

Those Who Came, Immigrants and Migrants

By Elizabeth Beaton and Mary Keating

Roman's Story

In 1906, a strong young man of sixteen years left his Polish village and set off for Canada. After long consultation with his family, he was going to join his steel worker uncle in Sydney, Nova Scotia. In a letter, his uncle promised to look after Roman if he needed help in finding a job and getting settled.

In the region where they lived, Galacia, young people from the farms were leaving home to become migrant farm labourers, or to be industrial workers in Europe's large cities. For Roman, the trip to Canada was simply a longer, more adventurous journey in the search for work

With money borrowed from his parents, Roman left Poland, traveling through Belgium to catch a boat in England for Quebec City. From there he took a train to Sydney. A horse and buggy "taxi" took him to a boarding house on Ferris Street in Whitney Pier where dozens of his countrymen lived. The next day he started work at the Sydney steel plant where he unloaded bricks and cleaned railway cars for \$1.40 per day. He spent \$13.00 per month on board and sent the remainder back to Poland to payoff the loan for his passage to Sydney.

The great influx of newcomers to Whitney Pier, which started at the turn of the 20th century, was part of a major wave of immigration to Canada between 1880 and 1914. Part of Canada's industrialization and national expansion, it was the cause of some of the most significant social changes in the country's history. For many who came to the new land, however, "immigration" did not mean immediate settlement and permanent employment. Instead, it meant the continued search for jobs across the country and often into the United States.

Departure, whether from rural Nova Scotia, a Newfoundland fishing village, or much further away, was the result of a combination of complex worldwide factors - depletion of agricultural and other natural resources, revolutions, natural disasters and ethnic persecutions which affected different countries in different ways. Improvements in communication and transportation in the late 19th and early 20th century also helped to establish patterns of emigration and immigration throughout the world.

The majority of the immigrants were not impoverished. Nor were they of a wealthy class. Instead it was the "middle" group who were most likely to emigrate - people who saw a chance to better themselves and could afford to do so. The social process of immigration began with the news of the

jobs, through agents and literature representing the mining or steel companies. Soon, letters home - often through the village priest - told of high wages, adventure and the promise of success. Savings sent home to buy more land or to payoff debts sent an even stronger message. Most immigrants - young single men - travelled with the name and address of a relative or friend at his destination who would lend money or give advice on medical, legal or business matters.

For the individuals and groups who made the decision to move, the desire for an improved standard of living was the primary driving force. Yet, the ultimate goal of most immigrants was to make enough money to return home and, indeed, many did just that.

Meanwhile in the homeland, wives and children, or sweethearts waited for their men to return, or for the ticket that would carry them away as well.

Searching for a Better Way of Life

Rural Cape Bretoners, Nova Scotians, and other Maritimers

Since 1850, and well into this century, the Maritimes experienced a major exodus of both men and women to the "Boston States." When the coal mining industry expanded and the steel making industry began, the migration shifted to a large extent to Industrial Cape Breton. Many who had gone to the States made the decision to return.

The 1901 Census indicates that a vast number of artisans at the Sydney steel plant were born in rural Cape Breton or other parts of the Maritime provinces. They include Nova Scotia Loyalist Blacks, Scots, Irish, and Acadians. Carpentry was one of the most prominent skills of these workers, but electrical, masonry, and blacksmithing and seafaring trades were common as well. While a good proportion of them worked in the rail transportation of coal from the mine to the Pier, most were labourers in the steel plant.

The rural Cape Bretoners and Newfoundlanders had in common a pattern of migration affected not only by seasonal farming, fishing, and woodwork, but also by strikes or recessions that affected the availability of work at the plant.

Newfoundlanders

The interaction between Cape Breton and Newfoundland has long been one of mutual migration. As early as the 1820's, farmers of Irish, Acadian, and Scottish descent moved from Inverness County to the West Coast of Newfoundland, maintaining the strong traditions of the Margaree Valley. Even before that, the Mi'kmaq Aboriginal people travelled to Newfoundland to hunt and fish, with many remaining there today. By the

mid 19th century systemic over-population forced the Newfoundland government to openly encourage out-migration. At that time, fishing communities from the outports of Newfoundland moved many of their people to the north and western coasts of Cape Breton. Neil's Harbour and Big Bras d'Or are examples of these settlements of Newfoundland fisherfolk.

When the industrial revolution finally exploded in Cape Breton, the work possibilities offered to Newfoundlanders were simply an extension of historical patterns.

