

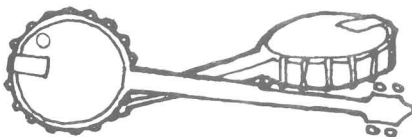
Are you from Bevan?

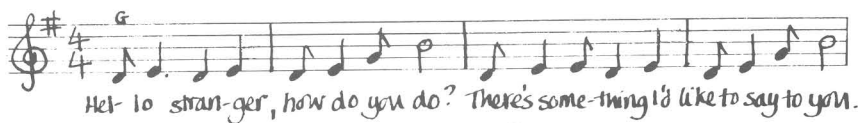
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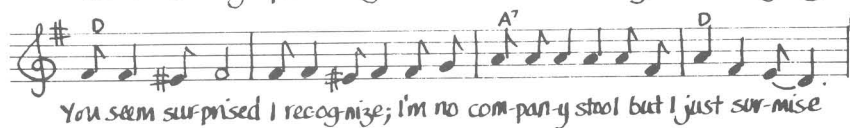


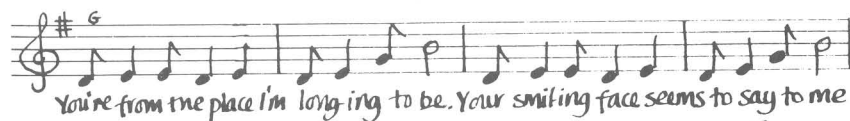
A member of the militia sent to Vancouver Island, 1913.

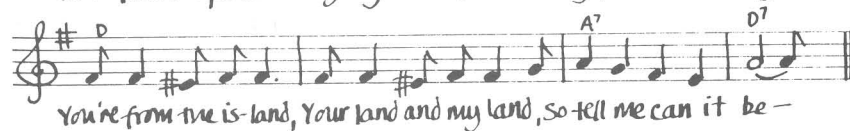
“Are You From Bevan?” is a mixture of nostalgia and grim recollection. The song tells in brief the story of a two-year episode in the long struggle of the coal miners of Vancouver Island to have the major mine owners accept their right to form a union. In the song a man—no longer a coal miner on the island—hails another whom he remembers from one of the colliery towns in the Cumberland area. He recalls the incident which precipitated the two-year dispute, the firing and blacklisting of a member of a miners’ Gas Committee. He then tells of the men’s reaction at Cumberland in September, 1912, where the blacklisted miner was turned away by the management. The men took a joint ‘holiday’ both to protest and discuss what further they should do. The next day they were ordered to take their tools from the mine unless they would sign individual two-year contracts. The song then refers to the ‘foul’ that nearly knocked them out. The ‘foul’ was collusion of the provincial government of McBride and Bowser with the dominant Canadian Collieries (Dunsmuir) Ltd. in their strike-breaking activities. These included the employment in Cumberland of men, mostly Chinese, whom they were able to intimidate; the turning of a mine and its townsite into an armed camp with special police and eventually militia; the condoning of armed strikebreakers at Extension when there was no evidence to suggest that the strikers were armed or intending to arm themselves; the arrest by duplicity of men gathered in Nanaimo in peaceful assembly; and finally the maintaining of military

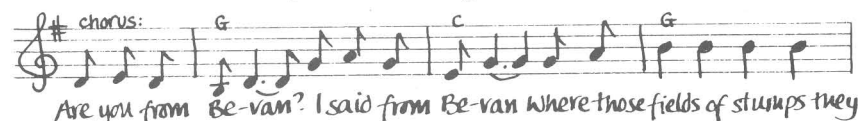


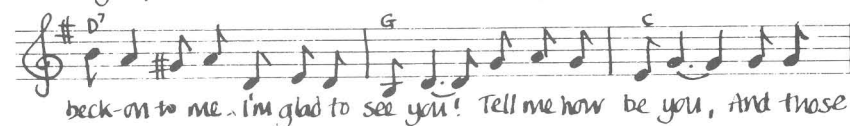

 Het lo stran-ger, how do you do? There's some-thing I'd like to say to you.

