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THE WABANA IRON ORE MINERS OF BELL ISLAND,  
CONCEPTION BAY, NEWFOUNDLAND: THEIR  
OCCUPATIONAL FOLKLIFE AND ORAL FOLK HISTORY

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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GAIL WEIR









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BY



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## ABSTRACT

Iron ore was mined at Wabana, Conception Bay, Newfoundland for seventy-three years. The economic impact of this industry was felt as far away as Sydney, Nova Scotia, which became a major steel producer because of it, and the economies of both Newfoundland and Nova Scotia were enhanced generally due to it. The nearby communities in Conception Bay were most affected in Newfoundland for the majority of the miners were drawn from them. This thesis documents the occupational folklife and oral folk history of the miners and, in doing so, attempts to fill a void in Canadian folklore studies.

The bulk of the data used in this work was collected in tape recorded interviews with seven former miners and four miners' wives, and is augmented by material from student papers in the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive.

This study focuses on three basic aspects of the miner's life: personal life history, occupational folklife, and occupational narrative. The life history is given of each of the seven primary informants; the objective being the emergence of characteristics of a "typical" miner's life. While each informant had certain factors which were

unique to his life, the occupational folklife of the miners tended to be of a universal nature. Most miners followed the same route career-wise, experiencing the same work routines. Hours of work, method of payment, foodways, clothing and equipment were common to all. The occupational narratives presented are generally of two kinds: those that are personal and those that are told about other miners. The personal narratives are often illustrative of the dangers involved in mining, while the non-personal narratives tend to be of humorous incidents.

The narratives presented in the conclusion concern the final years of the mining operation and take on the form of "protest lore" by focusing on problems prior to the close-down. A brief overview of life on the Island since DOSCO pulled out in 1966 and suggestions for further research are presented.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people helped me during the research and writing of this thesis and I take this opportunity to express my appreciation to them. I was fortunate in that the seven former miners with whom I made contact, Eric Luffman, Harold Kitchen and his wife Una, George Picco and his wife Sara, Albert Higgins, Len Gosse, Everett Rees and his wife Alma, and Ron Pumphrey, all welcomed me into their homes and gladly answered my questions without reservation. Jessie Hussey, my mother and the widow of a miner, provided detailed information on the home life of a miner, as well as anecdotes. My brother, Don Hussey, submitted to my questions on growing up in the home of a miner, and also sent me material of interest, including some from acquaintances in Nova Scotia who had survived the ore boat sinkings during World War II.

Dr. David Buchan and Dr. Larry Small originally encouraged me to apply for acceptance into the folklore programme. I thank them and also Dr. Wilfred Wareham for advice and guidance. Teachers and fellow students in the Folklore Department were generous in passing along citations and were generally supportive. I particularly thank Dr. Herbert Halpert for his advice which got me past the initial

stumbling block of how to get started, Clara Murphy for interviewing her father for me, and Audrey Kinsella who assured me all the way that I could do it.

The staff of the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive, Philip Hiscock, Audrey Kinsella, Patti Fulton, and Sharon Cochrane, were especially helpful throughout my research.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page	
ABSTRACT . . . . .	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS . . . . .	iv
LIST OF FIGURES . . . . .	viii

## Chapter

I. INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND . . . . .	24
III. PERSONAL LIFE HISTORIES OF THE INFORMANTS . . . . .	62
IV. OCCUPATIONAL FOLKLIFE . . . . .	88
V. OCCUPATIONAL FOLK NARRATIVES . . . . .	126
VI. CONCLUSION . . . . .	176
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	193

# LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Map of Bell Island . . . . .	2
2. Map of Newfoundland and Cape Breton .	28



## I INTRODUCTION

This study documents the occupational folklife and oral folk history of a sample of miners from the community of Bell Island, Newfoundland. Bell Island is located in Conception Bay on the northern part of the Avalon Peninsula in Newfoundland, Canada. Its dimensions are approximately 9.5 kilometers by 3 kilometers. The former mining district of Wabana is located on its north shore. Figure 1, on page 2, is a 1951 map of Bell Island showing the position of the mines and surface plants. Portugal Cove lies approximately 5 kilometers by water to the east, and the capital city of St. John's is 14.5 kilometers by road from Portugal Cove. Bell Island appears in stark contrast to the surrounding shoreline of Conception Bay. At many points along its perimeter the reddish-brown cliffs drop several hundred feet straight down to the ocean. There are only a few places where the land dips gracefully to the sea. A rock which resembles an inverted bell may be seen off the northwestern end of the Island. As early as 1819, it was recorded that the Island's name had been derived from this resemblance.<sup>1</sup> Known as Great Belle Isle by its original inhabitants, "Bell Island" came into popular use around the end of the nineteenth century, as the iron ore mining operation attracted people from Canada and other parts of Newfoundland.

