

Interview with Norris Greer  
Debert, Nova Scotia

--presently at Senior Citizens' Complex, Debert.

--b. February 8, 1900, at Joggins.

Q. How did your father come to be in Joggins? How did your family come to be in Joggins?  
A.

A. Grandfather was a tenant farmer of King Seaman's. And they rowed out and they came to Barrosfield where father was born in 1872, and they moved to Joggins in 1878. Father was six years old.

Q. The way you described your grandfather, you made him sound like a bit of a character.

A. [He was a deep-sea, square-rigger seaman.] He generally jumped ship, so [he] jumped ship in Australia and had to go to the out-backs. Stayed a year or two. And likely he jumped ship in Lower Cove--they came down for a load of grindstone. Then he went to Minudie to be a tenant farmer.

Q. Was he from Ireland originally? A. Born in Bellaminna, Ireland. In... [checks book] 1871... Born in 1841. Had ~~three~~ six children... I was nine years old when he died.

Q. [reminiscing about his grandfather] What I can remember, he didn't go to church, but the women went to church. And he and some old sea-captains there would sit in the kitchen and smoke and talk about going to sea. ... I do remember, when I was six years old, father started teaching mining classes in Springhill. We had a black driving mare, father used to put me on her back--he had to lift me up there--I took it up to Grandpa Greers and he tended me till father came home. Six years old, imagine. Youngsters started early, then.

~~Q. You went into the mines.~~

Q. Your grandfather never went into the mines? A. No. They bought a small house--there wasn't any barn--just across from the Roman Catholic Church, there... And they had to clear the land and they had a few cows and they put the cows in the Commons in the summer. But he's the first one that sold milk from house to house, in the Joggins. There were only two pays a month and in the winter no pay, so he thought it was a bad business, he got out of that. But he would contract, he'd take contracts for cutting lumber and hauling lumber and stuff like that. But he never went in the mine, no. [Company used to use trees right near the mine and just haul them up. Subcontracting it out was cheaper than paying data pay]. They you had the contract of hauling the ashes from the fire doors. And there was a road cut between two highways--they called it Greer's Lane, it was a short-cut for going home.

[on the frontier character of Joggins] People really minded their business back then... You didn't worry about Vietnam, you didn't worry about Tiwana--you didn't worry about Halifax. Saint John was ~~where the~~ where the supplies came from. And the stores all had warehouses and a tug, from the May of Spring till Fall, made weekly trips, and a hundredweight--threw it on the wharf for five cents a hundredweight. You hauled it home yourself. And then those stores would get a ninety-day draft--you wouldn't have to pay for that for ninety days. So that's the way they got along.

[Changes with the coming of the railway. Before 1888, merchants are reliant all on the water].

[If people went away for anything, it was to Saint John, while now it's Halifax].

[grandfather's lot did not go all the way to the River--there's another lot before that. surveyed off in 10-acre lots--some were divided into five-acre lots and some put two ten acre lots together to make 20].

Q. When was your father born? A. 1872.

Q. Did he start mining at an early age? A. He started weighing coal at the wharf when he was 13. And then he went in the mine [around 14 yrs old].... then there wouldn't be any work in the winter, so he'd take his father's team into the woods. That's when they took the big rafts down from the Finger Board. [Joggins Raft was really from "Finger Board, 5 miles West of the Joggins].

cook on the Joggins raft used 196 pounds of flour a day--just for bread.

--his father liked the woods--turned the money over to his father.

Things look different when you're young than when you're old--you just look at the good parts.

--thinks pay was about \$30 a month for a man and a team--points out that going into the woods means that your team is fed, while if you stayed home you might not be assured of this.

he imagines the first thing his father would have done would be loading for "an older man"--you'd have to get your mining papers.

then he took a correspondence course from the International Correspondence School--work up to shotfirer to overman to underground manager.

[Ask him about the 1884 Strike with Barnhill].

B.B. Barnhill, ...that was at No. 1....

Then Barnhill went and bought a timber lot down in Two Rivers. And he had enough land--they didn't lumber in the summer then--wood left to grow for ten years--nothing less than 8" from the stump was cut].

--lot of it virgin timber..

