

Allen Steves

Interviewer: Harold Steves (for the Britannia Heritage Shipyard Project)

Recorded at the home of Allen Steves, Port Alberni, B.C., July 13 & 14, 1991

(Project) Tape No. 102:1

NO RESTRICTIONS

Tape begins with conversation unrelated to Britannia, did not transcribe this.

HS: Maybe you can tell us about when you first learned boat building or carpentry work.

AS: Course I done a certain amount of carpentry work all my life, I mean my training at all. But when I started boats in 1942 I guess. I worked at the B.C. Packers when the war broke out and the Japanese were taken away. They hired a bunch of watchmen at the cannery. I worked there for a year or so. Then I went to, got laid off and I went down to this there boat place, Mike David's Boatworks, and get the job there right off the bat. And we were repairing gillnetters mostly. Re-planking and stuff, and then we built some new boats there. Built some sail boats that went to Alaska. And then eventually we built, started building clinker built row boats. Charlie Lindsay, Charlie Lindsay, he was a boatbuilder from Vancouver and so we built, I think we built clinker built row boats. About one a day pretty near, any where from 7 foot up to 14 foot boats. And we built probably a thousand of them in the couple of years there. And then we built these here sail boats for Alaska. They were a fairly good sized boat, mind you there was no keel and I guess about, probably about, maybe 30 or 40 feet long. And then we built, repaired some other kind of boats with installed engines and one thing and another. Repairs on used boats. And what else? Then they built several gillnetters and the Japanese. the Japanese are in there some where. The Japanese were taken away. The Japanese must have come back. Some of them, because we built some boats for Japanese afterwards. After they come back, after the war. And the Japanese used to put a real good spread on when they launched the boat they would buy quite a bit of liquor. And then when they finished up, I remember one Japanese, he gave every one of the boys that worked there a case of beer to take home.

HS: How did you launch the boats?

AS: Well they had that, they had a quite a big ways there, where we used to store the boats in the winter time. And then they dug that channel from along, parallel to that ramp out to that Scotch Canadian. A channel there where they could bring the boats in at fair good sized tides. Then before that they had to bring them in over real high tide to get them over the flat, mud sort of mud flats out in front of there. And that was originally a Japanese boatworks there. Atagi (Boatworks) was it? In fact there was a picture there I think probably that was where it was taken. And. So that's about all about. And then I went Canadian Fish, (oh oh, is that door locked? Come in.) the Canadian Fish bought out the Mike David Shipyard and then I worked for, I went to work for Stoltz after that.

HS: Okay. Can you tell me a bit about the sailing skiffs you built to go up to Alaska? Those would be similar to the Columbia River Skiffs, and the Fraser and maybe you could describe just exactly what they looked like. How.....

AS: I can't remember.... There was no motor in the skiffs, they were just made for netting. And they used to, up in Alaska, they used to tow these skiffs out to the fishing grounds because there was no motor in them and they had a sail on. And I don't know much more about the history of what they did there, about the fishing, I wasn't in there. But that's what they told me they did with them. And.

HS: How were they constructed? What type of?

AS: Well, they were an oak keel on a, long solid oak keel and cedar planking I believe. But I can't remember just exact size of them. But I guess they were probably about 30 feet and about a, a beam about, probably 8 foot beam, 8 or 10. Fairly wide boat. Otherwise I don't know much about them really. And we built quite a lot of gillnetters in there.

HS: Before you go on, the sailing skiffs, what kind of, one mast, or how many masts? What kind of mast did they put on?

AS: Oh there was one mast on and there was a centre board which you lowered down for holding them. And.

HS: How big was the centre board?

AS: Oh, I don't know, about 3 feet I guess, probably about three feet down. I don't know, I couldn't say for sure. Its so long ago and you know I can't remember precisely.

HS: Who made the sails?

AS: Well, we didn't. We didn't have the sails there, they were put on after. I don't know much about the sails. We put a mast on them. Then we built some, a couple of bow picker gillnetters, that's with the drum in the front end. I don't know how they turned out, I never heard no results from them. What the advantage were, I don't know for sure. And then we built a couple of pleasure boats there for... What the hell was their name? Somebody over in Ladner there. A pleasure cruiser about 25 foot boat, I guess something like that.

