

Transcription of Interview with Mrs. Joe McKay, Springhill.

b. 1910. 5 Chapel St., Springhill. born in Westchester, thirty miles from Springhill.

came to Springhill when she was about 14. his name was Hylan Nark.

Scottish and Irish descent. here for a number of generations.

attended Junction Road school.

schools here. "They were too strict in those days. You wouldn't dare open your mouth or you'd get swatted. Now kids get away with murder--they get up and move around."

--but they were "good teachers."

got to grade 11.

girls tended to go further on than the boys in school.

graduated from grade 11 in 1927.

n. when she was 19, 1929.

worked in the telephone office before she was married.

--telephone office was right on Main Street--some people would call up the telephone office and ask if you could grab their husband going down the street and do an errand.

--everybody used to call and ask where the fire was.

--if the town shook and they thought if there was an accident in the mines.

--telephone operators answered all sorts of questions.

telephone office was in the K of P building.

could have written a book--something like Peyton Place. lots of gossip. they'd tell you all the gossip around town.

two women worked on the board in the day-time and one at night.

\$7 a week for this work.

living at home all this time. 'There was no such a thing as just leaving home in those days....Nobody ever thought of doing that.'

lived up on the hill, when she got married; lived on Junction Rd. when living with her family. Her dad worked outside in the mines, and he was working on construction. Her husband was a coal miner, digging underground.

built houses for people around Springhill--sometimes work at houses to help his family. all built by her father. other people paid him.

'We were poor. We didn't have any money. Money was very scarce in those days.'

you had a garden--a cow and some hens. 'You were allowed to have them those days in the town.'

had a barn behind the house.

met her husband in 1929. fiftieth wedding anniversary last week.

his people were coal miners. his mother spoke Gaelic, taught Gaelic. her own mother taught Gaelic. were down from Antigonish way, they were born down there. Her husband was born in Springhill, but his mother came down from Antigonish.

Lachlan McKay. called him Dan Lachlie. (Brother) . her husband had two brothers and four sisters.

her grandmother talked about the big strike.

husband's family was growing up in a company house.

husband started work at 14. his father was dead and he had to go out to support his mother. got to grade 5 or 6.

She had an uncle start when he was nine. Boss had to have someone travelling with him all the time.

husband born 1909. started work 1923.

he was a chain runner on the mine. used to play hockey and used to be quick on his feet. 'He had to jump on and off and unhook these cars when they're moving and jump off again and all that. He did that for quite a long while.' worked cutting through stone--stone dust. Coal dust its not the problem.

He's presently got silicosis. from the stone dust.

left Springhill when the mines blew up, lived in Toronto for 15 years. retired back to Springhill.

'We wouldn't have any school when there were play-offs here!'

they'd let the kids out of school--

her husband had older brothers.
so he didn't have to look after the family completely.'

she said he had always known him, she thinks. he'd call up after he come home from work at night.

working as a regular miner at that point when she got married--on contract.

'The old pit clothes--they'd bring them home in a bag and--ah! gee, you'd have to wash them and mend them--you couldn't afford new ones. So you'd wash them and mend them, and the next time you'd see them they'd be all black and dusty. They had wash-houses out here, they use to bathe every day, you know, but they'd have to put these clothes on. And, what a mess! I used to hate them. They'd make such a mess of the washer.'

'You'd have to shake them out on the newspaper and the dust and--wasn't anybody wanted to see those.'

very hard to keep the house clean. they burned coal in the stove. they'd throw in the coal shute. the dust would just fly. 'Everything was dusty.' --coal dust and ashes everywhere.

'We never thought anything about it. We took it all for granted. We never knew anything different.'

'If you're used to that, well--it's just like anything you get used to.'

'You'd have a rough time--you'd get up in the morning and have to get the fires going and get the lunch ready and the breakfast ready and the men would go off to work, and three o'clock they'd be home--they use to bat at half-past three....Some men would get up five o'clock.... They always had four meals a day....Coal miners were great men for sweet stuff....They used to make a joke of it, and they said that if they had anything good in their lunch, they always ate it first, in case there was a bump and they lost their can.'

'We tried to put something nice in for their lunch, because we felt sorry for them going out to work in that old black place.'

'The women were really good to the men--they spoiled them, waited on them. Waited on them all the time. The mothers waited on their sons, their sons married...You waited on them an awful lot, to what the women do now. They never got anything to eat for themselves or anything like that. That was terrible....The mothers felt sorry for the kids going to work when they were just kids. And they'd make the sisters wait on the boys, run up and get his coat, run up and get this and run up and get that, or have his meal ready on the table when he came in through the door....And then it just seemed to keep on going once they got married.'

