

WORK THROUGH TIME

Cape Breton Stories of Land & Sea



Coal in Cape Breton: the Growth of Industry and Immigration

Cape Breton Miners' Museum

The arrival of the great coal and steel age in Cape Breton, and attendant investments in these industries, brought about one of the largest population booms the island has ever seen.

In 1889 Sydney was a small marketing and administrative centre for the surrounding rural areas, but by 1891, only two years later, Sydney ranked as the 74th largest population centre in Canada. Ten years later in 1901, Sydney ranked 28th and Glace Bay 46th in relation to other Canadian population centres. By the end of the coal and steel-related growth period, 1911, Sydney was the 21st largest and Glace Bay the 22nd largest municipality in Canada. In just twenty years, the population of Sydney and surrounding towns had grown by forty percent.

Before the twentieth century, coal mining was still fairly small scale and inefficient. Coal mining was a seasonal industry drawing men from rural Cape Breton and Newfoundland in the spring, only to return home in the winter. The seasonal past of coal operations in Cape Breton helps to explain why industrial Cape Breton's initial growth was a result of rural depopulation as many were drawn from outlying areas. Next to Cape Bretoners, men from Newfoundland remained the second most likely group to be found working in the mines.

As it became clear that coal would form one of the chief necessities of modern industry, coal mining and its related industries quickly became catalysts in the expansion of the island's population and development of its culture. With the formation of the Dominion Coal Company in 1893 and the Dominion Iron and Steel Corporation in 1909, coal mining and steel manufacturing entered a new era and a parallel wave of growth and immigration is evident.

The Dominion Coal Company Campaigns for New Canadians

By the late 1890s and early 1900s, Canada's Minister of the Interior, Sir Clifford Sifton was implementing a vigorous campaign to attract new immigrants to meet the country's employment needs. Many were attracted by a recruitment campaign staged in foreign countries initiated by the Dominion Coal Company and the Dominion Iron and Steel Corporation. Company agents were often placed at strategic landing points with messages like this one:

The Dominion Coal Company of Sidney (sic) Canada North America undertakes to furnish employment, which will pay you \$2.00 to \$5.00 per day. Emigrants would have to go via Trieste and there sign contracts concerning their future employment and wages. The steam ship fare is \$50.00 paid in advance.

Thanks in part to these campaigns, between 1891 and 1911 the immigrant population of some towns reached sixty percent. In 1910, 52.5% of Glace Bay's population and 51.6% of people in Sydney Mines had arrived in the last ten years.

It is safe to say that the new immigrants to Cape Breton were attracted to the employment opportunities, but for some world events also played a role in their relocation, as they looked to their new home as a means of escaping poor conditions in their countries of origin.

Many Lebanese immigrants sought reprieve from oppressive Turkish rule just as Ukrainians left their homeland frustrated by the Polish administration. The largest groups of Ukrainian immigrants arrived in 1904, 1907 and 1912 to work at the steel plant while others came to dig coal in Glace Bay and Dominion. Some Lithuanians came in the hopes of avoiding conscription with the largest number arriving in 1906 to work the mines in Sydney Mines. Jewish immigrants were able to escape persecution, poor conditions in Eastern Europe and fear of conscription. The largest wave of Jewish immigrants arrived between 1906 and 1912 and many settled in Whitney Pier and opened small businesses.

Despite their best efforts and hopes of a new life the transition for new immigrants to industrial Cape Breton wasn't always easy. Compared to those who had come from rural Cape Breton and Newfoundland, arrivals from continental Europe and the West Indies met with cruel local conditions and had more difficulty than their Canadian counterparts in adapting to their new home and work. In September 1904, the Labour Gazette reported that many miners who immigrated to Cape Breton were disappointed and had moved home or westward.