HS: What would be the biggest boats you built at David's?

AS: Oh, I don't know, about, gillnetters about 35 - 40 feet I guess, the biggest ones, some smaller ones.

HS: Would they have... Did you build any double enders?

AS: No.

HS: Or was it into the squared off stern?

AS: No, no double end boats, just regular gillnetters. Yup. Then I worked at Stoltz. (We built gillnetters and later) We built fibre glass boats at Stoltz, skiffs and stuff. Small stuff mostly all. And then I worked at M & M Boatworks. Charlie Lindsay and I worked there and built one boat there, a gillnetter. They had started this boat and then they, a fellow get injured or something, so they hired Charlie and I to build this one boat. Then I started to build boats at home myself. I built one gillnetter and several plywood boats and clinker boats with one thing and another.

HS: Couple of things. When you were at Mike David's, the freighter Chilosun, I remember it running ashore. You went and rescued that. Can you tell us a little bit about the Chilosun?

AS: Oh, out at Stanley Park. Yah, that boat went on the rocks. Well, it was coming into Vancouver Harbour and I don't know it lost control somehow and it landed up on the, on Stanley Park at Prospect Point. Yeah, somewhere along there. And it was on its side and there was holes in the bottom, ripped in it. Holes in it where it hit the rocks. It was a single bottomed boat, metal, iron boat, and it was sunk down. The tides used to come right in and the oil leaked out. And there was oil all over everything, fuel oil. And then they got a diver in there, inside and he went down and they put, tried to plug the holes from the inside, some of them and they did. Repaired her and put cement, whatever, over it, I don't know. And then at low tide we had to caulk open seams. And plates were sprung apart and was holes between them we had to plug a lot of that stuff. Eventually they got it floating. They had several pumps on it to pump the water because the water was still coming in pretty fast. And they hauled it over to North Van. to a shipyard there and parked it up again there. And then shut the pumps off and all, I presume, and the thing settled down and hit the dock. And done quite a lot of damage to the dock there were the boat leaned over against it. And eventually they put it on the ways. I went over there sort of as an overseer. I wasn't doing anything, just hired to sort of watchman or some darned thing was it. They had it on the ways and they patched all the holes up, boilers and that. And then they sold to some outfit for scrap and it was towed down to California. And that was the end of the Chilosun.

HS: What length was the Chilosun?

AS: Oh, about 175 feet or something like that. Pretty good size. I wouldn't know. Its in the books, you could check it out anyway. (Chilosun was a coast boat, union steamship, passenger and freight.)

HS: The other thing, apparently the David Boatworks, when I was a kid Dad used to go out beach combing and we'd pick up logs out in the marsh and tow them around and tie them up to one of the piles out in front of Mike David's. I guess out in the Hole in the Wall Channel. As I was told, they took the cedar logs in and cut them up, they had their own saw mill?

AS: See at the boatworks eventually they put a saw mill in there. And then the back logs, sections of logs of different, fir and cedar and one thing and another, and then we used to do a bit of beach combing. I did that too. I had a small boat, at high tide along the Spanish, or along the shores of the (West Lulu Island). Pick up any logs we could get that wasn't too high up, and tow them in. I don't know, I guess he gave us a little something, according to the board foot of

it.

HS: So when they cut those logs up, and use that lumber for boat building, the fir and cedar?

AS: Well, there was some that they sold a lot of it but they saved some. Yeah, we used some of the good stuff for boats. But then he'd gone more or less out of the boat building and he wasn't doing too much of boat building by the time he got the saw mill in was all (for profit). And some of the ways was discarded, a way for the storing boats. Had that mill in there so it cut down that quite a bit. And then they sold the, Canadian Fish bought the place. That was the end of that.

HS: Okay. After you went to Mike David's, you went to Stoltz and then you did some of your own boats?

AS: Yah.

HS: When did you, is that when you went down to, started at the Britannia? Or when did you start at Britannia?

AS: Oh, Britannia. Well, I went up to a logging camp.

HS: Oh right.

