

Transcription of Interview with John Coon, Springhill

[... b. Dec. 28 1903, in Springhill. Born on McFarland Street. Father an engineer--stationary engineer, last work was on the air compressor at the mines.

He came to Springhill

Started in the mine when he was 12 and retired when he was 77. Had 65 years with the Company.

He was very young when he came to Springhill--only about 4. His father's father came from Windsor, N.S. One time he worked at the 1900 in the No.2 mine, they had a place where they could come through at dinner time. Come up a ladder at dinner time (this is his father). Later on he ran the hoist at the Aberdeen. Hauling men and coal and stone from the mine. He didn't get papers through night school--he got his mostly through experience. Service paper.

When he started he got \$1.52 for twelve hours. His father's name was Alexander Coon, drove one of the first trains over to Parrsboro. One of the first engineers. John Coon's father fired for his father on this line.

"The Coons had quite a name as engineers here."

--mother's name was Cunningham, she came from McLelland's Brook. Her family came quite early to Springhill. He had f....]

[John Coon started work in 1922, at the age of 19. He had grade nine education. They had good disciplined classes in his school. A lot of strapping in those days. Father's job was one that was fairly steady. AIR Compressor on the surface. Most of John's work was around the bankhead--he was a chainrunner.]

Description of the chain runner's job: 'when they haul the coal out of the mine, they had what they call a chainrunner. At the bottom they had a chain with a cable on it--roughly weigh 100 lbs.' Had 8 boxes of coal--box weigh ton and a half. A steam engine would haul these up. Rope coils around the drum. Dropped the slack--the chain runners' job was to hook that chain on while it was moving. Shoved the chain on--another fellow took it off the other end. Back and forth, all day. Heavy work, but he didn't mind it.

He advanced quite a lot--became a coal weigher for the company. Coal weigher at Nos. 6-7 (located at the bottom of Junction Road.) Became coal weigher in 1924; went from coal weigher to bank foreman--in charge of about 20 men. When 6-7 closed down, moved to No. 4 mine. Weighman was the company man, the checkweighman was elected by the miners. 'He never said much,' Coon says of checkweighman.]

[Weighman's job difficult: everything had to balance, like an accountants books.

[1953: he became a coal inspector for the company, inspecting the quality of the coal. 'Oh, lovely coal--good ash in this coal....' (his appraisal of Spr. coal) CNR really liked this coal.]

longwall talk: you "clean off" a space, so much coal to "clean off."

good description of longwall work.

lining up the walls in No. 2: "They always claimed that lining up walls was the cause of the diaster....The miners were always scared to death going down there....They figured if you mined....They used to stagger the wall...."

--new system put all the pressure on the wall--and that's what happened.

likens a bump to stepping on a blown-up paper bag.

He handled bodies after they came out of the pit. They had to get them ready for the undertaker. Had an ambulance shed. Some of them in baskets, some in plastic bags. "There was nothing left of them, hardly."

put the remains in a copper cannister.

The day of the 1891 explosion John's father was on the three o'clock shift. It happened in the daytime, so he didn't get into it.

John Coon says he has book on the PWA.

John Coon's father went back to work--i.e. scabbed. "He was sorry after he did, you know. 22-month strike.

"We took a lot of abuse, you know." --on account of his father's return to work.

"They used to get up behind the house and call out, 'Scab!' and all, they done that...that was the way they got back at you.

[Bitterness died down a few years after the strike. His father went back to work for his family. His father was really more a PWA man.]

[recollection of "Johnnie Moffat---a distant relative of his mother's. still has relatives in Springhill. spent a lot of time in Cape Breton.]

"The Cape Bretoners went back and left these fellows out, you know. Holding the bag."

[His father out on strike quite a while before he went back to work. Well, I remember when they used to have the provincial police in here. Well, in fact, one of our men--Angus Beaton--he belonged to the provincial police, one of our own men. They were stationed at the Carlton Hotel, you know. And we had a picture here one time of the provincial police.... Yeah, we had a picture of the provincial police.]

[gang out by Herritt Road called the "dirty dozen". reputation of beating up on people who took girls out from that district.]

["towners" versus the "Herritt Roaders".]

[rented a home on the Herritt Road]

[it wasn't a bad house.]

1925 strike: they'd eat grass before they went back.

P.c. tax paid up in Springhill, so most of the money went to C.B.?]

--John Coon had an opportunity to work, as an official, during the 1925 strike, but he didn't work. he was left alone, holding the bag. Coon then rethought this, after they upped their offer, but it was too late. "You shouldn't have listened to those other fellows."