The study spans the years between 1893, when the value

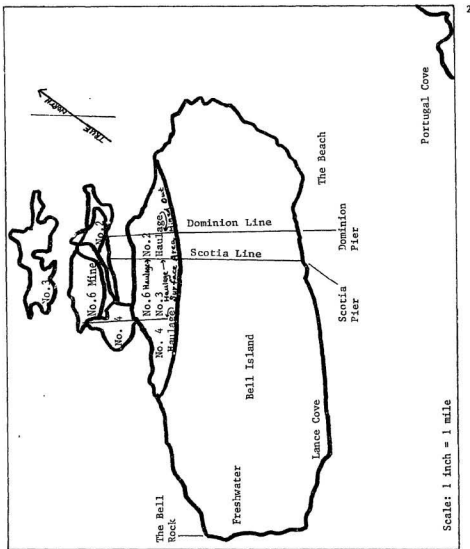


Figure 1. Map of Bell Island.

Map, showing the position of the mines and surface plants, based on one found in C. M. Anson, "The Wabana Iron Ore Properties of the Dominion Steel and Coal Corporation, Limited," Canadian Mining and Metallurgical Bulletin 473 (1951): 597.

of the iron ore reserves there was first realized, and 1966, when the operation was closed down completely. The men who comprised the last generation of Bell Island miners already are removed almost two decades from their mining experience. This experience is an important component of the Newfoundland cognizance, yet one will not find it outlined in any of the conventional historical sources. Through the use of oral history techniques this present work generates documents related to the Bell Island mining experience. As John Widdowson says in defending oral history as contrasted with documentary history, "we need to extend the scope of our enquiries to reflect aspects of our culture which have received scant attention in older-style historical studies."<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Richard Dorson directs the oral folk historian to "search out articulate members of the folk community and interview them for their personal and traditional history."<sup>3</sup> He defines oral personal history as "recollections at first-hand of...the non-elite, or the folk," while oral traditional history consists of sagas "told across the generations...Together they comprise oral folk history."<sup>4</sup>

While "the folk" and folklife have often been thought of in relation only to such traditional occupations as fishing and farming, Robert McCarl's conceptual corollary, occupational folklife, brings into focus a related subject worthy of the attention of folklorists. He sees occupational folklife as that "complex of techniques, customs, and modes

of expressive behavior which characterize a particular work group."<sup>5</sup> With these definitions and goals in mind, I have attempted to capture the essence of the miner's experience in the iron ore mines of Wabana.

#### Origins of the Study

The idea of doing a study of the miners of Bell Island was born out of ignorance. I grew up on Bell Island where my father, grandfathers, uncles and neighbours were all miners. It might be expected that someone with a background such as mine would have been an expert on the subject of the mines and miners. In fact, I knew next to nothing. It had not occurred to me how great my ignorance was until I began studying folklore at Memorial University. An integral part of the course work involved interviewing ordinary people about their working lives. Most of the interviews were on fisheries-related topics. When the time came to seriously consider a thesis topic, my first impulse was to do something on the role of women in the fishery since, having come from a mining community, I knew little of that life. One day it occurred to me that I knew almost as little about my own father's work experience. Not only that, but the mines on Bell Island had been closed for a decade and a half and no study had been done of the occupational folklife of the miners. With each passing year, the miners who could tell what the early days of the mines were like were decreasing in

number. This work has afforded me the opportunity to record some of their knowledge. At the same time I have gained for myself an understanding of "where I came from" and, as Widdowson says, "in assembling what will be the fullest evidence for future historians to use we are planting trees for posterity."<sup>6</sup>

One might wonder how it was possible to grow up in a miner's home and be so out of touch with his work experience. Of course, I knew something of ore-covered pit clothes, the rigging of lunches, paydays, and the phenomenon of seeing a boom town go bust. Clothes were brought home every week to be washed, but I had no idea what happened underground to make them so dirty in the first place. Lunches were prepared at home, but what were the conditions under which they were eaten? Paydays were an event, but no clue was given as to how hard my father had to work, or under what dangerous conditions, to get the shiny dimes that he doled out to us children from his pay packet.

I knew the heartache of saying good-bye to relatives and childhood friends whose families were leaving to find work in the factories and mines of far-away Ontario. I did not stop to think that most of the people on the Island had uprooted from their traditional homes to come there to work. Some of them had even come from other mines that had closed down, so this kind of upheaval was not new to them. The boom years on Bell Island occurred during the 50s when I was growing up,

did not take place at any of the schools on the Island. When I finished school, I knew more about how wood was turned into paper in Grand Falls than I did about how iron ore was mined in my own home town.