AS: I went up to One Hundred Mile House first. I built a pool room up there for Frank Howell. Pool room, and there was a store in the front like a variety store or a candy shop and that in the front. And then there was the pool room was in the back. That was all one summer and then I went up to Bend Island, to a logging camp up there as a camp carpenter. Was up there for about three years, I guess. Built three boom boats up there, besides working on a house. Built all the cupboards in their house and one thing and another. Then I built a house there, for the ... They had a young boy there, he was just old enough to go to school. So they were kind of isolated there, no school. So they built a small house for the school teacher to live in and a room for studying. Complete little house with one bedroom and a living room and a kitchen and a bathroom and whatever. And then I built a boat there too. A little pleasure boat about 18 foot boat, I believe, a little cabin on it. And I had it all rigged to put an engine in and then I, the season came to an end and for the winter we was laid off. And then they sold out so I never went back. So I sold that boat for \$1200.00.

HS: How big were the boom boats that you built?

AS: The boom boats were not too big a boat, I guess, about 25 feet or something. Made of cedar planking, covered with hard wood. Gum wood on the outside. Then there was this iron keel put on the front for grabbing the logs, they were pushing logs. And they had a double keel on, and propeller in between 'cause they could go right up over the logs.

HS: So that was out at Minister Island too?

AS: Minister Island.

HS: You also did a roof there, where you fell off the roof?

AS: No, actually it was at Bend Island, not far from Alert Bay. Oh yeah, I was on the outside we were doing a lot on, I was on the roof, it was on a floating camp. It was on planks, ladder didn't have any spurs on the bottom. So I was up on this roof, on this roof and I went to come down, and that damn ladder went wheeeeeee out at the bottom and I landed down on the dock. But I had some injuries, not too serious.

HS: I think that was about the time you also came back and built the back porch onto the old house?

AS: Could be, could have been, I don't know. Because I came back from there and then I went back to Stoltz and built fibre glass boats for awhile. And then I went to Britannia. One morning Bob Stoltz come and he says that Buster McKenzie just phoned up and he wanted to know if I got a good boatbuilder that I could hire 'cause they went to repairing boats. So he came to me, he says ""There's a job down at Britannia if you want to go."" So I packed up my tools and went down and went to work right on the same day. Had to come see the foreman (Mr. Shorey) first when I got there. ""Fine"", he says. So I went right to work repairing skiffs and whatever.

HS: Who was the foreman then?

AS: What the hell was his name? Shorey, George Shorey. He was the foreman in the shipyard. And then McKenzie was the foreman over the whole cannery and all. Yep, them was the days, I done a lot of work there. Repairing boats,

then we built a stand for at the reduction plant for putting that there, that thing they added on for purifying the air or some darned thing. That's in the cannery. (My son Earl worked with me, we constructed a tower with scrubbers on top for the reduction plant at the Phoenix cannery.) And boats was repaired, and awful lot of boats.

HS: Can you tell us a little bit about the boat repairs that you did. What was the size of boats you did at the Britannia? Small ones? Big ones?

AS: Well, it was various sizes of boats. Not too much on gillnetters, but seine boats mostly. Repairing guards and decks. And I built, one boat came in there we had to take the whole stern off, put a new whole stern on one of them boats, seine boats. And then the last job I done I was on the ""Haida"", that was a quite a big size boat, the ""Haida"" it was about, 150 foot boat, I guess or something like that. We had to put all new deck beams in it. Took the whole lot of the deck out and we had to jack the house up and take the beams, put new beams underneath and they were heavy timber beams, about 10 x 12 fir.

HS: When you did they ""Haida"", did you take it into the aisle (ways) or just have it tied out in front?

AS: It was out front, its too big to go in the ways. It was just out, anchored out front.

HS: What was the biggest boat that you took into the building?

AS: Well, there was one boat there, the biggest one, what was the name of it? When Gerry Miller came there, he was hired as a foreman. Well, I was the head shipwright, he was the head of the whole machine shop and everything. Any how, there was this boat on the ways, it had been there for repairs. We'd done the repairs. So instead of coming to me, I always ran the winch myself, put the boats up and down, Gerry thought he'd put it down. Well, he didn't understand, course he says he didn't agree with what I said. But I knew myself what happened. You see instead of taking up the winch and pulling the boat up a little bit to loosen it. You see when the boats been sitting there so long, when he loosened the cable to put it down, the boat sit there, it didn't start to move right away. And he got a whole bunch of slack in the line, and then the boat took off. Well, it went down about 10 or 20 feet and then hit the cable solid and it just bust the shackle and the boat kept right on going and whole cradle and all went right into the river. So they had to get a diver down then to get, to get the hook onto the cradle, so they could get it back up again.