'The wives took over and they spoiled their children.'

They spoiled the children, even if this didn't mean money.

company laid on a train for Parrsboro.

Q. What was the women's point of view on strikes? Were you ever through that experience? A. Yeah. It was terrible. There was no money, and the union didn't seem to have any money to hand out to them. And the men--they all used to smoke and they'd have to have their tobacco and cigarettes or whatever.... You'd dole them out a little money, just enough for a man to get papers to keep him happy. [rolling your own cigarettes]... Most of the women kept control [over the money] because the men were on different shifts and they weren't home to pay for anything, so the man would come home with the envelope and he'd give it to the woman. As a rule. Now that's the way I found it.... Farmers would come in on Saturday with a big load of vegetables--it was a great town to buy stuff.... Miners are great spenders.... They always had a good Christmas.... They really enjoyed life. Other people would be saving and scrimping and trying to get along, but the miners--a lot of the miners--they liked a good time.'

--fairly hard-drinking town, she feels.

--\$1 for a jug of wine, get drunk.

--not drink at home so much as in other places. 'The brave ones brought it home.'

--thinks the temperance movement was stronger among women than among men.

her parents were Baptists and pretty strict. 'Don't you ever bring it home,' he'd comment on husband's drinking.

drinking outside of the home: it would depend on when he came home and what shape he was in.

'It took you all your time to look after your husband and your kids and the coal dust.'

miners had big families. mother had big children.

'Miners had a great sense of humour. Most of them had the greatest sense of humour.'

--you could say things in the mine you couldn't say on the surface.

good fellowship of the mine.

after they got married they had a bungalow up the hill. bought this house when they came back from Toronto.

belonged to the Rebekahs.

just in Toronto one month when the bump came.

two children. little girl died when she was two; boy lived to grow up to be a teacher.

shopping on Main Street. 'I don't think anybody took cash.'

--people used to take their orders to the merchants during the strikes of the 1920s--they'd put on a dozen oranges down on their order and the merchants would change it to six--saying 'They don't need more than six.' They strike off what they thought the miners didn't need.

some of the merchants just forgot about the bills.

'But they kept the people.' Pay the merchants every Saturday night.

skated, danced, she always went to the games and watched her husband play.

retells story of Ackie Allbon's great victory in Yarmouth.

'We were all related, you know'--says of the merchants/miners. 'Oh, some people thought they were a little better than the coal miners, and they didn't want their girls to go around with the boys over in the Rows.'

girls on the Hill told, "You keep away from the boys in the Rows," but 'We all married boys in the Rows.'

--toppling over out-houses on Hallowe'en.

lot of sickness in those days--no antibiotics, 'Heat some salt in the oven and put it on their ear for ear-ache.' Poultices universal.

rich doctors in Springhill.

delivering a baby was \$4.00; otherwise covered by 25c a week.

midwives in town. Doctors were free, more or less, so they used to deliver babies.

never had any funeral home until a few years ago. body laid out in the front parlour. never put the lights out and closed the door and went to bed with a corpse in the house.

weren't like Irish wakes. they'd hang a big wreath on your door.

'The house would be packed--if you were popular, if you were well-liked.'

'They loved excuses to close the mines in those days. They loved to hear the whistles blow, but the women didn't.'

--whistle would blow the night before for 'no work' the next day.

her husband had three narrow escapes in the mines. he wanted to go back to the mines. 'Everything would shake, you know, and the dishes would rattle in your cupboard....'

she was down in the mine once. the heat was terrific in the mines, and the dust. --always saves a piece of a sandwich or a cookie--even long after his mining days--because you didn't eat the part your hand touched. give them bananas--cleanest fruit to eat in the mine.'

--there was some religious division: Catholics wouldn't let their kids play with protestants, and vice versa.

--her husband was a strong Liberal.

'Then when the whistles would blow they'd blame the Liberal government or the Conservative government, you know, they'd say "There's the old Bennett whistles or something,"....'

--always blame the local government here.

'Just a little sneakier,' she says about morals in those days.

many girls had to get married--it would take them a long time to live it down.

'You see, in this town, everybody knew everybody else.' Couldn't keep a pregnancy secret by any means.

quite a stigma. in the old days, "The stork brought babies."

drugstore--contraceptives. 'You whispered to the [pharmacist] and everybody knew you'd bought them.'

--so many hundreds of people left here.

--analysis of war conscription: "anything would be better than mining." "anything to get out of the mines."

small-town intimacy. good place to retire to.