

Transcription of Interview with Jean Heffernan, Springhill

Q. When were you born? A. I was born at the turn of the century, 11 days before 1900.

Q. December 19 1899? A. December 20. So I was born in the Victorian Age and I'm now living in the Space Age. So I've had to do a lot of adjusting, along the line.

Q. Do you think you would be more comfortable in the Victorian Age, or do you like this age better? A. Well, I liked the in-between age better, when people seemed to be happier with fewer things, and there was much more social life and people went calling and your neighbours were very much interested in you and all that sort of thing.

Q. Were you born in Springhill? A. I was born in this house, and I've lived here all my life.

Q. What did your father do? A. He was payroll clerk with the Dominion Coal Company....

Q. What sort of house was this to grow up in? How did you find it as a child? A. Well, we... it was the day of, you know, the ladies went calling on certain days, and -- this is real Victorian, you know -- and they had their days, and our day was every Tuesday, so that meant that things got dusted up and every room got more or less ready. And I can remember as a small child using my clay dishes to serve tea to long-suffering guests.

Q. So your family was very much 'in society,' in a sense, wasn't it? A. Well, I don't know.... I suppose there were grades of society, but there was a common level too.

Q. In that all of you worked in and around the mine? A. Well, the mine was directly responsible for our living.

Q. Tell me a bit about your father. A. Well, he was a customs officer, until 1911, and when the government changed he went out on his ear, you know. I think it changed around the fifth of March and he received his notice the sixteenth of March. And my mother was laid out in the parlour the same time. So that's something I've always remembered. I was 11 years old, at the time.

Q. And your father then sought employment with the coal company? A. Yes. And in 1914 he went to Halifax and he had a rank of honorary major. He was sent to Wellington Barracks for the duration...

60 Q. Was he born in Springhill as well? A. No, he was born in Halifax. He came to Springhill around -- I would say, around 1883, around there. Two years later his father came. In the meantime, they had opened up a small furniture store in the Orange Lodge building, and my grandfather came around 1885. That's when this house was built. And no other family has lived in it.

Q. I believe I've seen the advertisements for your father's furniture store in the newspaper. A. You see, the three Heffernans -- W.E. Heffernan, my grandfather, E.E. was my great-grandfather, and E.E. [?] was my great-grandfather, and they were all furniture men....

[father worked at Gordon & Keith's].

85 Q. So your father must have joined the coal company right at the end of the 1909-11 strike? A. Yes.

Q. Were they looking for someone like him? A. No, he was looking for a job, let's put it that way. And his brother-in-law, Sandy Dick, had a very influential position with the coal company and I think he was directly responsible for dad getting the job....

[Dick was chief sales agent for the Dominion Coal Co. He lived in Montreal, but he had a summer home at Westmount, across from Sydney.]

Q. Did you have any memories of Mr. Dick at all? A. Oh yes, Uncle Sandy. My goodness, when he appeared, that was like Christmas all over again.

Q. He was generous? A. He was very generous, he was a man who as a bit pompous but, as Dad said, Sandy always wanted the band to play but he was always willing to pay the band.

Q. Was your father very interested in politics? A. Very much so.

Q. He was a Liberal, I gather? A. Dyed-in-the-wool.

Q. That was often a difficult thing to be in Springhill. A. Yes....

113 Q. Do you remember anything about the elections? Was your father particularly active? A. Yes.... I remember Mr. Logan quite well, he was very tall, fine-looking man....

There was some connection there, he was related, I think, in some way to Col. Ralston,...

Q. What about your mother -- what was her background? A. No, my mother was born in Pictou, and her father, William Dick, came to Springhill as master mechanic when the mine was open. They didn't have anything fancy then, like mechanical superintendent....

Q. Do you have any memories of William Dick? A. No, I haven't. He died when I was about six months old.... And they called him Old Man Dick. And I saw on his tombstone that he was 52 years old.

Q. Was there any tradition passed on to you about what he was like? A. He was a great joiner.

He joined everything, like every lodge. He was in--well, lacrosse was very popular at that time. And he was in that. And he was in the band. And all that sort of thing. He was charter member of the Knights of Pythias, I know that....

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Q>Your mother...A.My mother's name was Margaret Grant Dick, and she was a dressmaker. And she was a wonderful housekeeper, something her daughter isn't.

Q.How many children were there in your family? A.There were four of us, three boys and myself....