Ethnic Tensions and Early Adjustments

As this period of immigration required adjustments of both the existing community and the immigrants themselves, it was a period not without racial tensions. There was a feeling among many Cape Bretoners, that the influx of foreigners would endanger their standard of living. Acts of crime and violence were not uncommon. The media, influenced by its readers, reflected the views of the public and reiterated various anti-immigrant sentiments. Often, the Anglicization of foreign names was part of the assimilation process; LeFargue became Leforte, Grinevicius became Green and Porrier became Perry.

Due to the large number of rural Cape Bretoners of Scottish decent in mining towns at the beginning of the expansion period, the chief language among many in the

mines was Gaelic. Throughout the first decade of the twentieth century, their language and culture fought off assimilationist pressures but eventually lost out to the feeling (often of an English-elite) that the Gaelic language was culturally and socially inferior. That coupled with the rapid urbanization and industrialization of the towns led to the decline of the Gaelic language in urban, and eventually rural, Cape Breton.

By the 1920s, tensions among ethnic groups in the mining community were diminishing. This was partially due to the Canadian Immigration Department's increased restrictions on the coal company's importation of labour, and also to the advent of the First World War in 1914, which slowed down the steady population and industrial growth.

Settlement Patterns and Social Cohesion

The Dominion Coal Company tended to employ many of the same ethnic groups at one colliery and the people were housed and thus settled together, in "ethnic pockets." The Cape Breton coalfield's size is compact in itself, and this also contributed to the centralized and concentrated settlement pattern.

Examples of this settlement pattern can be seen for instance in the Sterling area of Glace Bay, which was mostly inhabited by Blacks. Likewise, many Newfoundlanders worked and settled near the Number Two Mine in Dominion. Whitney Pier in the Sydney area was developed by the Dominion Steel and Iron Corporation and many foreigners, especially Jewish and Black (West Indian) immigrants, lived in company houses there. Due to these concentrations, people often adjusted easier as they had to deal with only one set of mine (or steel) officials and kept to themselves.

As each ethnic group arrived they quickly attempted to set up their own church. Religion became both the spiritual and social bond, which strengthened ties between those of similar ethnic backgrounds. People of Scottish origin with a Catholic religious affiliation were most common. Indeed, the Catholic faith was most dominant. In Reserve it accounted for 77.6% of religious ties, in Dominion 70.5% and in New Waterford 68.7%. The Presbyterians formed the second largest group in several towns and this faith too was often affiliated with people of Scottish decent.

By the 1920s, a number of fraternal and benevolent associations had also emerged in all of the mining towns. These groups ranged from the Ancient Order of Hibernians and the Oddfellows to the Knights of Columbus and the Loyal Orange Lodge. These groups played an important role in the community's social life by offering and organizing picnics, concerts, games and sports for their patrons and community members.

Societies were also formed among those of certain nationalities and ethnicities. The British in Sydney Mines formed the "Sons of the British Isles Social, Literary and Provident Society," a society dedicated to the "spiritual, moral, mental and social

improvement of members.” Acadian families in New Waterford and Reserve Mines established branches of “La Société’ L’Assomption” and achieved the institution of a bilingual class in the town school system. In 1918 Black miners in the Sterling area of Glace Bay founded a branch of the “Universal Negro Improvement Association” and the “African Community League.”

Lasting Impacts

By the 1920s, for many immigrants and their families that had arrived in the 1890s, Cape Breton was emerging as a home and perhaps even a “nationality.” The phenomenal growth rates of the island’s population in the 1890s and early 1900s were to end with the onset of the First World War. By this time the industrial way of life had taken shape: new ties and recreations in athletic, music and community organizations were developed. Added to this was the formation of trade unions and co-operative stores, which made life easier for both immigrants and native Cape Bretoners.

Although immigration had slowed, the coal industry was still a big employer, and would be for many years to come. The immigration that began as a way to staff the burgeoning Cape Breton coal industry would long continue to impact the ethnic makeup, settlement patterns and culture and heritage of Cape Breton Island.

This portrait of the role of immigration and the Cape Breton coal industry was provided by the Cape Breton Miners’ Museum.

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