"If you're a company man, you lean towards the company, and if you're a union man, you lean towards the union. We've had fellows here now, they were strong union men. At one time, I was what they called a steward...that was the UMW, outside on the surface. And when they had any grievance I used to have to go to the office. And we had a strike one time for two weeks, and I remember we had a hearing one time--they were taking men off the bank and the boys went on strike and tied the pit up--you had to have bankmen because you couldn't hoist coal without it, and the pits wouldn't go without the bank men. We had a hearing in the office, and Judge Crowell from the Valley--they brought him up as a conciliator. And we had this hearing. And the company lawyer was there, by the name of McNeil. And he was asking questions. And we had a big fellow, used to play ball here--Jim O'Rourke, his name was,...very prominent in baseball circles--and he was a very prominent union man,...and this McNeil asked O'Rourke, he says, "Mr.O'Rourke, do you think these strikes are of any purpose?" "Oh yes," he said, "the best weapon the workingman ever had." "Without them you'd be lost--what have you got?" You know, it wasn't any more than six months, he was on the official staff. So the company always figured, if you worked for the union, you work for us. A lot of those fellows that were with me in the union, became officials. They were carrying a red light.... [The company] They wanted them on their side.

[Coon was a steward in the 1930s].

[AMW vs. UMW] I was down street the night that they--they had a hall down here, and they went up, a bunch of fellows from the UMW, wrecked it--threw the fellows out--and the Mounties were right at the bottom of the step, and they just watched them do it, they never tried to interfere. I think they wanted it broke up anyway.

[on Harlan Pettigrew] Harlan would never give in on anything. Once he set his mind to anything, you'd never change it.

"They were throwing chairs, furniture out, and everything else. They just broke her up."

[AMW hall was right on the site of the Canadian Legion.]

'Most of the fellows that was breaking it up would be fellows that was into the UMW pretty strong.'

'See, when you're in a union like that, there's a lot of committee work, and it's money.'

[It was officials and committeemen who took the leading role in breaking up the AMW headquarters.]

--forty or fifty people at the scene.

[the night before they wrecked the offices, the day after they marched Harlan Pettigrew out of town.]

--more than a hundred people marched Pettigrew out of town.

--actual fighting going on--wrestling on the ground.

'Mind you, there were some pretty good fellows that got into the AMW, that wanted to go into it. I had some friends there that were pretty good guys that were going to go into it. They were going to sign cards, you know....' [examples of Buddy Jardine--he was a boxer--

The job of a committeeman: "Your job was if they had a case on the bankhead or something...they'd come to you, and you'd go to the man in charge of the bankhead, then your case was taken to the union...."

"My father knew J.R.Cowans well. J.R.Cowans was a great man....My father had a lot of respect for J.R.Cowans....Well, he was a gentleman. He was a great horseman. That park down there was built by J.R.Cowans. He was a lover of horses....There was a fellow by the name of Malcolm Blue, was a superintendent here, a manager, and my father had a lot of respect for him."

Cowans: "He didn't figure...he didn't feel his position too much. He..."

--Malcolm Blue called everybody Mac.--see also the very different assessment of Vincent Ward!

[story of Malcolm Blue finding an employee asleep--mechanic in the compressor room--and marking his position with chalk. To see if he was alive or dead!]

--local league in Springhill--the Bear Cuts, The Tigers, the Colts and the Iron Dukes.

--Mr. Coon is a strong Trudeau man.

"When I was young,...I remember the old train used to come up from the Junction at that time. And they had the old coaches....And I remember Hance Logan used to come in and he'd have a torchlight parade. That's true. They'd come up the old station hill and they'd all have old torches going, all hollering, "Vote for Logan." That's years ago."

"Years ago, it was terrible here...[At Southampton] They used to get into fistfights down there at election time."

"There wasn't too much politics in the union."

--tradition of Chris Hargreaves--"It was so bad at that time that if you opened your mouth, if you was Liberal at that time, you went up the fanway. That's true."

[Jules Lavenne]: I don't think he came out with it too much...

"I would never turn my politics."

Oddfellows used to have 300 members. Knights of Pythias are growing; others are shrinking. Oddfellows had to sell their hall.

[Class distinctions:] "I want to tell you something. In school you were different. ...In Grade 6, you could always tell--your teacher had a different attitude towards you. If it was a merchant's young daughter, she was always leaned towards. I knew that in school....The teacher used you right, but they'd pick on certain ones at school--we all noticed that."

--they used to call Donald McLeod Donald Duck as a nickname.

"I went to see the Duck."

Was Springhill a dry town or not? "Most of them wouldn't drink more than a gallon at a time."