worked with Barrett and Middleton, who were three partners, Bert Middleton, Harry Middleton, and William Barrett formed a partnership, and I was the crew, I was the only hired man. And we logged on the [Cor...inaudible] **Like that, it goes back to the...** Yes, yes, he's quite clear on anything like that, very careful about his statements.

Just to cover this for a second, you were saying about going to Vancouver, what was it you were saying about taking the boat? Well, a boat trip to Vancouver for the ordinary householder, and especially for a youngster like me, was an event to think about for months and remember for years. I imagine in the period between 1905 and 1910, I only made about two trips to Vancouver. But it would be quite often a three-day trip on the boat.

This island seems to be very isolated to you then, there seems to be a big world outside it. How did you feel about living on this island? No, we didn't feel isolated. We had our own community, and we knew we had to depend on ourselves. There was no doctor on the island. My mother, because of her medical missionary training, worked as a midwife, I suppose you would call it. And I can remember men coming in with a lantern at 2 o'clock in the morning, getting her out of bed and taking her through the woods, just on trails, to attend the birth of some of their children, the Parrott family and the Malcolm family particularly. But in case of serious difficulty, it was either, of course, the case that take the person to Powell River or Vancouver, and in later years, during the First War, in the 20s, Campbell River had a hospital and became the center for that.

What do you remember about the loggers and the boats? Well, logging up until the first war, until practically the end of the first war, was a question of the loggers usually traveled in their working clothes. They wore their own cork boots. They did not expect to get a berth on the steamers. What staterooms there were, were reserved for women. And the decks of the Comox and the Cassiars, I remember them,

were always covered with wooden gratings so that their corks could have something to hold on. I remember being quite surprised when I came back at the end of the first war and they had taken the wooden covers off and the person was standing at the gangway pointing at anybody that came near with cork boots, get those boots off or you'll break your neck when you get on the steel plates. When I started working in the woods after the war, then came the time when the companies began to provide blankets, clean sheets, quite a different setup. But I can still remember 1921, going up to Loughborough Inlet, T.B. Anderson's camps, when his oldest boy, Dewey, a man about 6'5", figured he was the best man on the boat for two days and nights. He undertook to throw anybody, and the only place they could do this was in this sort of big rotunda near the purser's office. So they piled suitcases along one side, and when somebody got thrown, they aimed to throw him at those. By the time we got to Vancouver, practically every suitcase in there was burst open, clean shirts and suits, and everything was piled up four feet deep. That was their idea of a good time. And we never expected to get a berth. We simply lay down with a blanket if we wanted to, or just stretched out along the gangways wherever there was room and out of the rain.

Was it pretty crowded, those boats? Sometimes, very crowded, quite often. And in the early days, around 1910, 1915, the boats had licenses to sell liquor. So there was a lot of difficulty over that. They were compelled to close the bar when they were in port. So most of the boats, the Cassiar and such like, would come into the landing. A bunch of men would pile on board as it was a logging camp, and then the boat would go out in the harbor for half an hour and allow them to get all the whiskey they wanted or whatever they were drinking, then come back into the dock again and they got off. So that was the way they served their customers.

Profitable business. Huge company, I guess. Yeah. Well, what about the boats coming back from Vancouver with the loggers on them? Those were quite large at this point. Do you remember anything about that? Well, I can only say that a lot of drinking went on at times, but I think most of them got rid of most of their money while they were in Vancouver. Partly due to my upbringing, I never did get into, well, up until I joined the... In fact, years after that, I never took a drink. And I remember one instance that sticks in my mind, working at a camp at Bird Cove on Read Island at, I guess, 13 years of age. The youngest in the camp, the hook tender and the man named Higgins and the rigging slinger decided that I should take a drink with them. And we were out sitting on the sidewalk between the store and the building where we slept. This was a walk raised above the ground about two feet. Well, the two of them finally got me down on my back and were going to force me to drink out of it, but I managed to squirm underneath this boardwalk, and in doing so I broke the bottle, so I had to leave camp for three or four hours until some of the other men got hold of these two drunken, hook tender rigging slingers and got them quieted down.

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There was one boat particularly that was a logger's boat, wasn't it? Was it the Cassiar?

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The Cassiar, I think perhaps more than any other. Later years, of course, the Cowichan, Cheslakee, Cheakamus, and Venture all went into that trade. But before the First War, the Comox and Cassiar were the two that were the big carriers along the mainland side. On the Vancouver Island side ran the larger boats which went through to Prince Rupert and worked in the Alert Bay District through there.

Do you remember Read Island quite well? Yes, fairly well. **What would you say about it, what was the peculiarities of the people on it?** Well, we had a sort of personal connection with Read Island because a cousin of my mother's, a Welshman named John Jones, settled there about 1900, a bachelor for many years, but one of the greatest physical workers, I think that I have met. Originally a man of 5'10", 5'11", perhaps. And when he sold the timber off part of his place to the Hastings Company, he provided them with beef and potatoes for several years, a camp of maybe 150 men. But he didn't think that with the rough roads - there were no roads, he just carried the stuff on his back over trails, sometimes a couple of miles from where he'd grown it to where the camp was. He said the country was too rough for a horse, so he carried everything on his back, something in the neighborhood of maybe ten tons of potatoes in a year and a cow every month. Eventually he married, but at one time, I know, near the end of the First War he had an offer of \$25,000 and he asked me if I thought it was enough or whether he was justified in accepting it. It seemed to him a lot of money at the time. He didn't accept it, and later he died in the Rock Bay Hospital and left the estate to the Columbia Coast Mission. But I think Mr. Green told me that he got very, very little out of it in the way of cash. The places were logged out by that time and had practically no value.