### Field Work

I anticipated field work with a certain amount of trepidation, the main problem being that I had only a vague idea of what questions to ask. While chatting one day with Dr. Herbert Halpert, Professor Emeritus of the Memorial University Folklore Department, I told him what I was planning to do and that I was not sure how to approach the subject. His advise was simply to interview with an open mind, let the informants talk, and see what would come out of it. I was fortunate in choosing as my first informant an uncle who had worked in the mines from the age of eleven, and had risen through the ranks to become a mine captain. Time after time people, who were not aware that he and I were related, recommended him to me as the person to talk to about mining. As soon as I walked into his house, he began talking about his experiences in the mines and continued non-stop for two hours. On two following occasions I was able to insert a question or two to guide the interview, but basically he poured out years of stored up memories. By analyzing the tapes of these interviews after each session, I began to see what questions I needed to ask future informants, and a

pattern of subject areas began to emerge.

Informant interviews took place over a period of a year, from May 1984, to May 1985. Seven former miners were interviewed. All of them began working with the mining operation as boys, the oldest starting age being sixteen and the youngest being eleven. All but one of them continued to work with the company until the mines closed. Only one of the informants requested that the tape recorder not be used. In that case, I took brief notes of the conversation and filled in details from memory immediately on returning home. This procedure was adequate since the informant did not use anecdotes to elaborate his points, but simply answered questions with short sentences. The wives of three of the miners sat in on the interviews and contributed valuable information. A fourth miner's wife, a widow, also contributed material in untaped sessions. A miner's son, whose formative years on Bell Island were also the 1950s, was interviewed to see what his awareness was of his father's life and work. A total of twenty hours of recordings were collected.<sup>7</sup> These, along with tape transcriptions, field notes, and other relevant material, are held in the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive, accession number 86-081.

#### Documentation

At the same time, I began a search for published

material that pertained to the folklore of mining in Newfoundland, as well as anything that touched on Bell Island's mining era. Peter Narváez's PhD dissertation is a "folkloristic examination of the traditions and the causational processes which reified" the events of the 1973 strike of Buchans miners against the American Smelting and Refining Company. Utilizing oral folk history to show what made this strike such a bitter one, it discusses the traditions that helped shape the protest songs which grew from that strike. It also details the sociocultural background of the majority of Buchans miners, information which is of comparative interest to the experience of the miners of Bell Island.<sup>8</sup>

Peter Neary studied the social, cultural, economic and political history of Bell Island. His work reveals the Island's rise in prosperity with the coming of the mining operation which caused a simultaneous increase in the prosperity of the surrounding communities in Conception Bay as well as the city of St. John's.<sup>9</sup> A version of this work entitled "Wabana You're a Corker" presents two ballads that had their genesis in the mining community, but otherwise does not deal with the folklife of the miner.<sup>10</sup> Neary also assembled a collection of slides pertaining to the mining operation as part of the "Canada's Visual History" series.<sup>11</sup>

Various works on Bell Island deal with historical documentation of the era. Addison Bown gleaned all



references to Bell Island between the years 1894 and 1939 from the pages of the Daily News. His compilation of these news items is bound into two volumes under the title "Newspaper History of Bell Island".<sup>12</sup> While these volumes are an invaluable record of the times, only tidbits of information dealing with the actual lives of individual miners may be found scattered throughout them.

Diane Tye's 1981 MA thesis in folklore examines a folk artist who was formerly employed as a miner on Bell Island.<sup>13</sup> In giving the background of her subject, Tye presents a word for word transcription of Murphy's life history which includes an account of how he first became involved in mining. This is one aspect of the miner's life which this present study attempts to document. Since Tye presents Murphy's account merely as background for her own work, however, she does not elaborate on it in any way.

During the spring and summer of 1985, an archival search was undertaken for materials that related to the lives of the miners. The archives included Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive, the Maritime History Group, and the Anthropology Department's Archives of Undergraduate Research on Newfoundland Society and Culture. Various papers on Bell Island, written mainly by students of folklore, history, and anthropology, are housed in these archives. These papers place little emphasis on the occupational folklife of the miner. Those papers with a

folkloric content tend to record beliefs, customs and, what Roger D. Abrahams calls, "traditional expressivity" as experienced by members of the Bell Island community at large, rather than making specific reference to the miners.<sup>14</sup> Even though these expressions of traditional behaviour are, without doubt, shared by many of the miners, they are rarely presented in these papers as being the folklore of that particular group, although some pertinent material was found.<sup>15</sup>

A search was done also of the Newfoundland and Labrador Provincial Archives. Material found there related to the original mineral claims on the Island and their sale to the Nova Scotia Steel and Coal Company, as well as the inquiry into the collision of two ferries, which resulted in the drowning of a number of miners. Photographs of various aspects of the mining operation are also housed there.

