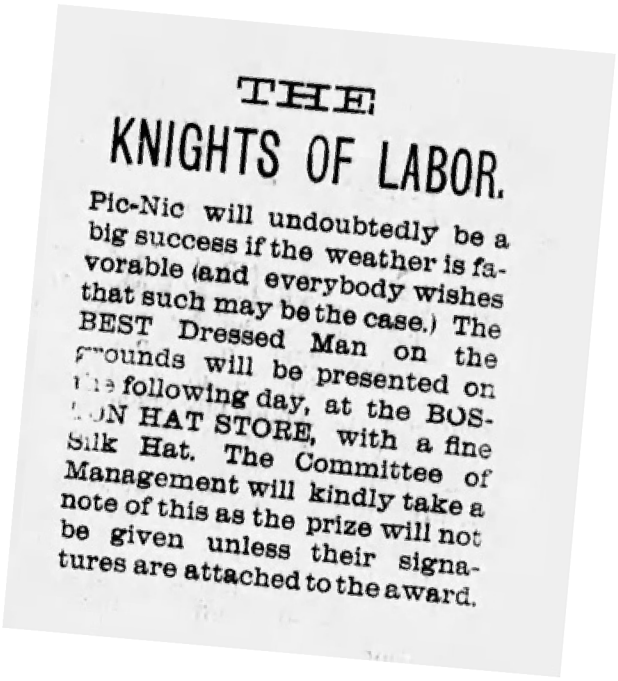
Kingston Workers' History Project

Labour Day 2023 Newsletter



THE
KNIGHTS OF LABOR.

Pic-Nic will undoubtedly be a big success if the weather is favorable (and everybody wishes that such may be the case.) The BEST Dressed Man on the grounds will be presented on the following day, at the BOSTON HAT STORE, with a fine Silk Hat. The Committee of Management will kindly take a note of this as the prize will not be given unless their signatures are attached to the award.

Picnics, parades, baseball, and Stompin' Tom

Kingston's Labour Day traditions

The first Labour Day festival in Kingston may have been in August 1887. A "Pic-Nic" organized by the local Knights of Labor drew two thousand people. In addition to many games and sports, there was a "Best Dressed Man" contest with the award of a "fine silk hat" from the Boston Hat Store in town. During the 1880s, Prime Minister John A. Macdonald promised establishing Labour Day as a national holiday but the holiday was only recognized in 1894, three years after his death.

Labour Day festivals in the early 20th Century were also accompanied by big parades. In 1902, the parade was hit with rain but 18 participating unions marched anyway through the muddy streets and steady rain. Keeping spirits up was the Fife and Drum Band and the 14th Regiment's Bugle Band.

Baseball was a popular Labour Day event at the Cricket Field. In 1906 there was a morning match between a Locomotive Works team and Sunbury. Later that evening, it was the Triple Linkers and Young Irishmen. The Triple Linkers were out to avenge their defeat to the Young Irishmen in July in front of 1,000 spectators at Lake Ontario Park.

The biggest Labour Day event in Kingston's history was the 1976 "Labour Day Picnic" at Lake Ontario Park. The Kingston & District Labour Council partnered with the Kingston Olympic Public Events Committee which had contributed to numerous local events surrounding the 1976 Olympic Sailing races at Portsmouth Harbour.

In big letters, advertisements announced "Everything is free!" and "Something for everyone". This included free ice cream, free rides, free drinks and free hot dogs. Contests for different age groups took place in categories such as running backwards, sack races, and egg-spoon races. Everyone was awarded an Olympic Button for participating.

There was also miniature golf, a draw for a 1976 Pontiac Astre, and a raffle for an Olympic quilt. While kids raced around the park, adults could visit the beer tent.

Local rock and rollers, Chameleon, took the stage at 6pm, and the evening was capped off by a 7pm performance by the popular Stompin' Tom Connors.

Researched and written by Doug Nesbitt

kingstonworkershistory.ca

kingstonworkershistory@gmail.com

Meet the KWHP Board of Directors

Doug Nesbitt

Doug Nesbitt works and lives in Kingston, Ontario. He is a former union organizer of janitors and home care workers. He has taught history and labour studies, and been a union researcher for organizing drives and strike preperation. He is writing his first book about Ontario's unions and the Common Sense Revolution. He earned a PhD in History from Queen's University.

John Rose

John Rose is a researcher and staffer working in the union sector in Katarokwi-Kingston. He has a PhD from the Department of Geography and Planning at Queen's University, and his interests include preserving blue collar histories and interrogating Canadian colonial institutions. He is also a singer-songwriter.

Cameron Willis

Cameron Willis works as a curatorial assistant at Canada's Penitentiary Museum in Kingston. He grew up in a working class union family in Thunder Bay and it is that upbringing that continues to fuel his interest in workers' history. He is especially interested in histories of unfree labour, the unemployed, welfare, and the incarcerated.