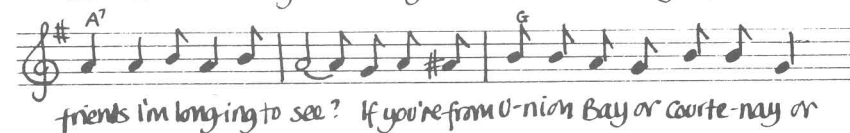

 You seem surprised I recognize; I'm no com-pan-y stool but I just sur-mise

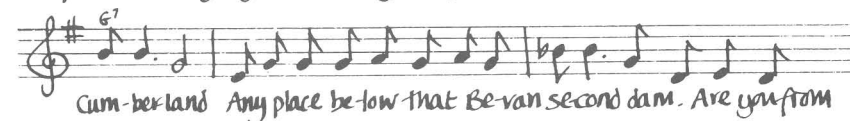

 You're from the place I'm long-ing to be. Your smil-ing face seems to say to me

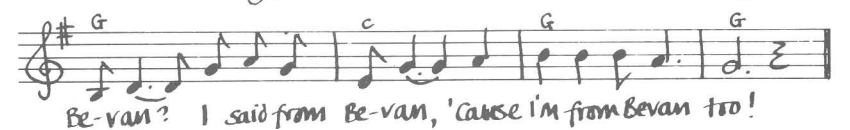

 You're from the is-land, Your land and my land, so tell me can it be -


 chorus: Are you from Be-van? I said from Be-van where those fields of stumps they


 beck-on to me. I'm glad to see you! Tell me how be you, And those


 friends I'm long-ing to see? If you're from U-nion Bay or Courte-nay or


 Cum-ber-land Any place be-low that Be-van second dam. Are you from


 Be-van? I said from Be-van, 'cause I'm from Bevan too!

Music transcribed by Shirley Cox.
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Hello, stranger, how do you do?
There's something I'd like to say to you.
You seem surprised I recognize;
I'm no company stool but I just surmise
You're from the place I'm longing to be.
Your smiling face seems to say to me
You're from the island, your land and my land,
So tell me can it be—

Chorus

Are you from Bevan? I said from Bevan
Where those fields of stumps they beckon to me
I'm glad to see you!
Tell me how be you,
And those friends I'm longing to see?
If you're from Union Bay or Courtenay or Cumberland
Any place below that Bevan second dam—
Are you from Bevan? I said from Bevan,
'Cause I'm from Bevan too!

It was way back in 19 and 12
Our gas committee was put on the shelf.
First we walked out, then we were locked out—
Then by a foul we were all but knocked out.
Our union miners faced guns and jail,
Hundreds of us were held without bail,
But by August 1914 our labour they were courting,
But they blacklisted me—

rule over the entire mining area to ensure that no union organization could possibly succeed.

Mining coal underground is for a number of natural reasons hazardous even in the best conditions, but the record on Vancouver Island had been very poor. In 1884 at Wellington 23 men were killed. In 1887 at Nanaimo 148 men, in 1889 at Wellington 75 men, in 1901 at Extension 17 men, in 1909 at Extension 33 men. This incomplete list shows that to the miners of 1912 the threat of gas explosions and fire was vividly present. Accidents with blasting, falling rock and moving machinery in 1912 in the Canadian Collieries' mines resulted in 2.12 deaths per 1000 workers.

Arguments for a union ranged from those based on concepts of human rights and dignity to those dealing with wages, working condi-

tions and safety. Mine owners like the Dunsmuirs had amassed fortunes and wanted no interference after decades of profitable management. As a means of keeping money costs down and frustrating the demands of the men, the owners had used many types of discrimination including tying wage differences to racial differences; they fought against the eight-hour day, and when it became law they obstructed its implementation; they readily took the gamble when mine safety was marginal. When laws were passed to make the miners welcomed government concern. But they believed that these concern. But they believed that these safety regulations could be effective only if the men had the protection of their own union.