Q.What was it like, growing up in Springhill? A.I didn't realize, when I was growing up, as a child, that anybody lived differently than I lived. And I was brought up with books and music and all that sort of thing. And my grandfather--now we knew every Mother Goose rhyme there was, but my grandfather, instead of bed-time stories, read Shakespeare. So I could say, "Out damn spot," long before I knew my prayers.

Q.You were a very established and secure family, then? A.Well, we never had money, but we were never poor, at least we never admitted we were poor. We didn't have brains enough to know we were.

[Hefferman, Jean's father, dragged people to court because they had beaten their children.]

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Q.There couldn't have been many children of your social position to play with? A.Oh yes, there were...Now, over here, a lawyer lived over here, and over there, a doctor, couple of houses over, a banker, and there was all this little clique, more or less...

Q.Would that clique have formed because your parents wanted you to mix with that sort of child? A.No, but then, a couple of doors away, there was a miner's family, and we were in there just as much as we were any place else. And we just loved the woman there, we thought she was wonderful. And she thought nothing of handing us a raisin pie, you know, for us to divide. No wonder she was popular.

Q.So when you were a child you didn't have a sense of a division in Springhill? A.No, no. And I'd come home from school and my mother would say, Now, Jean, you put on your good clothes today...

[Jean's clothes were given to a child next door. They would just disappear; then she'd find them on a neighbourhood child. Never had a chance to wear anything out.]

212. Q.So you had good friends among the miners' children as well...A.Oh, really, the...I had wonderful friends among the miners and their wives, some of them were the very best friends I've ever had, or ever hope to have.

219. Q.Do you have any memories of the 1909-11 strike? A....I remember it. I remember the town came under martial law--there were troops here, to keep order....I was only nine....I can remember, in 1910, the smallpox epidemic more than I can remember the strike.

Q.It was said at the time that that smallpox epidemic was cooked up by the Amherst papers to scare people away from Springhill. A.Well, I don't know, they had a pest-house up where the high school is now.

Q.Were you scared by it? A.No, everyone was vaccinated, and I remember the doctor came, Dr. Murray, that was Dr. Robert Murray, he came one night to vaccinate me. And my father gone in the drug store and he said, "Tell him not to scratch all over her," so anyway he came in and I was in bed, so my mother brought me down, and I sat on the doctor's knee. And he said to my mother, "You mind washing her arm?" And so she washed my arm. He said, "I asked one woman to do that and you couldn't tell what colour the child was supposed to be. And she was highly insulted." So anyway, "I've got my orders not to scratch all over her," and I had the neatest little vaccination mark you ever saw. And at that time my mother made a quilt, and she must have got the material at a bargain. It was the homeliest stuff, it was bright pink with tiny red dots on it. And we always called it the smallpox quilt.

Q.Do you remember the foreign labourers that were brought into Springhill? A.Yes, but I didn't see anything about that. You see, they used to be marched to work and some way they went through the company's rows and the women there used to do some weird things, when they were marching.

Q.What sort of things? A.Well, they'd be out, you know, threatening them and all that sort of thing....I don't think their language was too choice. Of course, this is just hearsay. I wasn't there. But the men weren't allowed to loiter, you know they weren't allowed to stand on the street corners, like they always did, or on the store steps. If they stopped, the militia made them move on.

Q.These are the strikers? A.Yes. They weren't allowed to stand in groups. And I don't know whether the YMCA building was used for their barracks or not, but I have an idea that it was. I can't vouch for that.

Q.Did you have any feeling about the 1909-11 strike--were you on one side or the other? A.No, the only feeling we had that I ever knew, it was a dreadful experience, and we, well, dad--was in the customs office then--and he was getting a magnificent salary of forty-five dollars a month. And we were living in comparative luxury. And when that strike was on, we were continually handing out. You know what I mean.

You can't see people go hungry or cold if you can help them.

Q. There was a real sense of the community being together rather than fighting each other? What did people think of the company? In a sense, the company was fairly hard-nosed--especially J.R. Cowans? Did you have any memory of him?

A. There was a great bitterness when the miners had to go back to work, without getting what they'd come out for.

Q. After nearly two years... A. Yes, it was 22 months. And there was a great bitterness. And that bitterness stayed. And the company--the men didn't have the same feeling for the company, after that.

