

# WORK THROUGH TIME

*Cape Breton Stories of Land & Sea*



## Sydney Steel

Elizabeth Beaton

*The story of the Sydney Steel Plant  
reflects the life patterns  
of the people of Whitney Pier.  
It is the story of proud work,  
unequalled camaraderie  
and class struggle,  
of machinery and skills and accidents  
of environmental problems,  
of an industrial community.*

Since 1900, the steel industry has influenced the economy and social life of all Cape Breton, and especially Sydney. But Whitney Pier was the district most affected by steel. In fact, its growth as an urban industrial community was inextricably tied to steelmaking, and the ups and downs of the industry have directly affected its development throughout the century.

Steel production in Sydney was the brainchild of the Boston industrialist, H.M. Whitney, head of the Dominion Coal Company which mined coal in Cape Breton since 1893. Cape Breton was a logical place for the production of steel. It had local coal fields and limestone deposits, iron ore across the Cabot Strait at Wabana, Newfoundland, and an accessible harbour from which to export the finished product. Under the direction of H.M. Whitney, the Dominion Iron and Steel Company (DISCO) began construction of the Sydney plant in 1899. The first heat was poured on December 31, 1901.

The Sydney plant was immediately famous for its “modern” American technology and was the topic of excitement all over North America. In *The Halifax Herald* in 1901, General Manager A.J. Moxham proclaimed of the steelmaking operation: “Canada’s position as a steel maker is now something more than strong. It is invulnerable.”

In the decades that followed, Sydney had the largest heavy industry in the Maritime Provinces, and one of the three integrated steel plants in Canada.

Throughout the twentieth century, Sydney steel makers made history in technical innovation. The "Mackie Retarded Cooling Process" of the early 30's was the best known, but there were many others, including a melt resistant blast furnace "tuyere" or special "valve" developed by machinist George Beaton. In 1956, the furnace crews poured 49,000 tons of steel without an "off-heat," a record yet to be matched anywhere.

The steel plant is located immediately beside Whitney Pier on the south side of Sydney Harbour. At its peak, it consisted of over 100 buildings on 500 hectares of land. Since 1901, the major products of the plant have been iron, semi-processed ingots and billets, rails (beginning 1905), wire and nails (beginning 1901), plate (beginning 1918).

By 1905, the plant boasted of a battery of 400 Otto-Hoffman by-product coke ovens, four blast furnaces with a combined capacity of 1200 tons, 10 fifty-ton open hearths tilting furnaces, a 35 inch blooming mill, a rod mill, a rail mill, a machine shop, a foundry and power plants. Much of the shoveling, wheelbarrow and other backbreaking work associated with previous iron and steel technology was eliminated in the "state of the art" plant. The new internal machinery of the Sydney steel plant included steam driven or electrically powered cranes, mechanical doors, conveyors and cars of various sorts on a huge complex of rail transportation. Still, there was a coexistence of manual labour and machinery-operated labour in the plant throughout its history. "Bull work," such as furnace cleaning or lifting bales of wire, continued to be done by hand and depended on the strength and stamina of the workers.

In 1909, DISCO merged with the Dominion Coal Company to become the Dominion Steel Company (DOSCO). By 1920, the Sydney plant, now British Empire Steel Corporation (BESCO) had expanded significantly. It added a blooming mill in 1903, a rail mill in 1904, a rod and bar mill in 1910, and plate mill in 1918. Auxiliary shops included a foundry, a forge, and a machine shop. A new blast furnace had been added, along with two replacements of the coke ovens. Throughout the period, the steel makers in Sydney experimented with various technologies in trying to find processes compatible with the types of iron ore and coal found in the region. They concluded that the open hearth process was best, although variations of Bessemer converters were tried. In 1929, the company was turned back to DOSCO.

The plant prospered during the two world wars. Sydney was an important producer of shell steels and coke ovens by-products during World War I. A steel plate mill went into production in 1918, but fell into disuse immediately after the war, to be revived with the Second World War, which also saw the expansion of the open hearth area. But after World War II, the ravages of the Depression showed through as the boom of the war years became a "bust," and it became evident that the out-dated DOSCO equipment could not keep up with its modern Ontario steel competitors.

Adding to the decline of markets for coking by-products after World War II was the fire in the 1940s that destroyed the Dominion Tar Company, adjacent to the Subway.

In the mid-1950s, amidst the fanfare of a new Kopper-Becker coke ovens, and rebuilt open hearth and blast furnace, the plant changed hands once again, this time to the Britain-based company, Hawker-Siddeley. But the new management was not prepared to further revitalize the steel plant's aging technology in the face of the downturn in the world steel markets and particularly in the face of a Nova Scotia government report which stated that "Sydney possessed no actual or potential economic advantages for steel production and was disadvantaged because of its distance from markets."

On "Black Friday," October 13, 1967, Hawker-Siddeley announced that it was closing the plant. The protest that followed is part of the folklore of Industrial Cape Breton. Men, women, and children, students, singers, clergy, and even politicians rallied to "Save our Steel."