On Vancouver Island in 1912 the four coal mine companies employed 3,500 men. Canadian Collieries

(Dunsmuir) Ltd., bought two years earlier by the railway promoters William MacKenzie and Donald Mann, pursued the anti-union policies of the former Dunsmuir owners. The other three companies, although operating 'company unions,' supported the Canadian Collieries' opposition to *bona fide* unions. After the United Mine Workers of America had received repeated invitations from a substantial number of Vancouver Island miners, the union in 1911 sent organizers to the island. The miners from the Cumberland, Nanaimo and Ladysmith areas believed that only the backing of a large union could overcome the adamant opposition of the coal owners. The dispute in September, 1912 over the blacklisting of one man quickly became an issue of union recognition. After being locked out by Canadian Collieries for seven months, the men and their union organizers brought the miners of the other three companies out on strike for union recognition. This occurred on May 1, 1913, but they did not know at that time how far the owners' resistance would go. As summer approached, numerous efforts were made to get the two sides together. In June, the Vancouver Board of Trade's offer to mediate was rebuffed by the big coal mine operators who said that there was "nothing to arbitrate!"

In mid-August a riot occurred on the Canadian Collieries' property at Extension, apparently sparked by a rumour that the strikebreakers had shot six striking miners. In the ensuing turmoil company houses and mine buildings were burned, a store was looted and the strikebreakers were driven from the site. This

proved disastrous for the Union. Attorney-General Bowser sent the militia to the coal areas, men were arrested, and the mines were kept operating with strikebreakers until a year later agreements were signed with miners' committees in the separate mines. One coal mine company was an exception, the smallest of the four. After the strike had run three months they had agreed to an arbitrator; ironically an agreement was concluded on the day of the Extension riot. That company signed a union contract with its employees later in August. The U.M.W.A. paid strike money to striking miners whether or not union members until June, 1914. At \$16,500 per week, they supported the men to a total of \$1,500,000. After nearly two years the struggle was given up, and the mines returned to regular operation. Many of the miners were blacklisted and never worked again on Vancouver Island. For years there was a legacy of bitterness. But the solidarity of the miners in a just cause and their commonly-shared hardships did allow them to look back in pride. One veteran of the strike quoted the old aphorism: "No strike is wholly lost," for, as he explained, most of the miners' specific demands regarding working conditions were met by August, 1914. Further, the publicity of the workers' cause made way for the general acceptance of the right of workers to organize with a union of their own choice.

Bevan was used in the song as a symbolic location of the 1912-14 dispute. It was a particularly suitable choice, for everything in Bevan was owned by the MacKenzie and Mann interests—"the land, coal, houses, store, hotel, even the road leading to

the mine''; and since Bevan was out of the general public's eye, the union supporters there felt quickly the full force of the owners' anti-union tactics. Not only would the company management not meet with the men, but families were evicted from their homes. One man remembers his mother standing outside their house with her apron full of rocks for his father to throw at the scabs or blacklegs, who were trying to move into locked-out miners' houses. The McBride-Bowser government ignored appeals by the miners to aid in negotiations with the mine owners; instead they sent special police. In the Cumberland area by late August, 1913, there was a government force of 20 to 30 mounted police, 100 or more special police, and over 300 soldiers with arms and a field gun.

After MacKenzie and Mann took over the Dunsmuir collieries in 1910, the stated capital of the company increased overnight from two to fifteen million dollars. The railway promoters became coal mine pro-

motors with visions of their coal fuelling their railways and projected shipping line. They sold shares in their new coal company on the London money market to a reported total capitalization of \$25,000,000. Some of this fresh money was invested in the Bevan mines with a new railway spur, a new townsite, a second dam on the Puntledge River, a powerhouse for the electrification of the mining operation. It has been plausibly suggested that the two notorious promoters were pleased that they could use the dispute with the workers as an excuse for not paying dividends on these recent shares. They wished to sustain their reputations in London where they were again selling bonds for the Canadian Northern Railway.

Phil Thomas

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