Nicknames in the Mines

Since the beginning of European settlement on Cape Breton Island, coal has played an important role in the Island's economy and history. In addition to its important economic role, the coal industry has also influenced the culture of mining communities.

One example is the widespread use of nicknames. Two methods were used to collect nicknames for this study. Examining the surviving ledgers of the General Mining Association from 1832 to 1893 uncovered 358 nicknames. Interviews with five miners and one retired physician produced 246 nicknames.

Five Most Frequent Origins of Nicknames

Type of Nickname	Total Number	Per Cent
Place Names	124	20.5
Unknown Origin	117	19.4
Occupational Names	88	14.6
Physical Quality	69	11.4
Patronymics*	44	7.4
Total	442	73.2

*a name derived from a male ancestor

The largest category of nicknames is place names. They usually refer to where the miner lives or where he came from. Examples include *Sandy Cape North, John Caledonia*, *Lloyds* (Cove) and *Lingan*.

Occupational nicknames are the third largest group. Many relate to a persons job in the mine. For example, *Jim the Bottomer* worked at the bottom of the mine. Other nicknames include *Mason, Carpenter, Collier, Coal Hauler* and *Sawyer. Horse S… Dan* looked after the pit ponies and *Alex Cage* operated the elevator in the shaft known as the cage.

Some nicknames are positive and some negative. In an industry where physical strength is valued, 13 miners were called *Big*, three who were boxers were known as *Boom Boom, Champ* and *Bear*, and a well-liked miner had the nickname *Terrific Don MacIsaac*. Some miners hate their nicknames. One man, dubbed *Cockroach* because he seemed to bend over all the time at work, objected to his name so much that he complained to the mine committee to stop the men from using it.

A generation ago there was a family called the *Rat Desveaux*. At first glance many people would consider this an insult. Further investigation however, reveals that the family did not feel insulted because it referred to the miner's habit of working extra shifts to support his large family.

On the other hand, some nicknames are truly insulting. Two mining officials with abrasive personalities were nicknamed *Bill the Brat* and *Archie the Snake*. One

overman, known as unintelligent or "stunned" was named after a machine used to pull heavy objects called a tugger. He was nicknamed *Tugger Head*.

Some of these derogatory names refer to people who don't pull their weight at work. These include the miner who often fell asleep in the pit. He was nicknamed *Noodle Neck* by the men, humorously suggesting the drooping of his head was caused by a weak neck. A pair of miners who would try to quit early or slow down work are known as the *Knock Offs* and the *Tie Ups*. Although legitimate injuries are common in the mine, one man would work for nine months and then mysteriously develop back trouble and go on compensation for the other three. He was given the name *Jimmy Oh-My-Back*.

Some nicknames aren't readily understandable unless you are part of the miners' community. These include *Leeches*, who comes from Leitches Creek, *Balls* from Balls Creek and *Curly Angus*, who was actually bald.

Humorous nicknames can relieve the tension of working in a dangerous environment. *Tree* is the name for a tall miner, *Stump* for a short miner. A man with a reputation for working and moving quickly became *Road Runner* and two with unusual eyes are called Pig Eyes and Gum Eyes. A miner known for his religious devotion is known as *Pope*, his son *Little Pope* and his grandson *Poop*.

Some nicknames refer to personal characteristics, such as Governor for a man with a domineering personality. An incident in the mine can also lead to a nickname such as *Fire Bug* given to man involved in a mining accident. When the 1925 strike resulted in a raid on the company store, one miner injured his foot by dropping a tin of biscuits on it. He and his descendants were known thereafter as the *Biscuit Foot MacKinnons*.

One of the most important uses for nicknames is identifying those who have identical names. Scottish immigrants to Cape Breton would often give a child a relatives name as a sign of respect. In some cases, the same name would be given to two children in a family.
The result was many people with the same name. For example, in our collection of names, there are 37 John MacDonalds. Some of the nicknames used to tell families apart include the *Borehole MacDonalds*, whose father bored the holes to hold explosives, and the *Blue MacDonalds.*

Other ways of telling the men apart would be to include a parents name as a nickname, for example *Rory Hector* or *Alexander James*. Occasionally a surname would be used such as *Neil McKinnon McKenzie*. In some cases the parents' nickname is included, such as *Tommy Big Jim*, meaning Tom, son of Big Jim.

Another important naming tradition has to do with the power of naming. One person with the power to bestow nicknames was the company paymaster. Sometimes it was used to tell people with identical names apart but occasionally it was a form of revenge. When the paymaster ordered Sandy MacDonald to remove his hat, Sandy responded defiantly. "Her is not a hat. Her's a cap; and Mister Smarty, the head that took her in here can took her out." To get even he put Sandy on the payroll as *Sandy Took Her MacDonald*.

The tradition of nicknaming in mining communities has several useful functions. Nicknames can relieve some of the stress of working in a dangerous occupation, provide

a relatively safe channel for expressing criticism of company officials and at times, express criticism of fellow miners who fail to work effectively.

Many of the nicknames combine humour, aptness and a witty turn of phrase to create entertaining examples of names that give insights into the lives of miners, their work and their community.