Q. There had been a sort of bitterness [before] about Mr. Cowans and the company. Do you remember anything about that? A. Well you see, Mr. Cowans was more or less aristocratic. And he didn't associate with the common herd, you see. And if you were invited to his place, it was a royal command. But you weren't supposed to invite them back.

Q. How did your family feel about him? A. It didn't mean a thing.

Q. In a way you were outside it because your father wasn't drawing his income from the company? A. Yes, and we didn't have to let him boss, you see.

Q. But other people were bothered by it? A. Oh yes.

Q. And not just miners but people who might have considered themselves Mr. Cowans' social equals? A. Yes. And a lot of people were snubbed. But of course the Heffernans didn't go to be snubbed. They didn't go, period....

314. Q. Were the merchants of the town supportive of the strikers? A. To this extent, that they extended credit to them. And some of those bills were never paid. They couldn't be paid. A man with six or seven children getting--while he was working--getting less than a dollar a day for ten hours' work--well, how could he ever have hoped to pay? And they were getting 25 cents from the union--25 cents a week, for each person in the house....

[merchants were generous]... And one man, Allan Purdy, on Saturday when he sent the order, always put a bag of hard candy in for the children.

Q. You were going to school, then, weren't you? A. I was going to school--you'd better believe it, I was going to school. I went to a school that had been condemned for about 11 years before I landed in it. And the floor went in waves like this, it was so worn. There was a bench and it had a bucket on it--that was the water supply. And there was a long-handled dipper. There was a pot-bellied stove here--if you were there, you roasted, if you were three feet away from it, you froze. And the teacher's desk was there. There were blackboards there. You had slates. You had little bottles of water and what they called slate rags. And in two days they smelled to high heaven. And to me it was the most beautiful place on earth. I just loved it. And I had a teacher--a Miss Swift--her brother Lancy Swift, is still alive--and she was my grade two teacher. And she could do absolutely nothing wrong. And there's still some of the girls left in town with whom I went to school, you know. There are a few of them, still surviving.

Q. I remember reading about the 1909-11 strike, there were fistfights at the school between the children of strikers and non-strikers. A. There were fistfights anytime. If Junction Roaders met the Herritt Roaders, there was a fight--regardless of whether there was a strike.

Q. So it was a fairly rough-and-tumble place, was it? A. Well, to a certain extent. You know, but it wasn't that bad. I never remember my brothers being in a fight. Of course the Heffernans are all too lazy to fight....

[Miss Heffernan went down to Mount Saint Vincent in 1918-20.]

392. Q. Do you remember anything of the Great War and what it was like then to live in Springhill? A. Well, you know, there were a great many men that went from Springhill, and it was a very patriotic town. I mean, there were everlastingly Red Cross teas, welcoming soldiers--they would come and stay with families here, you know, and the same thing happened during the Second World War. When the troops would go away, Dad was one who organized their lunches, you know, for them to take with them...

Q. Was yours a religious family? A. We're Catholics. And we were brought up strictly, because at that time the Church was very strict.

Q. Catholics were a minority in Springhill, were they not? A. Yes. And they were sort of looked down on.... But we just ignored that. My mother was brought up Presbyterian but she became a Catholic when she married Dad. And her mother thought more of Dad than she did some of her own.... There was no bigotry, you know what I mean. If there was something going on for All Saints' Church, well dad would be there and helping with them. If there was something going on for the Orange Lodge, well he used to play in the band--

Q. He used to play in the Orange band! A. Well, this band, it went to all the Orange meetings, and he'd go to these meetings, they'd be open air meetings, there was one down in Shubenacadie, and he was standing alongside of a great big Orangeman about six feet something, that towered over Dad, and Dad wasn't exactly a runt, and he was standing alongside this [man] and the orator for the occasion was giving the Catholics particular hell, and Dad was going, "Isn't that great," you know. The man

never knew that he wasn't one. And a few years ago there was a Presbyterian minister here, and he was from Scotland. And he phoned me and he said, "Can you tell me anything about the Orange Lodge in Springhill?" And I said, "Yes. When do you want it?" He said, "They're coming to the Church this afternoon at two o'clock." And I said, "Alright, I'll have something for you." So anyway, he had it all in order, and when he started to preach, he said, "If you expect me to start running down the Catholics," he said, "You're in for a disappointment." And then he went on and he gave the history of the Orange Lodge in Springhill. And when they came out one was saying to the other, "He must have got that over in Scotland..." And Bruce Hynes [?], who lived two doors up, he knew very well where he had gotten all the news, you know, and he didn't say a word--he let on that it came from Scotland. So anyway, Mr. McBride brought the material back, and he said, "Look. If I had told them, if I tell them in Scotland that I came to a Roman Catholic for the history of the Orange Lodge, they'll never believe me."

