

Cape Breton Miners Speaking, 1888



The following is taken from the transcript of evidence given by two Cape Breton coal miners before the Royal Commission on the Relations of Labor and Capital, in April of 1888. Prime Minister Sir John A. MacDonalld appointed the Royal Commission in 1886 to study the effects of the Industrial Revolution in Canada. The "Q." below represents questions being asked by one of the four members of the Royal Commission in the evidence taken at Little Glace Bay; A. T. Freed, a Hamilton newspaper editor; Michael Walsh, a Halifax master carpenter; William Haggerty, a Sydney Mines school teacher; and John Kelly, a New Brunswick factory owner. The "A." represents answers by Cape Breton coal miners.

Alexander McGillivray

Miner, Little Glace Bay Mine, Sworn.

Q. How many men and boys are employed in the (Little Glace Bay) mine?

A. 1 could not give a very definite account, but I think there would be about 45 pairs of men employed.

Q. You are a coal cutter?

A. Yes.

Q. About how many hours a day do you work? **A.** We generally go down about 6 o'clock in the morning and come home sometimes as early as 4 o'clock. We generally come home from 4 to half-past 5 o'clock.

Q. How much are you paid per ton? **A.** In some parts of the mine we are paid from 41¢ to 43¢--there is a difference of 2¢ between different parts.

Q. Are you able to tell us how much you earned last year?

A. I cannot exactly say, but I can tell how much I earned for several months It would be \$198.60 for April, May, June, July, August, and September. The figures are: for April, \$22.51; May, \$27.87; June, \$38.50; July, \$25.13; August, \$33.94; September, \$40.67.

Q. Was this what you made clear?

A. No; powder, oil, doctors, school, and rent were to be deducted.

Q. How much time have you worked since last September?

A. We worked October fairly steady, I think, and the best part of November, and I think a little in December. In January I think I was idle altogether; in February we were idle; in March we worked.

Q. Did you get a full month's work?

A. No.

Q. How often are you paid?

A. Once a month.

Q. They would be in a better position to purchase goods?

A. I think so.

Q. Do you belong to the Miners' Association?

A. Yes.

Q. Have they presented the question of fortnightly payments to the management?

A. Not that I know of.

Q. Do the men complain of fortnightly payments?

A. Yes, they do.

Q. But they have never presented their case to the management?

A. No.

Q. Are there many boys employed in the mine?

A. I think there would be 13 or 16 drivers.

Q. How many trappers are employed in the mine?

A. I think there are 3 or 4.

Q. Do you know what the trappers get?

A. I am not sure whether it is 40¢ or 50¢.

Q. What do the drivers get?

A. I think it is from 50¢ to 70¢.

Q. Do you know what the laborers get?

A. Some of them get 80¢ a day. I don't know whether any get more than that or not.

Q. How is the school tax and the doctor's tax levied?

A. The school tax and the doctor's pay are levied separately in the mine in which I am

employed. The doctor's pay is 40¢ a month and the school tax 15 ¢ a month.

Q. Do you pay 15¢ for the school every month?

A. Every month that there is work.

Q. Has that been talked over with the manager?

A. Yes.

Q. What was the result?

A. He would not alter it.

Q. Do you consider that tax is legal?

A. I do not.

Q. Have you presented it to the school inspector?

A. We have not.

Q. Would you not get more satisfaction by representing it to the proper authorities?

A. If they have any authority to deal with it.

Q. You are aware that you must pay a school tax any way?

A. Yes; we pay a school tax beside that.

Q. Look at this paper (memorandum handed to witness). That is the statement of your account for the month of July, 1887?

A. Yes.

Q. You cut 66 tons and a half of coal?

A. Yes.

Q. For which you are credited \$33.53.

A. Yes.

Q. And you cut 2 cubic yards for which you were credited \$1.60?

A. Yes.

Q. Making a total of \$35.13?

A. Yes.

	total amount earned	Rent	Coal	Powder	Oil	School	Doctor	Tally
Mar	\$11.62	\$1.50	\$0.50	\$0.06	\$0.00	\$0.15	\$0.40	\$0.30
Apr	22.51	1.60	0.25	1.80	0.50	0.15	0.40	0.30
May	27.87	1.50	0.55	1.26	0.50	0.15	0.40	0.30
Jun*	38.57	1.50	0.06	2.80	0.80	0.15	0.40	0.30
July	35.13	1.50	0.25	3.24	0.80	0.15	0.40	0.30
Aug.	30.94	1.50	0.25	2.60	0.90	0.15	0.40	0.30
Sep.	40.67	1.50	0.30	2.52	0.60	0.15	0.40	0.20
Oct	35.38	1.50	0.33	1.44	0.80	0.15	0.40	0.30
Nov.	26.55	1.50	0.37	2.16	0.50	0.15	0.40	0.30
Dec.	14.58	1.50	0.63	0.26	0.40	0.15	0.40	0.20