HS: The boat was okay though?

AS: Didn't hurt the boat none. The boat just floated out there.

HS: Pretty fast launch.

AS: What he should have done if he'd have took off the slack and pulled the boat up a little just to move it and then to start to let her down, she'd have been all right. But he didn't savvy (understand). We put a lot of boats up there. We had the two ways. (Gerry Miller, foreman, had an unfortunate accident. He went to launch a boat, the ""Pine Leaf"", off the ways, a shackle broke and cradle went off the end of the ways. No damage to the boat.)

HS: And how many boats do you figure you repaired over the years?

AS: Oh God I don't know, about 40 a year or more than that, I have no idea. I was there quite awhile about 10 years or so. Well, oh we get bigger boats and then we had skiffs, seine skiffs. There was a whole bunch of them, and you used to have to all repair them and every year pretty near. Then they eventually got... Those were wooden skiffs, they always had damage to them. Then eventually they got aluminum skiffs. Well, there was not much work on them. A little top work or something on the top structure on them. But.

HS: Were the wooden skiffs, plank skiffs or plywood, or both? There are two plywood skiffs sitting on the site even today just sort of derelict.

AS: Well, I think they were mostly the old original ones, weren't plywood, they were planked. And then later on there were some plywood ones. And then they went to the aluminum ones. Not much fibreglass boats on the skiffs, mostly all were aluminum.

HS: When you brought the big seine boats in, how did you get them in with all their masts and stuff? What happened?

AS: Well, all the seine boats, well if there were any boats with masts, they had to take the masts down. You know how the height of the building is there. But not too much, they didn't have.....

Tape stops abruptly

AS: (We replaced) maybe guards or house work, or something to do, maybe windows to correct and one thing and another. But didn't pull them in, always too big. Was all the smaller ones we had to rebuild. I remember putting a whole new top structure on, putting cabins on and everything on it. Another one I had put a whole stern end on it. It was built of solid (fir) timbers on the back of it. And, oh I don't know, there was quite a lot of small jobs and a lot of it just repairs of guards and one thing and another. Then there was the odd boat we had to put a few planks in. Generally all, them boats was mostly all the bigger boats. Mostly fir planking, little hardened cedar. Gillnetters of course, most of the gillnetters had cedar planking, one and an eight's inch or something. We did quite a bit of small jobs on gillnetters too, on the outside ways, with that outside hoist. And oh, I don't know.

HS: The crane out in the front dock, what was that for lifting out?

AS: Oh, we'd lift engines and different stuff, equipment off boats with that. Drums off gillnetters, engines out of boats, and whatever. Different heavy stuff you had to lift, and sometimes a certain amount of equipment on board.

HS: You were chief shipwright. Who worked with you on your shipwright crew?

AS: Jack Weinrauch was one and then, there was not any steady men. There was a Japanese fellow, what was his name? (Shin Nakade) He worked there steady a long time. And I can't remember all their names now. And then there was a quite a few of the, in the winter time when the boats were tied up, there was a lot of the fellows worked on the seine boats and that. They worked in the shop on repair work and on boats and that. I guess were about half a dozen men on wooden ship work. Jack Hill worked there quite a while, he fished in summer and then he worked all the rest of the season in the shipyard. And Andy Jacobson he worked there. Other ones I can't recall at the moment their names, some of them, because they weren't steady.

HS: Now Terry worked, with you for awhile there or did he start after you were there?

AS: Well, Earl worked there for quite awhile and Terry worked there for awhile, but not too long. Oh, of course Terry worked there after I left, he worked steady there for a long time. And in the machine shop, well there was Cecil Fisher, run the, when I first come there he... Eventually died of cancer. I'm sure he eventually retired and he passed away. (Irvin) Barnes is his name, the blacksmith, he started his own shop in Steveston after that. He worked there for quite a few years. Jack Deagle worked there on the engine work.

HS: Which blacksmith was that? There was one blacksmith, Bob Garrin, would that be it?

AS: No. What did I say his name was?

HS: You were saying Barnes.