Q. The Orange Lodge was very important in Springhill, wasn't it? A. It was.

Q. A recreational outlet rather than a... A. Oh, no, it was very, very important. But we haven't the Black Knights of Ireland. They're in River Hebert, they just come for state occasions... The Orangemen used to have a dance, you know, and Dan Gillis, who was a very good Catholic, always called off for it.

Q. There was a Catholic fraternal order too, was there not? A. Well, it wasn't exactly... it was a mutual benefit association. CMBA. And it was sort of an insurance thing, I think--you know, you paid into it. Now, I don't know too much about that. But I know the first church was moved back from the property of the [?] wooden church and they used that as the CMBA hall for years. But then in time that died out.

Q. What did you do after you went to Mount Saint Vincent? A. Just kept house, that's all.

Q. What courses did you take at Mount Saint Vincent? A. Well, I specialized in English--you'd never believe it to hear me talk.

Q. Then you came back to Springhill. A. Then I came back to Springhill. I took a secretarial course too, but I never used it.

Q. You've lived here ever since? Right here.

Q. Were you taking care of your father? A. Well, my father was a semi-invalid for awhile...

Q. My impression is that a mining town doesn't leave much room for women to have much say in public affairs--is that true? A. You'd better not believe that one (laughs). Women are behind the men and they're pushing the men, you know. They mightn't come right out with the big guns, but they're there and they're--I know men who have been forced, you know, to take a leave that they probably didn't want to take, just to pacify their wives....

Q. For a young girl growing up there wasn't too much here to hold you here, was there? Except your family? Were you thinking of a career? A. No, you see, the first--I think the first woman to work in the company's office was Miss May Sears, and she came from Moncton. And that was around 1904. And Mr. Dave George [?] brought her as his secretary. And she caused quite a sensation, in the town. But that was 1904. But she boarded over the Arabs and I used to go to that house. And I had a terrible crush on the man who boarded there. Because he used to make such a fuss over me.

...
585. [Details about her father's job with the company...]

607. [Re women and war.] I think it was around 1915 the first woman clerk worked in the bank, and that was Agnes Baxter, and she came from Maitland, Annapolis Co....
...In 1925 the whistles blew four times for no work for one of work. Well, you heard that whistle at a certain time. It meant there was no work. And at that time things were really bad and a great many people left Springhill. The young men went away, and they went mostly to Detroit or to Gary, Indiana....

Q. Did any of them come back? A. No, no, they all settled. They came back on vacations you know, but I don't think any of them ever came back to live.

[Comments on Archie Terris.]...Well, he went in as a labour member, but he didn't exactly set the world on fire.

[Comments on William Hayes.]...He had to be elected every year....And he had a very good position, you see, he was paid in American money and at that time there was quite an exchange, you see, and he used to get quite a bit extra, because of that....He was a very good man, and he did try to keep things on an even keel.

Q. There weren't very many strikes in Springhill in the 1920s, were there? A. Oh, well--when the mines started again, when Springhill was playing baseball, it was nothing for them to stop work, you know, to go for a ball game....They'd come up, and they'd empty their water can, and that was a sign they weren't going to work. And when one did it, well, then, they'd all do it.

Q. Do you remember much about sports in Springhill...? A. Now I don't remember lacrosse, I never saw a game. But in 1895 they won the championship--I know that they won the

championship....And in baseball, oh my goodness! they used to get in fistfights over that, you know, down at Westville when they played Westville--of course it was another mining town--and they always ended in a battle, of some kind.

756 Q. Horse-racing was very popular. A. Oh yes, and Mr. Cowans kept a string of horses ... and he had two []...

[On J.R.Cowans]. Now here's something that might strike you as being strange. He was on the board of the Royal Victoria General in Montreal, and if a Springhiller landed there, regardless of who he was, J.R.Cowans couldn't do enough for him. He went all out to do for him....