Q. Against this you were charged rent \$1.50, coal 1 25¢

A. Yes.

Q. How much coal did you receive for that?

A. About 2 loads.

Q. You are charged for the hauling end not for the coal?

A. I think so.

Q. You are charged with oil 80¢

A. Yes.

Q. Did you use that amount of oil in one month?

A. I think so.

Q. You are charged with powder \$3.24?

A. Yes.

Q. Was that one month's supply of powder?

A. I am not sure; I have had less than that some months.

Q. Have you ever had as much as that?

A. I can't say.

Q. You are charged for school 15¢

A. Yes.

Q. Doctor 40¢

A. Yes.

Q. For tally 30¢?

A. Yes.

Q. That is for the man miners employ to watch the tally?

A. Yes.

Q. You are charged for store account \$28.49?

A. Yes.

Q. Would you run that much every month?

A. No.

Q. This would probably include some book account?

A. Yes.

Q. So the credits and the debits for the month exactly balance, each making \$35.13?

A. Yes.

Q. You received that month no cash?

A. No.

Q. Is it generally the case that at the end of the month no cash is coming to you?

A. On many occasions.

Q. Do you get all your family supplies at the store?

A. Most of them.

Q. Are the boys who work in the mine generally able to read and write?

A. I cannot say that they all are.

Q. What is the age of the youngest boy working in the mine?

A. I don't know that there is any younger than 12.

Q. Do you think the boys are well treated?

A. Yes; so far as I know.

Q. You have not seen any of them beaten?

A. No; nor heard of them being beaten.

DUNCAN McINTYRE, Caledonia Mine, sworn:

Q. How many people work in Caledonia Mine altogether?

A. In summer I think there are as high as 80 pairs--that would be 160 miners.

Q. How many boys and laborers do they employ?

A. Perhaps about 20 boys.

Q. And laborers, how many of them do they employ?

A. I would say 30 at some times and 20 at other times. Perhaps they would have an average of 25.

Q. How many hours a day do you work?

A. It is very hard to say; the men are their own masters, and they come up when they like. They are generally on the bank ready with their tools at 6 o'clock in the morning, but it may be 7 when they go down.

Q. About what time do you come up?

A. From half 2 until half-past 5 or 6.

Q. Will the average be as late as 4 o'clock?

A. It will average as late

Q. Give us an idea of how many days' work you do in a year.

A. I think we work about 8 months of 22 days in the year all put together.

Q. During the other 4 months do you think you do nothing at all?

A. I think not.

Q. When you work a full day, about what are your earnings?

A. I know we all work harder than we can stand it. We work harder digging coal than we can stand it a long time.

Q. Some pairs of men dig 10, 12, or 13 tons?

A. I think 10 tons of coal is very good work for one pair of men in that colliery.

Q. Do you shovel your own coal?

A. We do.

Q. How much do you receive per ton for shovelling coal?

A. 33¢ a ton in summer. The price paid in the banking season is 28¢ a cubic yard.

Q. Are you able to tell us how much you made last year?

A. No.

Q. The work began on the 8th March, 1887?

A. The miners were idle until that time. In June 1887, the gross amount of my work was \$29.75.

Q. How much was deducted from that?

A. Powder and oil, \$2.84; sundries, \$1.90; store, \$20.23; checkweighman, 35¢; cash, \$5 (that was in advance). There was a balance of \$4.18.

Q. How frequently are you paid?

A. Once a month.

Q. If you require money between the days of payment, do you get it?

A. It depends on circumstances. If they see you are not able to meet the store bill, they are very dubious about advancing money; but if you are able to meet the store bill, it is very likely that they will give the advance.