Our first meeting

Thirty people gathered at the RCHA Club on October 14 2022 for the inaugural meeting of the Kingston Workers' History Project. Co-founder Doug Nesbitt delivered an engaging presentation on "Kingston in Hard Times", including the 1933 "invasion" of City Hall by unemployed workers, and the protests against Premier Mike Harris's government in the 1990s. An excellent discussion followed. Special thanks the RCHA Club staff for their service and hospitality, and support from the Canada Employment and Immigration Union.

Become a member!

KWHP membership benefits:

1. Newsletter by mail for Labour Day, New Years, and May Day.
2. Get active in organizing KWHP's educational and cultural meetings, and special events.
3. Develop practical skills like archiving, research, public speaking, and more.
4. Membership rights as per KWHP by-laws.

For details, contact
kingstonworkershistory@gmail.com
Annual membership fee: $5

What is the Kingston Workers' History Project?

The purpose of the KWHP shall be to establish and maintain a non-profit educational association:

1. To present and communicate educational programming on the history of working people in Kingston;
2. To present cultural events concerning the history of working people in Kingston;
3. To encourage and facilitate the preservation of records and artefacts related to the history of working people in Kingston;
4. To encourage and facilitate research and writing on and representation of the history of working people in Kingston.

The KWHP thanks RavenLawLLP for its generous support

what's new?