At that time, if you worked for King Seaman, he owned you, if you know what I mean. You weren't a slave, but still, he told you, or else. And B.B. Barnhill, he was conservative, so everybody voted Conservative. He'd have more men in the winter than he'd have in the summer, with the little village, he'd keep them going with the mill and the farm and he kept nine cows down there....He was a genius in a lot of ways. He had a store--the employees could get stuff at the store, and checked off their wages. And he had a darkroom for developing pictures. And there was a post office. And no telephones into the camp, but he knew everything that was going on. And he had a bevil and a grindstone, run by ~~machines~~ steam, for ~~flowing~~ machine cutters, so you'd get the right angle. And he had a separator run by steam. He had an orchard there. He was kind of ahead of his time in a lot of ways....He had enough land for ten years growth--no clear cutting then, just select the best trees. [All this after he got out of mining].

...He was a graduate of M.I.T.

...Oh yes, I remember B.B. Barnhill. When I was a youngster we had to ask him before we went up the stream fishing. All he asked us if we had any matches. He was frightened of fire....But one time--I said he was Conservative--he fired a man because he vote Liberal. That was the end of him. So you knew just where you stood with him.

---five million cut used to keep Apple River going all the year.

--schooners had a hatch to accomodate the long spiling.

--take it to Boston and New York.

--father, married in 1897. he would be a miner before then.

--Sydney Greer went to Cape Breton to work.

--remembers English capital.

Burchell, he was the wise guy. Well, you see, he'd let out contracts, he he'd get a cut on everything, you see? When he left Joggins, he went down and he bought that Bras d'Or business, eh?

(He put in old pipe for new when he modernized Joggins in 1907--it all turned into a lake). (laughs and laughs).

--treated company lumber as if it were his own--making a profit out of wood shipped down for the company! --a sharp operator

He knew there was going to be trouble about the Springhill Strike. So he built a big fence all around the property, right?  
(He tricks the men into thinking he was building a ballfield--he'd build the fence and the men would supply the uniforms. But all the while it was a preparation in case the big strike spread to Joggins!)

Norman Avar, the accountant--he writes to England to try to interest capitalists there in investig in the mine. He gets word back that people are interested but they want to see the property.

Burchell holds half the coal back on the day before the delegation arrives, so that when the endless haulage gets going, it will look that the mine is a terrific producer.

--at that time slopes and levels have to be six feet high--at that time they were using horses in the levels.

So you had whitewash at the bottom, for about 200'.  
And it was a good plant, they liked it outside.

Burchell gouged out several holes in it. When the investors go down the mine they think that they have six feet of coal--when there's only three feet.

"So you can imagine what a character he was."

--Robert Bell--he came in around 1912--he was the only honest mine manager that ever was there.

The rest of them was all in a racket, all the way down the line.  
Bell was honest with the men and honest with the company.

Well, Norman Avard, you know, I think he was a millionaire before he died--there was never anything crookeder than Norman Avard.

One time he was in Chicago Utilities--that's when they started that plant down at Maccan. They wouldn't sell him the power plant unless he took the mine over. Well, when they took the mine over, they were kind of used to doing things like they used to do, American-style. I mean, if you had thirty years there, they paid you a small pension. That was unknown.  
[This is c.1928].

They had a first-aid man, and three shifts on the engine. They were kind of following the Coal Mine Regulation Act. But these others--they'd just close the book on that, eh?

But Norman, he was brainy, don't you forget that. (story of Avard beating an adding machine at arithmetic--he complains the machine is too slow).

--Avard was superintendent up until the war was over,

--in 1905 his father was manager of the Fundy Coal Company

1895:

"They had a hall, a union hall, and they had an Irishman, Dan Dewar, he used to fire the boilers. He used to fire on ocean liners. He was a character. (story of Dan getting the rope mixed up on the trip). Well, he said, gentlemen, would you agree with me, there's only two ways of doing anything, ....

--remembers Pinky Carroll. And Dan--well, at the hall they had draft beer. And Dan, he had Pinky's hat on. Well, they went down to the Company Office. And they had a delegation of miners in there--father was in there. And they had them in there, trying to get a settlement--they kept them talking. And my grandfather--he was kind of nosey, like myself--he kind of found out what was going on. And he said, there's a scheme there. The company had a scheme--the railway station's just across the track--the police will rush out and come and take them to Amherst. And the miners said, let them out. And then they stood shoulder to shoulder against the building, and lifted it up, and they said, let them out or over goes the building. So they let them out.

They all had a club, all had a stick. But some went to Amherst...

Dan went with them. And Dan asked to have a word with the judge and he said, "Take it easy on them, your honour. They haven't got a quafter in their pockets, any of them."