#### Mining Folklore Scholarship in the U. S. and Great Britain

A search of mining folklore collections of North America and Great Britain revealed that, while there were differences, many items were common to the experience of the Bell Island miners. Mining on Bell Island had a relatively short life span compared to the coal, tin and copper mining districts of Great Britain. Whereas miners there often inherit their jobs from their fathers, the majority of Bell Island's miners were the sons of fishermen. Some of their

traditions, such as the times and names of meals, will be recognized as those adhered to by many Newfoundland fishermen. Many of their beliefs and customs are common throughout the western cultures and have nothing to do with mining.

There are several possible reasons why the Bell Island miners share so many beliefs and customs with other mining communities far removed from the shores of this Island. Diffusion of beliefs through the migration of active bearers is one explanation. The mining operation was first developed by two Nova Scotian companies who brought in their own men, experienced in coal mining, to oversee the startup of the mines. Some of these men stayed on, going "home" to Nova Scotia only when they retired or died. Through the years, the companies operating on the Island imported various experts in mining engineering and geology from Canada and England. These were men who had experience in other mines and had absorbed traditions and beliefs from these mines. It would be unusual if they had not passed on their experiences to the men on Bell Island.

There was at least one regular miner on the Island who had come from Cornwall, England. In 1904, the Daily News reported that Thomas Williams, a 68 year old miner from Cornwall, was 'discovered dying of hunger and exposure after the door of his shack was noticed half open during a severe snow storm.<sup>16</sup> It is not known how he came to Bell Island or

how many others there may have been. In the 1870s the mining industry in Cornwall experienced a depression. This caused an exodus of Cornish miners to all corners of the world, anywhere there was mining to be done. One observer of the times wrote, "wherever a hole is sunk in the ground to-day - no matter in what corner of the globe - you will be sure to find a Cornishman at the bottom of it, searching for metal."<sup>17</sup> A man such as this, coming from a tradition of hundreds of years of mining and now working shoulder to shoulder with the local miners, would surely have passed along many of his own beliefs and traditions. For example, perhaps the most believed superstition among Bell Island miners was that a woman visiting the mines brought bad luck and possibly death. This belief is also one of the best known miners' superstitions worldwide. One of the places that it is reported to be commonly found is Cornwall, England.<sup>18</sup>

In other instances, Newfoundlanders went to Nova Scotia and returned later. For example, when he was laid off in 1923 because of a slow-down at the Wabana mines, Eric Luffman went to Sydney, Nova Scotia, to work in the coal mines. During his stay, he boarded with a mining family. No doubt there were aspects of this mining life that were different from the one he had come from, and it would be reasonable to assume that when he returned to Bell Island a few years later he brought back some of these differences with him.

While there are some fine collections of mining folklore, there is a paucity of information dealing specifically with iron ore mining. Following is a survey of some of the major works that have been written on the folklore of mining in Great Britain.

Lydia Fish illustrates in her 1980 article, "The European Background of American Miners' Beliefs," that many of the beliefs and customs of miners on this side of the Atlantic originated in Britain.<sup>19</sup> Her 1975 The Folklore of the Coal Miners of the Northeast of England surveys the works of other collectors of mining lore.<sup>20</sup> Alan Smith's 1969 Discovering Folklore in Industry also contains a brief survey of British mining folklore.<sup>21</sup> Dave Douglass, a coal miner himself, authored two History Workshop Pamphlets on pit life in County Durham, one in 1972 and the other in 1973.<sup>22</sup> Lynn Davies wrote an important 1971 article on coal and lead mining in Wales in which the various beliefs are related to their motif numbers.<sup>23</sup> Details of the lives of the tin and copper miners of Cornwall, who seem to be the darlings of mining folklorists because of the great mass of lore attached to them wherever they are found, were chronicled by A. K. Hamilton Jenkin in 1927 and Robert Hunt in 1903.<sup>24</sup> David Rorie's appendix to John Ewart Simpkins 1967 Examples of Printed Folk-lore Concerning Fife is an account of folklore in coal mining in Fife, Scotland.<sup>25</sup>

Peter Narvaez's 1986 dissertation was the only work

found which relates to the folklore of mining in Canada. In the United States, on the other hand, a great deal has been written on the subject. A survey of this material follows.