Q. The company keeps a store then?

A. I am not prepared to say whether it is the company or one of the company. As far as I have seen, the flour and molasses and the cases goods are all marked DMK which I think means David McKeen.

Q. Who is he?

A. He is the manager of the Caledonia Coal and Railway Company.

Q. Are you required to deal at that store, or may you deal at any store you please?

A. I will just speak of my own case. The clerk in the store told me personally it was in our option whether to deal there or not. But in the spring I began to work there, I think it was the spring of 1884, or 1885, I went there to look for work in April, and I got work on the understanding that I would take goods for work during the banking season. But he only specified the banking season. In the winter the people that own farms and timber land make contracts to furnish timber for the colliery, and they are paid out of the store because they do not want to advance any cash for timber in the winter. I have that from one of the bosses. I was getting timber for them, and one of the bosses said he did not want to give me the timber because I was not enough in debt at the store.

Q. Do most of the miners deal at that store?

A. I think so I don't think there are half a dozen families at the colliery but deal at the store.

Q. How many different varieties of goods do they keep at the store--groceries and dry goods?

A. They keep a nice store in summer; there are groceries, boots and shoes and family supplies.

Q. How is it in the spring?

A. In the spring those who depend on the store get flour, tea, oatmeal, and molasses. I think that is all that has been there since work commenced on the first of March.

Q. If you have not money in the winter when there is no work, to what extent will they give you credit?

A. I will give you my experience. In 1887 I left about \$200; that is, I dealt there to that amount. On the 1st of January I wanted a barrel of flour; we get orders from one clerk to the clerk of the warehouse. I asked him for the order, and he went into the company's office, and when he came out he came to me and said, You will not be supplied this winter at all. How is that? I asked him. He said, You did not make any arrangement with Mr. McKeen for supplies. I went into the office and asked Mr. McKeen if he would not trust me with a barrel of flour, and he said, No,-,he did not see what claim I had to ask for a barrel of flour. I said that I had dealt at the store to the amount of \$200 in 1887, and I thought he should give me the barrel of flour. He then told the bookkeeper to write me out an order, and we had no further talk about it. That is the way they served

me. I think they are a little freer with others.

Q. You are working for the company now?

A. I am.

Q. Are you a married man?

A. I am.

Q. Do you live in one of the company's houses?

A. I do not.

Q. Can you, get as good a house from other persons as you can from the company?

A. No.

Q. Does it make any difference in reference to getting work whether you live in a company's house or someone else's?

A. I think it does. Mr. McKeen told me that the only ones that had any claim on him were those who lived in his houses.

Q. Do you know the character of the company's houses; have you ever been inside of them?

A. I never visited the company's houses any until today, when I made it my business to see at least one of them. I knew that there were three different rows, and that there was likely to be a difference between them. I went into the first house I chanced to come to; I only went into one, and I did not pick the worst nor the best. I walked in and spoke to the woman and she gave me an idea of what the house was like, and I saw for myself.

Q. How many rooms were there in it?

A. There was an entry at the door where you go in; there was a kitchen and a small closet for dishes; and there was one small bedroom downstairs. She said all the stairs part was open; I did not go up to see.

Q. Was it plastered upstairs?

A. Yes; but it was all open.

Q. Could it be used as a bedroom?

A. It could in summer, but it would be too cold in winter.

Q. Did the house seem in good repair?

A. It did.

Q. Do you know how many wells there are to the houses?

A. There was one well near the stable and one near the store; that was all.

Q. How near is the stable to the houses?

A. There are two rows, known as the "French rows," near the well. There is another row called the "monkey row, a long distance away from it.

Q. How near is the well to the stable?

A. It would not be outside of 40 or 50 feet.

Q. Do you think the surface water could drain into the well?

A. I could not say.

Q. What rent was paid for those houses?

A. \$1.50, as far as I know. I did not ask particularly as to the rent, but I always understood that the rent for that row was \$1.50. I enquired if there was a cellar under the house, and they said no. I asked if there was any kind of a hole under the floor, and the woman showed me. It was about 18 inches deep. I asked if there was a drain and the woman said no. I looked to see for myself, and there was none. She said she had seen the water as high as the floor in the hole. I asked if they ever had sickness in the house, and she said yes, that they had been 4 weeks quarantined with diphtheria. It was in digging time. They had some potatoes in the ground that they could not dig themselves, and as no one dug them, they were lost. They were not allowed to go out of the house themselves.