AS: Barnes, yah. He had a place on First Avenue, down across from where the old cedar was there. I haven't seen him for years, so I don't know anything about what happened to him.

HS: Was he a young fellow or an older fellow?

AS: Sort of, yah middle aged. He had a family.

HS: Cause there was a George, lets see, I think it was George Barnes used to live at No. 2 Road and the dyke.

AS: His name wasn't George.

HS: He was actually building a boat there.

AS: Oh yah, might have been a relation, I don't know. If only I could think of his first name. Yeah, them's the days. There was a lot of fishermen, or gillnet and seine boats, they worked on their own boats there during the winter time, off season. A lot of them did.

HS: Who did the engine work in the engine room?

AS: Fred, something or other, and Jack Deagle and Harold, something or other. Then there was another fellow, another that one Harold, used to work carpenter work. In the winter time, he was on one the boats. You know, I should have kept a diary and I'd have all the names of all these boats and people and everything. Now its been so dog gone long since I've been there I can't immediately recall some of the names. I can see their faces, but then I can't just place them.

HS: Do you recall the stories from before you went there? We'd heard that they'd fixed rum runner boats and various other things like that. Did you ever hear any stories like that?

AS: No, we fixed a rum runner boat at Mike David's.

HS: You did!

AS: Yah, well it wasn't a rum runner at that time, it had been.

HS: What kind of boat was it?

AS: A cabin cruiser, sort of, fairly fast boat I guess.

HS: Do you remember the name of it?

AS: No. I was trying to think of the name of the people that owned the boat. When I stop thinking about it then, it'll come to me. Might think of it but right now I can't.

HS: Well, if you think of it, write it down or something. We're just collect boats for Britannia. We'd kind of like to get one that was used as a rum runner for part of the museum.

AS: Well, it wasn't at the Britannia, this was at Mike David's.

HS: No, I know, but any boat that was used in the harbour. Cause we'll be collecting old boats that were made here. We're looking for boats built by Mike David and like yourself and different boat builders that worked in the different shops. To have a selection of the different boats build in the harbours. So we want to get a rum runner too.

AS: Well, we didn't, we just repaired the boats. And that one I remember. I can't remember the name of the darned boat. The Japanese and different people had boats but.....

HS: Okay. The other thing we wanted to know was the buildings. Now when you were working, doing the repairs of boats, you had some of the equipment in the boat shed on the dyke side, in the Kishi Boatworks or the Richmond Boatworks, whichever it was called. What did you use that building for?

AS: Well, there was one building that we had lumber in. That's about the only building we had. There was a building there with several rooms on it where it used to be the gillnetters kept gear and stuff in it. I remember working down there once in one of them, something or other I forget not. I don't know what we was doing down there, but that was only a small job anyway. We done quite a lot of work in that other shop across the dyke. We had that big planer in there. Everything was planed through that big planer and we done a certain amount of repair work on gillnetters in there. Not too much, but quite often.

HS: How big a gillnetters could get into that shop?

AS: Regular size gillnetter, 35 feet or so. No problem there. We had to bring them in at high tide because the weeds were kind of, back in behind the building there.

HS: So you had to use the large planer for the main shop. You had to take the lumber back and forth then?

AS: Oh yeah, the big planer we had to bring it over. And the little planer of course, it was smaller stuff. Yeah, all the heavy stuff we did on the big planer.

HS: So if you used that shop and the Britannia itself, how many boats could you be doing at one time? On the ways, how many were you able to get in?

AS: Oh, on the main ways we had a boat on each side, that's all we could get in there. But the little ways, one boat was all you could bring up at one time. But then on the little ways we used to pull them up and put them on storage,

for winter storage of them, each side of that small ways in there. Might take about, I guess you could put about 6, about 8 boats on one side and 2 on the other, I think. But they were mostly, there was no work much on those, it was mostly storage and the fellows that owned the boats used to do a bit of repairs or what ever they needed. Didn't do much work on that, but once in a while we'd do something on it, but very little. I remember one time we got a south east wind storm and the tide came up, it was at high tide. Must have been January, that's when you get your high tides or winter time. And it came right over top of the dock and there was 6 inches of water in the stock room, and out where we parked our cars, by the building across. Everybody had to move their cars back, onto higher ground because there was about a foot deep of water in there. And the other shops had water right in over the floor. That was only once that we ever got water that high.