Coal mining on the east coast and the songs of the coal miners have been amply covered by George Korson, whose books include Minstrels of the Mine Patch in 1938, Coal Dust on the Fiddle in 1943, and Black Rock in 1960.<sup>26</sup> Archie Green's 1972 Only a Miner is another contribution to coal mining songs.<sup>27</sup> The journal, West Virginia Folklore, edited by Ruth Ann Musick, has featured a number of special issues of coal mining personal experience narratives. Some of these consist of narratives relating to mine accidents and disasters. Others contain stories of animals and ghosts in the mines.<sup>28</sup> Musick's 1965 book, The Telltale Lilac Bush, repeats some of the narratives from the journal.<sup>29</sup> Another fine work on coal mining in Pennsylvania is Patch/Work Voices, 1978.<sup>30</sup> Richard M. Dorson's 1952 Bloodstoppers and Bearwalkers contains a chapter on copper, gold and iron mining in the Michigan Upper Peninsula.<sup>31</sup> In the western United States the most notable work has been done by Wayland Hand, who has written about the folklore of gold mining in California, silver mining in Utah and copper mining in Montana.<sup>32</sup> In her important 1945 article, Caroline Bancroft wrote on gold mining in Colorado, with a small mention of iron mining.<sup>33</sup>

The results of these works indicate that, in spite of differences in the ore being mined and the methods used to

mine it, some aspects of the miner's life appear to be universal. For example, a similarity between Bell Island miners and other widely separate groups is seen in living arrangements. In one area studied by George Korson, the West End of Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania, the Dutch coal miners did not want to give up their traditional homes. Instead they commuted between "their farm homes and the coal mines in the mountain ridges."<sup>34</sup> Jenkin notes that miners in Cornwall, England, engaged in this practice as well:

Where the distance to the mine was too great for the men to walk daily, they would bring their own food and lodge with another miner's family, returning home on<sup>35</sup> the Saturday night to see their own people.

Like the men in these two mining districts, many Bell Island miners commuted, leaving their homes in fishing communities around Conception Bay on Sunday afternoon and returning the following Saturday. Some of them provided their own food, which the lady of the house cooked for them.

#### Summary of Material Covered in This Work

The second chapter of the thesis provides historical background for the remainder of the work, detailing the main events of the mining operation, labour problems and mining unions, the collision of two ferries in which commuting miners were drowned, and the sinking of ore boats by two German U-boats during World War II. These documented accounts are supplemented by folk memories.

In chapter three, life histories of the seven informants are given, with such information as how they or their parents came to Bell Island, where they came from, their fathers' previous occupations, and the type of work their fathers did on Bell Island. They also discuss when they started working, their reasons for starting work, first jobs, first bosses, first salaries, work experience through the years, and what they did when the mines closed down.

The fourth chapter deals with occupational folklife. Some of the items discussed are wages, working hours, shifts and length of work week over the years, loading ore cars, retiring and pensions. It also covers foodways: the rigging of the lunch; what it consisted of; what was drunk in the mines; types of lunch containers; where the men ate; when; and the names used for lunch times. This is followed by descriptions of the clothing worn by the miners, what the atmosphere in the mines was like, change houses, washing up at home, and washing the pit clothes. Pit boots, hats, and lamps used over the years are also discussed. Horses and rats are depicted and personal experience narratives about both are given.

Chapter five consists of occupational personal experience narratives, beginning with obtaining work and a first day on the job account. Practical jokes are dealt with, beginning with initiation pranks, then moving to pranks played by young boys working on the picking belt, and on to



practical jokes played by men underground. Following this, narratives are presented which are concerned with the many facets of accidents and death in the mines, including premonitions, customs, beliefs and taboos. Narratives of ghost encounters, experiences of being lost and alone in the mines, other taboos and beliefs and accounts of fairies at the mine site round out the chapter.

Chapter six concludes the work with an oral folk history version of the final years of the mines, detailing what went wrong and why. Finally, there is a brief look at economic conditions on the Island since the mines closed and some proposals for further study.

## Notes for Chapter I

<sup>1</sup> Lewis Amadeus Anspach, A History of the Island of Newfoundland (London: By the author, 1819) 301.

<sup>2</sup> J. D. A. Widdowson, "Oral History and Tradition in an Urban Setting," Lore and Language 2.9 (1979): 48.

<sup>3</sup> Richard M. Dorson, "The Oral Historian and the Folklorist," Selections from the Fifth and Sixth National Colloquia on Oral History, eds. Peter D. Olch and Forrest C. Pogue (New York: The Oral History Association, 1972) 46.

<sup>4</sup> Dorson, "Oral Historian" 46.

<sup>5</sup> Robert S. McCarl, Jr., "Occupational Folklife: A Theoretical Hypothesis," Western Folklore 37 (1978): 145.

<sup>6</sup> Widdowson, "Oral History" 56.