[replying to comments about Cowans's personality] He wasn't a glad-hander, you know. If he'd given of himself a little more, there wouldn't have been the trouble there was....He was the boss, you didn't talk back to him. He was the resident superintendent. He wasn't the manager, he was the superintendent. Well, now, the manager--he lived in a corner house, a three-story house, and that has since been torn down.

Q. Do you remember anything about temperance in Springhill? A. Well, (laughs) I don't know. When you got whiskey for twenty-five cents a quart, I don't think it did much for the temperance union....Well, I think that the men thought that after sweating six days in the mine that they were entitled to getting drunk on Saturday night.

Q. There was a lot of fuss about the Scott Act. A. Oh, that Scott Act! There was always someone being arrested, for selling or, you know--places being raided. And one woman, she was supposed to appear in court, and she said she was too ill to go, well she's still alive and she's evidently never recovered, because she never appeared in court.

947 [on politics] In those days you knew what people were [what party].

Q. Even though in an election campaign people said the worst things about each other, it was all forgotten afterwards? A. Well, there were people who never spoke to each other again. But as Dad used to say, the politicians were shaking hands with each other after an election...

...when my father lost his job it was because he was a Liberal and Laurier had gone out of power. Well, when Angus L. MacDonald was elected and of course the axe fell, because the conservatives had been in power...So a lot of Conservatives were losing their jobs. And my father was going down to the post office--you see the customs office was upstairs in the post office--and this was after Angus MacDonald was elected. He was going out and he met one of the leading Conservative ladies. And she said, "Frank, I think it's terrible the way the Conservatives are losing their jobs, since the election. The Conservatives certainly didn't do anything like that." He said, "Lillian, you picked out the right man to say that to and the right place to say it." She said, "Oh Frank, I forgot about you."

Q. You'd think that would divide a community. A. But it didn't....

But I know, before an election, that--now, in the mornings, on Main Street, the merchants used to go--to, I think it was Simon Fraser's, and it was next door to A.G. Purdy's. And he was a great Liberal. And Col. Dan Murray was a great Liberal. And someone else was a great Conservative. And, you know, they'd meet there every morning just to talk, just talk things over. But when there was an election on, Col. Murray wouldn't go to it at all in case he'd say something, you know, get in an argument. And he wouldn't go at all. He stayed away.

Q. The election of a labour candidate must have seemed a strange thing in a town where everyone thought in terms of Liberals and Conservatives....A. Well, I don't think people paid too much attention to it, on account of this continuous voting for the district representative for the labour [i.e. the board member], that it was just kind of--well, they felt, it was all more or less the same. No one got in a panic. It was more of a kind of joke, to tell the truth.

[Miss Heffernan says she became so agitated at baseball games that people practically had to hold her down.]

[Springhill colours were maroon and gold.]

[There were girl's baseball teams and hockey teams.]

[Tennis was a popular game as well. There were quite a few tennis courts.]

...The Iron Dukes, they were at foot of the Junction Road--well, the women down there supported them. [Baseball team.]

[After Wellington. After Wellington Orange Lodge.]

Q. What about the police? A...There was one policeman and we were all scared to death of him, and that was George Smith. And if you went coasting down Drummond Street, ...gathering snow and cinders as we went, well, he'd got your sled, your father had to go over and pay 25c to get it back, and that was a small fortune in those days.

Q. It wasn't much of a town for crime, was it? A. Look, there wasn't a lawyer that ever came to Springhill that could make a living....

Q. Question asks if there weren't many people who came to Springhill for short periods in

search of work, so you'd have a sort of "floating population."] No. When you got a job in the mines, in Springhill, it was handed down from father to son and then he handed it to his son, and it was sort of a clan feeling, and if you hired anyone-- if anyone was hired, who wasn't a native, oh, there was a big uproar over it. ...There'd be a hullabaloo.

159. Q. It must have been hard to send your boy down the mine at 14 years or so. A. My dear man, they went in the mine when they were nine years old, as trapper boys. And they worked that air-trap you see, and kept it going, the poor little gaffers. They would fall asleep and a man would come along with his pit-belt and hit them, to wake them up.... And those kids in the winter never saw day-light, they went to work around five in the morning and they came home around five at night. And in the meantime the daylight had come and gone. And they talk about the good old days! Well, believe you me, they're welcome to them. I don't want them.

...But the miners in their own way had a good life. They used to have dances in the kitchen, you know, ... and if anyone was sick, the next-door neighbour landed with her pot of soup or something....