The result: SYSCO came into being, a corporation of the Nova Scotia government. Unsuccessful technologies, shut-downs and lay-offs, and promises of modernization followed. Finally, in 1987, the modernization and down-sizing of SYSCO began, followed by the complete closure of the coke ovens, the last cast at the blast furnace, and the last heat of the open hearth. It was the end of integrated steel production at Sydney.

SYSCO has been a mini-mill since 1990, employing about 900 people. Its future lies in an overseas market for rails and the successful combination of electric arc/ladle metallurgy/computerized mill technology with an expert workforce of steel makers.

The Nova Scotia government announced its intention to privatize SYSCO in early 1992.

### *The Steelworkers*

The Sydney steel plant's greatest resource has always been its workforce. The greatest numbers of people were employed during the years of both World Wars, with the peak showing about 6,000 in the workforce. Women have worked at the plant throughout its history, mainly in clerical jobs. However, during the Second World War, about 700 women were employed at jobs in every operation of the plant. The steelworkers of Sydney are remarkable for their solidarity and pride of workmanship in an inherently dangerous industry that has caused injury and death, and has affected the health of all who work in it.

The steelworker's history of worker solidarity began early in the century with the early financial difficulties of DISCO, when in 1903, the company decided to reduce

wages. The move was met with much resistance and in the following year, the Provincial Workmen's Association organized an unsuccessful strike. The army was brought in and not only were wages lowered, but the union was eliminated.

Although there were several "trade" unions (such as carpenters or bricklayers), no strong attempt was made to form a general union until the 1920s when once again the steelworkers were threatened with a wage reduction. Recollections of the 1923 strike tell of the police and the barbed wire and military tents at the plant. There were pitched battles and a machine gun was placed on a roof to protect plant property.

For the first 30 years of the plant's history, at least half of the workers were born outside of Canada, and work was divided on ethnic lines for most of the 20th century. The 1910 Commission on Hours of Labour concluded that foreign and Newfoundland labourers were "exploited to a greater degree than the native men." The "foreigners" were often employed in the most undesirable jobs – the coke ovens, or blast furnace, or doing "bull work" such as cleaning furnaces or lifting bales of wire.

Because skilled jobs were not open to immigrant workers, they were also barred from the established unions at the plant. As a result, the role of immigrants in the labour movement has been greatly misunderstood and neglected. As labourers, they were characterized as unlikely to organize and protest their working conditions. As leaders, they were seen as "dangerous foreigners" with connections to Bolshevism.

Come pack your duds and get away  
We are not wanted here, We'll go where hundreds go each day  
from hunger and despair We'll go and seek a country  
Where both milk and honey flow, Go pack  
your duds for Sydney, For New Morris told me so!

St. John's Daily News, 1903, written by a Newfoundlander, leaving on The Kyle for Sydney

The fact is that the immigrants played an active and important role in the labour movement from the very beginnings of the plant's history.

Indeed, one of the first recorded instances of worker-management tensions at the plant was in 1900 when DISCO police attempted to arrest two Italians involved in an altercation with a foreman. In 1903, Italian workers struck for more pay and better work. When the company tried to bring in new labourers, the Italians "assembled into two pickets of fifty men each, armed with 'heavy clubs, picks, shovels, iron bars' while one striker 'carried a red flag.'" The police broke up the pickets, doing "considerable clubbing" and arresting one or two. Some Italians were blacklisted and left Sydney for steel plants in central Canada.

Slavic workers also carried their collective standards of justice and democracy from the old country. Because of the stigma of the "Red Scare," some were ostracized from the Ukrainian Catholic Church in the 1920s. However, these same people took an

active part in the Orthodox Ukrainian Church and many belonged to the Ukrainian Labour Temple. Several of the Slavic labour leaders were black-listed after the 1923 Strike and a few were even deported during the Depression.

Jews, although they did not work at the steel plant in large numbers, were known for their intellectual support of the labour movement through study groups carried out by labour leaders. Some Jews were "1905-ers," i.e., they took part in the Russian Revolution of 1905. During the Depression, Jewish merchants did much to assure the dignity of the unemployed workers.

When compared to steel workers elsewhere Sydney steel workers are close to average in their participation in strikes, although the Sydney workers have become known for their union militancy.

This essay originally appeared in *From the Pier, Dear! Images of a Multicultural Community* by Elizabeth Beaton and Mary Keating, published in 1993 by the Whitney Pier Historical Society.

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## **Afterword**

Work Through Time Project Team

*Since these essays first appeared in *From the Pier, Dear!* in 1993, a lot has changed for SYSCO, the Sydney Steel Plant, and the surrounding communities of Sydney and Whitney Pier. Several factors, such as changes in technology and global markets, led to the end of the steel industry in Cape Breton. Throughout the 1990s, the Nova Scotia government made attempts to sell the Plant to private owners, including MinMetals of China, all of which were unsuccessful in the end. From 2001 to 2004, the site was dismantled and many parts of the Plant, including the Bloom Mill, the No. 3 and No. 7 Blast Furnace Stoves, and the cold tower of the Liquid Air plant, were demolished. The road ahead calls for the environmental remediation of the Sydney Tar Ponds and discussions of future use plans for the former Plant site. For further reading and links to additional resources on the history of the Steel Industry in Whitney Pier, please visit the "Further Viewing" section.*