<sup>7</sup> For field work and interviewing techniques see Kenneth S. Goldstein, A Guide for Field Workers in Folklore (Hatboro, PA: Folklore Associates, 1964) and Edward D. Ives, The Tape-Recorded Interview (Knoxville: of Tennessee P, 1974).

<sup>8</sup> Peter Narváez, "The Protest Songs of a Labor Union on Strike Against an American Corporation in a Newfoundland Company Town; A Polkloristic Analysis with Special References to Oral Folk History," diss., Indiana U, 1986.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Neary, "'Traditional' and 'Modern' Elements in the Social and Economic History of Bell Island and Conception Bay," Canadian Historical Association Historical Papers (1973): 105-36.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Neary, "'Wabana You're A Corker': Two Ballads with some Notes Towards an Understanding of the Social History of Bell Island and Conception Bay," paper, Canadian Historical Association, Kingston, ON, June 1973.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Neary, Bell Island, Canada's Visual History Series 1, vol. 12 (Ottawa: National Museum of Man/National Film Board of Canada, 1974).

<sup>12</sup> Addison Bown, "Newspaper History of Bell Island."

<sup>13</sup> Diane I. Tye, "A Contextual Study of a Newfoundland Folk Artist: Patrick J. Murphy," MA Thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1981.

<sup>14</sup> Roger D. Abrahams, "Towards a Sociological Theory of Folklore: Performing Services," Western Folklore 37 (1978): 164.

<sup>15</sup> Only material found in the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive has been cited here. The archive itself will be referred to as MUNFLA for the remainder of this work. Manuscripts will be referred to by their collection accession numbers, followed by page numbers where applicable, e.g., MUNFLA, Ms., 74-97/pp. 70-72. Tapes will be referred to by their collection accession and tape accession numbers, e.g., MUNFLA, Tape, 75-90/C1884. Survey cards will be referred to by their collection accession numbers and individual card numbers, e.g., MUNFLA, Survey Card, 66-7/114.

<sup>16</sup> Bown, "Newspaper" 1: 17.

<sup>17</sup> A. K. Hamilton Jenkin, The Cornish Miner (London: Allen, 1927) x, ch. IX.

<sup>18</sup> Wayland D. Hand, "Folklore From Utah's Silver Mining Camps," Journal of American Folklore 54 (1941): 147.

<sup>19</sup> Lydia Fish, "The European Background of American Miners' Beliefs," Folklore Studies in Honour of Herbert Halpert: A Festschrift, eds. Kenneth S. Goldstein and Neil V. Rosenberg (St. John's: Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1980) 157-71.

<sup>20</sup> Lydia M. Fish, The Folklore of the Coal Miners of The Northeast of England ([Norwood, PA]: Norwood Editions, 1975).

<sup>21</sup> Alan Smith, Discovering Folklore in Industry (Tring, Herts: Shire Publications, 1969).

<sup>22</sup> Dave Douglass, Pit Life in County Durham, History Workshop Pamphlets 6 ([England]: n.p., 1972) and Pit Talk in County Durham, History Workshop Pamphlets 10 ([England]: n.p., 1973).

<sup>23</sup> Lynn Davies, "Aspects of Mining Folklore in Wales," Folk Life 9 (1971): 79-107.

<sup>24</sup> Jenkin; Robert Hunt, Popular Romances of the West of England (London: Chatto & Windus, 1903).

<sup>25</sup> David Rorie, "The Mining Folk of Fife," Examples of Printed Folk-lore Concerning Fife, ed. John Ewart Simpkins (Nendeln/Liechtenstein: Folklore Society, 1967) 385-419.

<sup>26</sup> George Korson, Minstrels of the Mine Patch (Hatboro, PA: Folklore Associates, 1938); Coal Dust on the Fiddle (Hatboro: Folklore Associates, 1943); and Black Rock (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins P, 1960).

<sup>27</sup> Archie Green, Only a Miner (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1972).

<sup>28</sup> Ruth Ann Musick, West Virginia Folklore 7 (1956): 2-4; 8 (1958): 53-68; 10 (1960): 17-36; 11 (1961): 37-60; 12 (1962): 33-47.

<sup>29</sup> Ruth Ann Musick, The Telltale Lilac Bush (Lexington: U of Kentucky P, 1965).

<sup>30</sup> Dennis F. Brestensky, Evelyn A. Hovanec, and Albert N. Skomra, Patch/Work Voices (Pittsburgh: University Center for International Studies, University of Pittsburgh, 1978).

<sup>31</sup> Richard M. Dorson, Bloodstoppers and Bearwalkers (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1952).