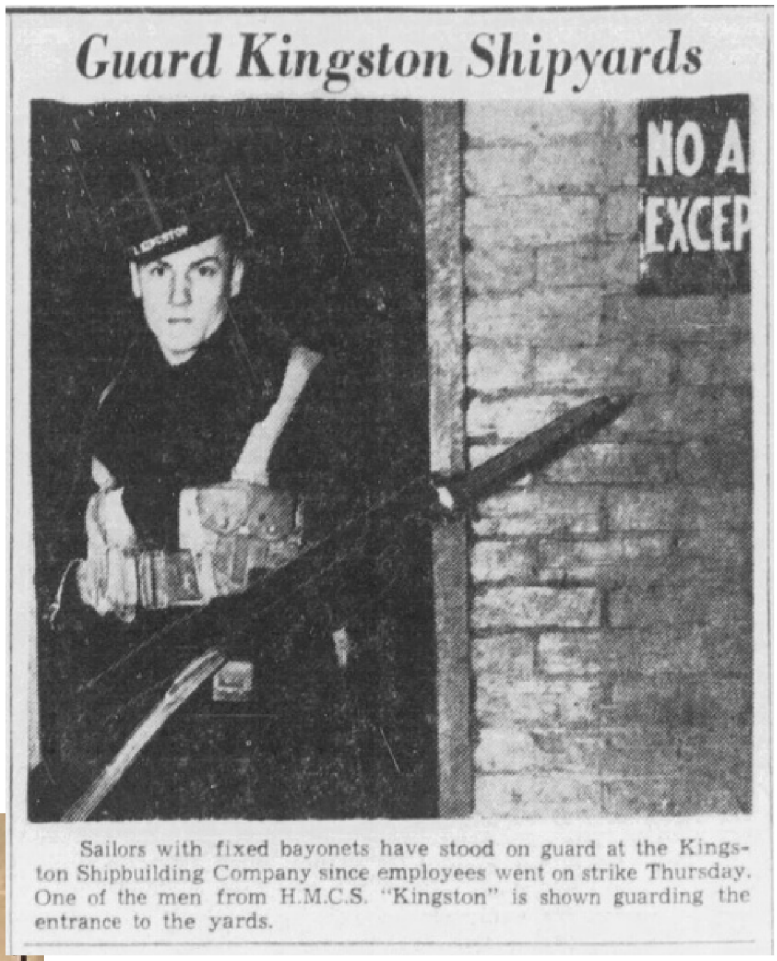
kingstonworkershistory.ca

Solidarity in Wartime

The 1942 Kingston Shipbuilders Strike

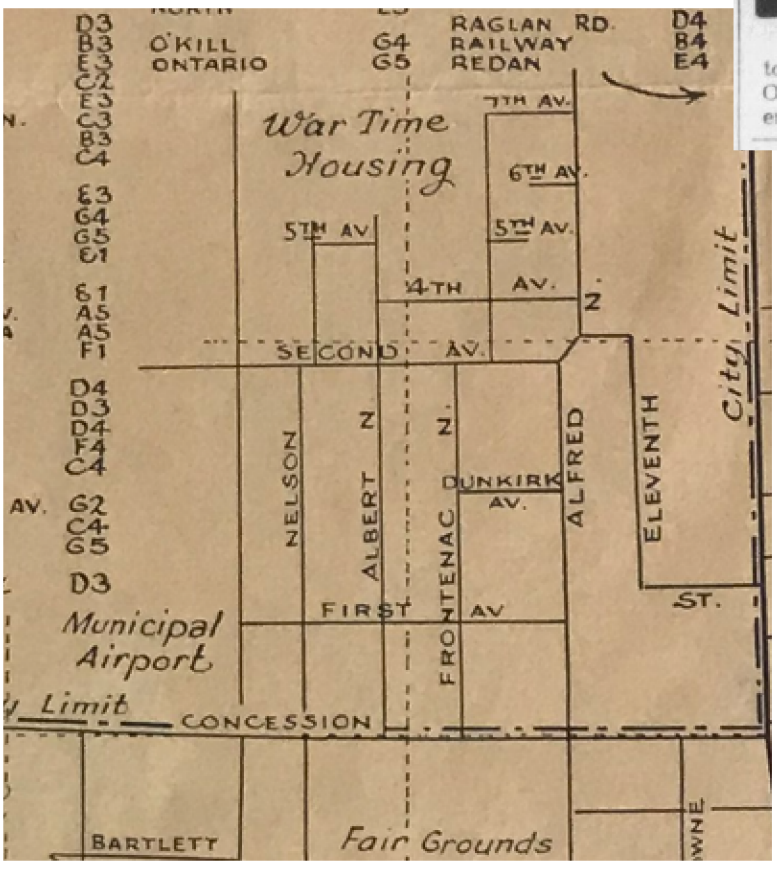
Facing long hours and low wages, a hostile employer, and a housing shortage, Kingston shipbuilders made a democratic move to show solidarity with shipbuilders in Midland through a sympathy strike in 1942. On the heels of the *Royal Commission Investigating Wages and Working Conditions in Ontario and Québec Shipyards*, shipbuilders felt slighted by the federal Department of Labour for not implementing the Commission's many recommendations. This set the stage for a series of strikes at Ontario shipyards.

Research and writing by John Rose



Guard Kingston Shipyards

Sailors with fixed bayonets have stood on guard at the Kingston Shipbuilding Company since employees went on strike Thursday. One of the men from H.M.C.S. "Kingston" is shown guarding the entrance to the yards.



Building Kingscourt

From war-time housing to schools

In the early 1940s the Canadian federal government partnered with Wartime Housing Ltd. to construct 250 houses for war workers and their families. The foundations were set for a neighbourhood that would eventually become known as Kingscourt. Follow the Kingston Workers History Project's investigation into the origins of the Kingscourt neighbourhood as tenants pressured governments and housing companies to build a school in the area and in the process built a new community for wartime workers in the city.

Research and writing by John Rose

Cassie Ward Mee

Kingston's own labour champion

By Doug Nesbitt

One might say Cassie Ward Mee is the mother of Kingston's first labour movement. In March of 1887, Mee delivered a speech on the "Mission of Labour" and the aims of a new organization, the Knights of Labor. Hundreds of people, including entire families, filled Kingston City Hall to hear Mee speak. Introduced by Mayor John Carson, the crowd expressed great approval and delivered a unanimous vote of thanks to their guest. Within months, the Knights could boast 1,500 members in Kingston.

Born in Kingston in 1848, Mee settled in Cortland, New York in 1882 with her husband Charles Mee. Amidst depression and powerful new corporations, Mee was among the millions who joined the Knights of Labor to defend the dignity of working people and the "noble and holy" role of labour in sustaining humanity. The Knights, Mee believed, existed to defend labour from "degradation" and the "evils" of ignorance and greed. These values were one reason why the Knights were among the first unions to open its doors to women and people of colour.

Mee's speaking career as a Knight began in August 1885. Mee proved so effective, she was invited to address a crowd of ten thousand Knights in Boston Common in August 1886. Mee received plenty of applause throughout and earned praise as an eloquent speaker.

When Mee returned to Kingston in March 1887, her speech was so well-received, the Knights of Labor exploded in size to 1,500 members, with significant support in the building trades, Victoria Foundry, shipyards, docks, ironworkers, telegraph operators, and the new cotton mill. Strikes broke out at the Victoria Foundry and cotton mill, making the Knights of Labor a new force in Kingston.

Later in August, the Knights of Labor "Pic-Nic" drew 2,000 people. With alcohol strictly prohibited, attendees enjoyed sports and games such as baseball and a tug-of-war contest. The Knights also spearheaded literacy programs, lobbied for improved public education, and pooled resources to pay for doctors. The Knights even sought to launch the "People's Political Party", which may be Kingston's first-ever labour party.

Repression in the United States and new unions sent the Knights into decline. There is little public record of Mee's activities after the 1880s. Mee lived out the rest of her life in the United States, and passed away in Rochester, New York in 1912 at the age of 64. She was the mother of five children.