Q. How much does the company keep off for the doctor?

A. A single man pays 50¢ every month, and a man with a family pays 40¢.

Q. Do you pay that whether you are working or not?

A. I understand so. I did not pay for doctor or school myself.

Q. How was that?

A. The first 8 months I worked, I paid the doctor, and then I met with an accident; I got a pick driven through my hand, and the doctor would not attend me as I lived a mile from the colliery. When I got well I objected to pay the doctor as he would not attend me. I believe the doctor himself said he would rather not take my money. I believe I am not the only one that does not pay.

Q. How old are the youngest children who work in the mine?

A. I think I am safe in saying that they are working as young as 9 and 10 years underground, from the appearance of the boys.

Q. Can they read and write?

A. I think they have a small chance.

Q. Are they all trappers?

A. Generally.

Q. You are paid monthly?

A. Yes.

Q. Is that an advantage?

A. No; we think it is a disadvantage.

Q. Will you explain how?

A. We are not even paid monthly. If we begin work on the 1st of May, we do not get any money until the 15th of June, and then we only get paid for the work done in May. That

is, one-third of the money is kept back.

Q. You get all the money for May on the 15th of June?

A. Yes; but we have to wait a month and a half for our pay.

Q. Do you get any sub-pay?

A. No; except we may go to the office and ask the paymaster for a little money; he may advance it if he thinks we can make both ends meet. When we get paid monthly the only place we have to go to for supplies is the company's store, and we pay higher there than we would do at the cash store. I will give a few of the prices if you will take them. I did not pick out the dearest articles or the cheapest. In the company's store we pay \$6.25 for a barrel of flour; in the cash stores we get it for \$5.50. A pound of tea in the company's store costs 35¢; in the cash store it costs from 22¢ to 30¢. Sugar is 9¢ a pound in the company's store and 8¢ in the cash store. Soap is 7¢ and 8¢ a pound in the company's store and the same quality in cash store is 5¢ a pound. Molasses 50gallon in the company's store and 40¢ in the cash store. Butter is 22¢ and sometimes 26¢ a pound in the company's store while, if you buy it from countrymen or from the neighboring stores, it will average 20¢.

Q. Are all those articles of the same brand and as good quality as from the company's store?

A. Yes, as far as I know.... I might say further that the potatoes I buy from the company's store cost 80¢ a bushel, while I can get them for cash for from 40 to 45¢. So what brings me and a good many workmen to the company's store is because we have no cash; we have so long to wait for our money.

Q. Have there been any accidents in your mine as late?

A. No; not many. I know of some.

Q. Is there much gas in the mine?

A. There is.

Q. Can you work with open lamps?

A. I can.

Q. Does anyone go into the mine before the workmen to see if there is any gas?

A. They do.

Q. Have there been any explosions of gas?

A. No; there have been no explosions, but I know of one man being burnt.

Q. Was he badly burnt?

A. He was off from his work for a considerable time.

Q. Does the roof come down to a considerable extent?

A. No; we have no difficulty overhead. On the eastern side of the pit, where they are working at pillars, the roof comes down.

Q. Have you known men to be hurt?

A. Yes.

Q. How long ago?

A. Last year.

Q. Were they badly hurt?

A. One of them had his leg broken.

Q. Is there any fund from which men get relief when they are hurt or sick?

A. No.

Q. You don't get any from the association to which you belong?

A. The only relief that is given is out of the funds of the association or out of the miners pockets. The miners generally get up a subscription for those who are not able to help themselves. I have known of a subscription being got up and the men contributed and so did the manager.

Q. Does the doctor attend men who are laid up for a long time without extra charge?

A. Yes; he attends them straight through.

Q. Does he make an extra charge in case of childbirth?

A. He does.... I think it is \$4.

Q. Do the miners have any voice in the election of a doctor?

A. No; not that know of.

Q. The manager appoints him?

A. Yes; as far as I know.

Q. You have nothing else to suggest, have you?

A. No, I think every stone is turned, pretty much.

Our thanks to David Frank, University of New Brunswick, who provided us with this selection from the Royal Commission, as well as the date used in the brief introduction. The photo of miners at the entrance of the Port Morien mine came from the Miners' Museum, Quarry Point, Glace Bay.

Cape Breton's Magazine