<sup>32</sup> Wayland D. Hand, "California Miners' Folklore: Below Ground," California Folklore Quarterly 1 (1942): 127-53; "The Folklore, Customs, and Traditions of the Butte Miner," California Folklore Quarterly, 5 (1946): 1-25 and 153-78; and "Folklore From Utah's Silver Mining Camps," 132-61. Also see his article, "American Occupational and Industrial Folklore: The Miner," Kontakte Und Grenzen, ed. Hans Freidrich Foltin (Gottingen: Verlag Otto Schwartz, 1969) 453-60.

<sup>33</sup> Caroline Bancroft, "Folklore of the Central City District, Colorado," California Folklore Quarterly 4 (1945): 315-42.

<sup>34</sup> Korson, Black Rock ix.

<sup>35</sup> Jenkin 258.

## II HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

### Bell Island's Pre-Mining History

Prior to 1893 and the start of the mining operation, Bell Island was sparsely populated by Irish and English settlers who farmed the rich topsoil and carried their produce in sailing vessels to St. John's and points around Conception Bay.<sup>1</sup> Evidence shows that iron ore was mined on Bell Island in an earlier period, as Lewis Anspach wrote in 1819, "there is an iron-mine at Back-Cove, on the northern side of Bell-Isle." Anspach received his information from oral sources and does not elaborate on this mining operation.<sup>2</sup> Much earlier than this, in 1578, Anthony Parkhurst, a Bristol merchant who made four voyages to Newfoundland, reported that he had found "certain Mines...in the Island of Iron, which things might turn to our great benefit...for proof whereof I have brought home some of the ore."<sup>3</sup> One of the members of John Guy's colony, Henry Crout, wrote glowingly of Bell Island saying, "the like land is not in Newfoundland for good earth and great hope of Irone stone."<sup>4</sup> Despite these reports, it was not the British who eventually invested in Bell Island.

On August 4, 1892, the Butler family of Topsail paid sixty dollars to file three applications for licences to search for minerals on the north shore of Bell Island.<sup>5</sup> They had shown a sample of the ore to the captain of an

English vessel who said he thought it might be valuable and took a piece of it to England with him. He wrote some time later asking for "50 pounds for analysis" but the Butlers thought it was money he wanted and did not reply. One of the younger Butlers, who went to Canada to seek his fortune, wrote back to Newfoundland and requested that a sample of the ore be sent to him. The result of this analysis was good and the Butlers took out the three leases on the north side of the Island. They then engaged the dry goods merchants, Shirran and Pippy of St. John's, to act as their agents in finding a developer for the property. These agents brought in the New Glasgow Coal, Iron and Railroad Company, later called the Nova Scotia Steel & Coal Company.<sup>6</sup> Upon investigation of the area, this Company agreed to pay the Butlers \$120,000 if they decided to purchase the property, which they did on March 4, 1899.

In his 1956 Life and Labour in Newfoundland, C. R. Fay tells of an interview he conducted with a grandson of one of the Butlers, who stated that the value of the ore on Bell Island was discovered by accident. His grandfather had a coasting boat running from Port de Grave to St. John's. On one trip, when he was caught in a strong wind, he stopped at the north side of Bell Island and took on ballast. At St. John's, while unloading the ballast, he was approached by a foreign-going skipper who offered to take a sample and have it analysed. Some time later, after ignoring the request



for the "50 pounds for analysis," his grandfather, who had by now moved to Topsail, took a prospector to the Island. Instead of his usual fee of five dollars for ferry service, Butler received a miner's claim and was told he should keep his mouth shut. The grandson says that in the end the claim brought five thousand dollars.<sup>7</sup>

#### Corporate and Economic History of the Mining Operation

R. E. Chambers, the chief ore and quarries engineer of the Nova Scotia Steel and Coal Company, landed on Bell Island in 1893 "in company with the Messrs. Butlers, of Topsail, Newfoundland, who then owned the property, for the purpose of examining the iron ore beds there."<sup>8</sup> One of the older informants for this study remembers the Chambers of New Glasgow, "old Bob and young Bob," as being good people:

They were blacksmiths in their day, but they got mixed up in real estate and they owned the Nova Scotia Steel and Coal Company in Trenton.