The Newfoundlanders who responded to the call for workers at the Sydney steel plant came from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. They were Irish Catholics, or Devon and Dorset English Protestants from Eastern or Central Newfoundland, especially the Avalon Peninsula. Or they were French from Newfoundland's west coast. As early as 1901, there were about 500 Newfoundlanders in Whitney Pier. In this group, there were about 40 families.

The exodus from Newfoundland continued well into this century: in 1920, *The Cape Breton Post* declared that each time the steamer *Kyle* left Newfoundland, it was filled with second class passengers headed for Sydney. By 1921, there were about 2,500 Newfoundland-born people in a total Sydney population of 22,545. If "ethnic" Newfoundlanders were included, this would have been a far larger number. The majority of the Newfoundlanders were single Irish Catholic male labourers, most of whom lived initially in boarding houses near the steel plant.

Others, of Methodist or Anglican religious persuasion were more likely to be skilled craftsmen at the steel plant, or they were fishermen with their own boats. This group of workers often had their families with them.

Americans

Many experienced workers for the early Sydney plant, both management and labourers, came from American steel cities such as Pittsburgh, Birmingham and Chicago. Because they were employed for their specific skills, they tended to be older than the local steel workers. In the plant's first year of production, these American tradesmen included two iron worker foremen, aged 60 and 37, a carpenter aged 63, and an engineer aged 45. Most of them lived with other skilled workers on Bay Street in Whitney Pier.

There was another group of Americans who worked more directly with the steelmaking process. During 1901 and 1902, DISCO'S Furnace Superintendent J.H. Means, an American, arranged for about 100 Black steelworkers to come from Alabama, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee. They were housed with their families in the Coke Ovens area of the Pier, often in houses that were poorly heated. By 1904, "a number of coloured

furnace workers" left for Colorado where they expected to find employment. It is believed that only one of the entire group remained in Whitney Pier.

The Europeans

Europeans who came to Cape Breton often began their journey as migratory workers in their own countries. These migrations were the result of drastic land reforms in the mid 18th century when peasants were allowed to own their own land at the end of feudalism. Increased population, the burden of taxes and the rapid change to commercial market farming forced many farmers to sell their small holdings to large companies. Those who kept their small farms could not pass on a living to sons and daughters, so they, along with the farmers who were bought out, worked as farm labourers.

The industrialization of Europe caused this pattern of migratory farm labour to change. A vast array of urban labouring jobs were created, and a broadening of regional work migration led to the beginnings of international migrations. This coincided with dramatic political changes. Ideas on social democracy and class consciousness, combined with an awakening of nationalism throughout the European continent, resulted in discontent, and even rebellion. Emigration to North America offered not only jobs, but political freedom. Nationalism found even greater possibilities in the new land as young workers discovered the importance of the solidarity found in language, religion, and other ethnic traditions. Some European governments discouraged emigration, but by 1914, many hundreds of thousands had left their homes, never to return.

Some ethnic groups came to Whitney Pier and did not stay. The 1901 census, for instance, indicates that Scandinavians from Norway, Denmark, and Sweden were steel workers or seafaring traders. They were few in number and did not stay in the community, although some actually brought their families for a short time. Small numbers of French and Belgian people also came; again few stayed.

Over the years, Whitney Pier has been settled by the occasional person born in Britain, some coming as workers in the early years, others as war brides after the two wars. Usually, though, Whitney Pier was not considered a likely place for the settlement of British-born persons.

South Italians were among the first Europeans to come to Whitney Pier. They came by way of the United States under the Boston contractor, Thomas Cossolini, to provide skilled construction work in building the Sydney steel plant. One of the many important projects they completed was the laying of water lines from Sydney River to the steel plant; the same water lines are still used by the city of Sydney. It was understood by the Immigration Branch that these workers were "sojourners," that they would leave the country as soon as the work was done. However, many stayed and

settled down, bring their families from Italy or the United States.

Hungarians also came early in the history of Whitney Pier. In 1901, on one street there were more than 60 Hungarian workers, all called "labourers." In actual fact, they were skilled iron workers, brought by DISCO specifically for the start-up of the plant. Some of them were met in Halifax by the employment clerk of the company. The specialized skills of the Hungarians may be traced to the fact that Hungary underwent industrialization and rural land reform at an earlier date and at a faster pace than other states in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Many Hungarians left Whitney Pier as a result of a strike in 1904, and went to the Niagara region of Ontario or to industrial cities in the United States. However, some Hungarian names remain, such as Nagy, Ambruse, Manly, Mazelin, and Rotz.