Wasn't there a notorious hotel on the... Yes, run by a man named Wiley. Well, Wiley was alive from when I first remember him. He had quite a store. He had a logging camp of his own. The only powerboats in those countries were steamboats. Wiley had one, and Bull at Harriot Bay had another one. And most of the time they ran them on wood or on bark that they pried off the logs in the booms. Wiley died at Bird Cove and was buried in a grave which was blasted out of the rock. They put him down in the hole and then poured cement over him. And that's still there on the entrance to the bay on Read Island.

Is this what he said he was probably wanting to be buried? Yes, that was his wishes as far as I can remember. **Do you remember this chap?** All I can remember is going into the store, my dad and I went over there once or twice to the rowboat, it's about a four mile row from Whaletown, and I'd judge he would be a heavy built man then, around 55 years of age, that's probably around 1909 or 1910. But that's all I can remember. A little gray hair, but a big heavy, rather slow-moving man. **Any stories about him at all?** No, I don't recall any. **As much the same as Bull's hotel, I suppose, as a lively place for the loggers.** Yes, and at that age I wasn't supposed to have anything to do with them, so I don't think I had much interest in them either.

When did you come to work for the Columbia Coast Mission? Well, my first contact with the Columbia Coast Mission was in 1911 when Mr. Green and Hepburn, college students from Toronto, came and lived in our cottage at Whaletown. And the reason it sticks in my mind very hard at that time was the two of them demanded that I should go in swimming before breakfast with them in the salt water. However, Mr. Green was overseas as a chaplain in the first war, and when he came back, after I got out of hospital, 1920, that would be, 1919, I worked for him a year on the Makehewi, the mission ship he had at that time, as engineer and general help. But...

Was he beginning just then? No, he had already been on the mission before. Yes, he had been out as a student for three or four summers before the First War. But back in 1906, when I was seven years old or eight years old, I can remember the first Columbia coming into Whaletown was John Antle on it, and the first Presbyterian boat coming in then. I'm missing the name of the minister now. **Called Crosby...** It was a man before Crosby. Anyway, when they came in, our house was the only house in the district that had an organ in it, or a piano. We had an organ, and my mother was a good player. So services of any minister that came in, if he couldn't hold them aboard the ship, were held in our house. And our house, for many

years, had impromptu services in it. But when a minister came into the harbor, he would get in touch with my mother, and I was the one that had to run around the country and notify the people where the service would be and when it would be held. **How would you do your running around? Just on your feet?** Just on my legs, yes. You know, the roads were pretty rough in those days. It was all horses, of course, up until I think the first car came to Whaletown about 1911. The previous to that was horses and carts with iron wheels.

Did you have horses? Yes, we had a team, a good deal of the time.

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For riding horses?

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No, they were used for work, hauling wood and plowing. **Tell me about your experiences with the Columbia Coast Mission, Alan Green was really just starting at that time, and regularly, I suppose, on the Columbia Coast.** Well, he started about 1918, I guess, as a minister for the Columbia Coast Mission with his headquarters in Quathiaski. He was married at that time, after he came back from France, and raised his family in Quathiaski until the 30s. **What do you remember about that year of working for him? I mean, I'm not sure he was so passionate about the work [inaudible]**

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I'm sure, a very young man.

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Well, he tried to hold regular services at Whaletown, Quathiaski, sometimes Campbell River. But a great deal of his work entailed servicing the hospital at Rock Bay, making trips, although there was no wireless and no telephone service. By word of mouth and by pre-appointment, he would arrange to take people to the hospital and take them back to their homes from the hospital. Rock Bay then was the center for the Hastings and had about four or five hundred loggers employed in the camps around there.

What was the hospital at Rock Bay? Was it a [inaudible]? I think built during the first war. And oh, I would think about ten or twelve beds. I remember it because the Hastings was one of the first two or three logging companies of that size in B.C. And my Uncle Charlie was the first locomotive engineer in B.C. for the Hastings, also their first master mechanic. And in 1916, when I came up to Rock Bay one trip on a leave from hospital, it was only 1917, I remember the superintendent there, Mr. Debracy, saying, Well, Al, your uncle did a good job for us. If you'd like to stay here a week or two and roam around the camps, you're welcome to. So for three or four days I jumped on any locomotive I wanted to and slept in any camp. Later I worked for them as a logger for a year or so. **Where were they getting their logs from?** Well, at that time they were rail dumping at Rock Bay and logging on what is now Amur Lake and Roberts Lake and Stella Lake, Cranberry Lake, back 20, 30 miles from Tidewater.

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Where were they taking their logs to?

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Oh, going to their own mill at Hastings Mill, where the big elevators are in Vancouver now.

[Inaudible] Oh I think she enjoyed it. **She must have had quite an education.** Yes. The last war, no. I mean, about five years ago, my wife and I were back in Europe for six months, and I went to Cardiff, saw some of my mother's acquaintances, and I went down to the Cardiff College, and one of the professors showed me the room in which he said my mother would have taken her medical training in 86, 87, 88...

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