Then one morning, early, they went up to No.2. There were so strikebreakers. And Dan was the leader. ----but they told great stories about Poor Old Dan.

I think he had gangren--he died when they cut his legs off. --thinks it was the heat from the boilers on the ocean liners.

--he was the firebrand in the Joggins, I would imagine.

"They chased him home"--Bansmeer.

And they chased him home and he got under the bed. And someone said, you can't go in there, a wuan's going to have a baby. And he went away and didn't come back.

One man, they say he broke a trail through the woods running home. I guess they were just playing with him with these sticks.

One man, they brought him down for a trial. And they had a flagpole, a high flagpole, and of course he'd be convicted of strikebreaking. And then they put the chair and they hauled it up as high as it could go, the chair he sat in, it was tainted.

One man, Mackenzie, Heck Mackenzie--he was a blacksmith--and I think the underground manager came out, he had a revolver. Hec just wrenched his revolver away from him, and of course he had to go to the United States. He never came back for 25 years.

An awful lot of people in Joggins--they'd just stay a short time and away they'd go. It's hard to remember so many of them. It's a kind of drifting population, if you know what I mean.

[Election of 1896]

Len MacDowell had a livery stable. And he was a great Liberal. So they got word to have a young team of horses ready a certain morning. They wanted to go around the shore. Just a driver and himself. Course he'd stop at Two Rivers and set up the wagon and say a few words. Wouldn't get any votes there. Oh, he'd get one--that's where the guy got fired. But it's 100 miles from Joggins back to Joggins by way of Parrsboro and they made that trip in 24 hours with the same team of horses.

Well, you see, the Company was Conservative, and that made a difference you see?

--after his father got his general manager's papers, he approached the Providence Company owning the grindstones--

--Huestis brought an automobile down from Providence--on the deck of a schooner

--big stones go to axe factories and places like that in Philadelphia

--Fundy Strike of 1906

--"They closed the mine down. It didn't start again until 1919."

--father as mining instructor--Monday morning to Springhill, Chignecto, River Hebert--take up the whole week.

--in 1906, he had a little botleg crop pit--he and another man  
--taking out crop coal, out of that same seam.

"Well, you'd sell the coal locally, you see. You wouldn't get all that much."

"It was just narrow workings, it was all development work, you might say. You couldn't go any depth, because you couldn't get any air down there. And there was no way to drain it, it didn't get that big. You weren't going down over fifty feet. Some used to try a little short wall in there (laughs).

Company officials were supposed to be Conservative.

mining instructor from 1907-- died 1944. He was 72 years old when he died.

--stopped mining instructing when 1940.

Fundy Mine--they had big puncheons in the engine room, full of hot water if you wanted to use them--they were taken from the boiler. Other mines didn't have any wash houses.

--mines would bore holes in the solid--they'd blow it right out of the solid. Oh, there were a lot of infractions.

His grandmother: "She was quiet, the direct opposite of my grandfather. She couldn't seem to hurry and she always got things done. And very calm."



--her parents were from Ireland--were tenants of King Seaman. --then moved to Apple River.

grandmother born in Halfway River.

on poverty in the Joggins:

"Well, of you didn't know any better...The whole country was poor then."

"Ans you were better off there than lots of places, let's face it."

When you started for the company, it was a month before you got any pay, because there was two week's back time held.

You'd have to get credit at the store.

(back pay issue)

"Well, we weren't paid in 1939."--one week back money.

--miners didn't get one black cent after the company paid workmen's com p.

-Only small complaining, because the young ones were going to sign on in the War anyway.

grew up in a family of six.

everybody was born in a different house.

--Vinegar Hill, off the pit road

Father and Mother went up to Halifax, to the Exhibition--they bought a new [Wurlitzer?] piano, \$600 cash.

cost him \$1500 to build the house in 1909--he had to borrow \$300 to finish it.

N. Greer didn't go to school past age 15.

\$22 a month at the Bank--he'd prefer to be anyplace than in the bank.

lived in Quincy, Mass. for 10 years--he liked it there.

1920-1930.

worked in Amherst--but didn't live there.

I knew Oz Fife and I liked Oz Fife. He was smart. It was a good thing he couldn't read nor write. Fair as could be. If you told him you could do something easier or better, he would listen.

--hr could get stuff during the war that was rationed

--he could write his name.

He was good-hearted. He would help anybody out.

As far as I was concerned, Taylor was a man who either owned you, or else. So he and I didn't get along too good together.

--Dr. Cochrane did help out with horses.