Slavs, especially Ukrainians and Poles, but also including Slovaks, Slovenes, Bulgarians, Czechs, Serbs, Croations, Macedonians, and Russians began to arrive in large numbers by 1905. There is evidence of small numbers of Slavs in Whitney Pier as early as 1901.

The Poles and Ukrainians came mainly from what is now the western part of Ukraine, called Galacia. Although they came from the same region, they maintained ethnic differences based on history, religion, and language. There is evidence that Russians were involved in the heavy wood construction of the steel and coal piers.

The Jewish People

Although Jewish immigrants to Cape Breton came from east Europe, they must be considered separately from Slavs, not only because of ethnic differences but because of the circumstances of their life in Europe and their departure from the homeland.

Compulsory army service, pogroms, and being forced by prejudice and economics into ghettos, all of these factors made life almost unbearable for European Jews in the latter part of the 19th century. In response to these conditions, many young Jews took part in the 1904-1905 revolution against the Russian government.

The Whitney Pier Jews came from the eastern part of Poland known as The Pale, and from Romania and other regions. They often left the country illegally, or bribed officials to allow them to cross borders. Most went to the United States, especially New York, but it was not long before the Cape Breton mining and steel boom caused them to make their way north. They set up peddling routes from industrial Cape Breton, and Whitney Pier became one of their major settlement points. When they came to Canada, it was most often with their families. There was no returning to their country of birth, which both rejected them, and would punish them for leaving.

Mediterranean People

The immigration from the Mediterranean region to Cape Breton began in the same way as the east European experience, through regional migration. The reasons for Mediterranean migrations are based in trading and the roots go back a thousand years.

Poverty, wars, and the pull of the New World caused the modern out-migration of Lebanese and Syrians to peak between 1900 and 1914. Annually, 15,000 people left their homes for the United States, Brazil and Canada. Halifax was the destination of many simply because it was on the ship's route to New York. In the towns of Nova Scotia -- Yarmouth, Amherst, North Sydney and Sydney -- these newcomers continued their traditional buying and selling. However, in industrial areas such as Whitney Pier and Sydney, many added manual labour to their means of making a living.

West Indians

The Emancipation of the Slaves in the West Indies in 1834 resulted in land reforms that benefited the plantation owners rather than the newly freed slaves. By 1850 the West Indies were barely able to sustain the rapidly increasing Black population. Between 1897 and 1914, over 20,000 people left the small islands. Barbados, from where most of the permanent Cape Breton Black immigrants came, had over 1000 persons per square mile, and most of the island was under cultivation and not available for habitation. In 1910, the West Indies Royal Commission suggested emigration as a solution to the economic problems of the islands. In fact, this only confirmed what had been common practice for over half a century.

American imperialism in the West Indies and Central America also had a role to play in the massive out-migration. The coaling station in St. Lucia, the building of the Panama Canal, and the Cuban banana plantations all provided work for thousands of West Indian Blacks who moved seasonally with the available work.

In 1909, anxious correspondence between immigration officials questioned the landing of West Indian Blacks in the Maritimes, which was a direct violation of Canada's immigration policy at the time. West Indians, both men and women, continued to land at various Maritime ports in fishing and trading boats, taking trains to Industrial Cape Breton.

The immigration authorities admitted that the Blacks were "well-behaved, well-dressed, and well-spoken" and were not a burden on the public welfare system. They were also in great demand as good workers in the mines and the steel plant, and the women as domestics. The permanent immigrants from this work migration to Cape Breton have settled in New

Waterford, Glace Bay and especially Whitney Pier.

Not all West Indian Immigrants were Blacks. About 20 white West Indians came at the same time, also to work in the mines or the steel plant, but few maintained any connection with their Black countrymen

Chinese

Political violence, as well as overcrowding precipitated China's out-migration. The Chinese took an active role in the American and Canadian gold rushes of the late 19th century, but they are particularly known for their part in the construction of the CPR. The Chinese who came to Cape Breton before 1920 were part of the dispersion of Chinese people out of work after the completion of the CPR. In Cape Breton, as in other parts of Canada, they provided laundry and food services to industrial workers.

This excerpt originally appeared in From the Pier Dear! Images of a Multicultural Community. Published in 1993 by the Whitney Pier Historical Society.

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