HS: Okay. The other thing you mentioned was the storm that took the roof off, what happened there?

AS: Well, I don't remember the time, I remember that coming off. It tore the front end of the roof off and it tore a piece off one of those other. I think it took a sheet or two of aluminum off that net shed, we had to repair that. And that other building where all the small storage sheds were, for the gillnetters, took whole one corner off of that. We repaired that all back into shape again. But the big building, of course we just cut it off straight across and repaired the edge, left a section of the roof out of it. And what else?

HS: When did you put on the tin roof?

AS: Jack Weinrauch worked on that one roof with me. I haven't got the date down. I remember working there, I got some pictures on the things. And the other main building over the machine shop and the stock room and all, Jack Hill and I put that on. And I remember one day, you had to carry these sheets and I was just taking this sheet, I think it was about 4 x 8 sheets, not heavy but a little awkward. And the wind caught the damned sheet and it flew over and I stepped over it sideways to save myself and I stepped on the aluminum sheet that was already there and down I went head first. Slid right off the end of the, slid down the building right off the end and down onto the dock. Luckily I didn't even get a bruise. Its only about a ten foot drop there. I guess which was, I guess I probably put my hand out and probably took the strain because I went down head first. Yeah, those things happen. Another time, Jack Hill and I were working on a boat putting some guards on a gillnetter up on the ways. And caulker had been there the day before, put up a temporary stage in there. So we never checked the dog gone stage. We got up there and were working and all of a sudden that damned stage broke down and we both went flying off the side. And I hit the side of the ways just like the side here, no I must of hit it on my back. I don't remember, it happened so quick. Anyhow, I had five broken ribs and I landed in the river. I had to get out of the river. It didn't knock me out or God I wouldn't be here today. I got out of the river and then I climbed up on the dock and I went over and kind of short of breath like when you knock your ribs out. And then I was all soaken wet so, Gerry Miller was there then, he drove me home. I had my car but I didn't drive. He drove me home and then I had to, I went to first aid. I had to go over to the hospital, somebody took me over. Went to the doctors, not the hospital, and they took X-rays and they said, "" We're going to have to put you in the hospital. You've got five broken ribs."" So I was in the hospital for a week I guess. But it wasn't serious, it was bad enough. That's not important, I mean as far as the shipyard's concerned, that's just personal.

HS: That's the kind of stories we want though.

AS: There was another time Jack Weinrauch and I were underneath the cannery, its all on piles you know. Well, some of these pilings had rotted off at the top, the bottoms seemed to be solid into the ground, the top end had rotted a bit. So we had to cut the top, jack it up and put timbers on top of the piling. And it was mucky and slippery down underneath the darned cannery you know, its a mud hole. I slipped, carrying something heavy down and I slipped and fell and I ruptured myself. So I had to go to the hospital and the compensation board. Get myself sewed up again. That took a few days, one little incident. But we got all them timbers put up underneath there. We had to jack,... It was a lot of work jacking that. Had to put down a timber on the ground to sit our jacks on, cause we were all mucky, and then jack up these big heavy timbers about 10 by 10 or something or other. One place, along beneath the machine shop, we had to put one long piece in, cut right across 2 or 3 pilings. But we made it.

HS: The pilings that are under the building, do you know if they're dug deep into the ground, or are they just sitting on mud sills?

AS: Oh no, they're deep. They've been put in with a pile driver, no doubt about it. Back in 1800 something, cause they seem to go solid in the bottom, just at the top end where the timbers are sitting on it, the odd one has rotted off and the timbers had settled a bit. Some of the timbers had to be replaced. But we were getting there. Oh I done a lot of work there.

(Rest of the tape, stories of early childhood days in Steveston. Not transcribed.)

End of Interview.

(When I went to work at Britannia, it was ABC Packing owned by Bell-Irvings. Britannia and Phoenix Cannery. Buster McKenzie was manager, Norman Goble was assistant manager, George Shorey, Shipyard Foreman, Dave Inglis, stockroom, Cecil Fisher, machinist, George Sturgeon, blacksmith, Joe Mervie, mechanic, Tom Young, rigging, Jack Hill, carpenter and fisherman, Adrian Allegretto, carpenter and fisherman, Jack Weinrauch, started soon after.