He states that it was the younger Chambers who came to Bell Island looking for iron ore. The Nova Scotia Company did not want people to build on Bell Island. They wanted them to live in Portugal Cove and area and commute to the Island, going to their homes on Saturday evenings and back to the Island to work on Monday mornings.<sup>9</sup>

In the summer of 1895, when the mining of Bell Island iron ore was started and preparations were being made for the first shipments, Thomas Cantley, who was secretary of

the Nova Scotia Steel Company, named the mine site "Wabana." This is an Abnaki Indian word which, literally translated, means "the place where daylight first appears."<sup>10</sup> Since the Island is by no means the most easterly point on the continent, the name does not seem quite suitable until one considers Addison Bown's comment that it is "a particularly appropriate title for the most easterly mine in North America."<sup>11</sup>

Bell Island's location was ideal for the Nova Scotia company. Its position in the most easterly part of the American Continent meant that the mines were directly on the marine track of North Atlantic shipping. Cantley wrote that this was regarded as an extremely attractive feature:

...for perhaps the most necessary requirement for an iron property, after the quality and quantity of the ore shall have been assured, is its geographical position. Indeed, accessibility is fundamental. From Wabana, situated midway between Europe and America, the seaport markets of both continents lie open.<sup>12</sup>

Chambers attributed the establishment of Canada's first fully integrated, primary steel producing plant at Sydney, Nova Scotia to the Bell Island iron ore deposit, which, as can be seen from the map on page 28, lies just 350 miles from the Cape Breton soft coal fields. This plant transformed Sydney from "little more than a village...into a bustling cosmopolitan city."<sup>13</sup> It used Wabana ore as its sole source of supply of blast furnace ore until the 1950s, and its existence is the foundation stone of the Cape Breton

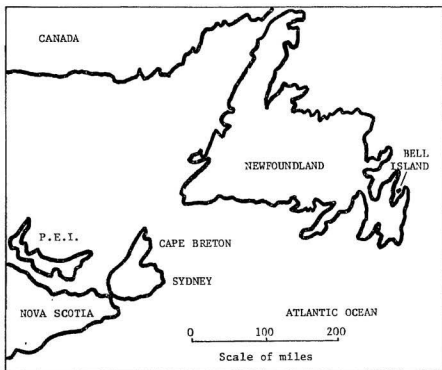


Figure 2. Map of Newfoundland and Cape Breton.

Map, showing Bell Island's position relative to Sydney, Nova Scotia, based on one found in Thomas Cantley, "The Wabana Iron Mines of the Nova Scotia Steel and Coal Company Limited," Canadian Mining Institute Journal 14 (1911): 299.

coal industry.<sup>14</sup> During 1912 and 1913 the Wabana mines provided almost half of the total amount of iron smelted in Canada.<sup>15</sup>

The first shipment of ore left Bell Island destined for Ferrona, Nova Scotia, on Christmas Day, 1895.<sup>16</sup> The first shipment to the United States left the Island on July 3, 1896, and on November 22, 1897 the first trans-Atlantic shipment left for Rotterdam.<sup>17</sup>

Originally the mining of the red hematite was a surface operation, but it was soon discovered that the main ore deposit lay under the floor of Conception Bay in a series of beds, which dip at approximately eight degrees towards the northwest.<sup>18</sup> In 1899, the Whitney Company, later known as the Dominion Steel Corporation, bought the lower bed, while the Nova Scotia Company retained the upper bed in which the ore contained a higher percentage of iron. Included in the sale was a submarine area of about three square miles adjoining the shore. By 1911, the Nova Scotia Steel and Coal Company owned thirty-two and a half square miles of the submarine area and the Dominion Iron and Steel Company owned eight and a half square miles. Work began on driving the slopes, or shafts, to the submarine areas in March 1905. The Scotia holdings were reached in 1909.<sup>19</sup> The minimum cover for submarine mining was fixed at two hundred feet from roof to sea bottom. By 1951, ore was being mined three miles out to sea where the cover ranged up to sixteen

hundred feet.<sup>20</sup>

The British Empire Steel Corporation, BESCO, absorbed the two companies operating on the Island in 1920.<sup>21</sup> BESCO was soon in financial difficulty and in 1926 it went into receivership and was taken over by its mortgager, the National Trust Company. In 1930, the assets of BESCO were bought by the Dominion Steel Corporation, known as DOSCO, the name associated with "the company" through its subsequent title changes. Dominion Wabana Ore Limited, a subsidiary of DOSCO, controlled the mines from 1949 until 1957, the most prosperous period in Bell Island's mining history. Then, after a fierce battle among DOSCO's major shareholders, A. V. Roe Canada Limited, which later became Hawker Sidley Canada Limited, took over both companies.<sup>22</sup>

At the taking of the 1891 census, two years before New Glasgow Coal, Iron and Railroad Company appeared on the scene, Bell Island had 709 residents. By the 1901 census there were 1,320 residents listed, of which 199 were employed in mining. There seems to be a contradictory statement in this census when it is noted that 1,100 men were employed in the mining operation.<sup>23</sup> Actually, many of the men working on Bell Island at that time maintained their homes in communities around Conception Bay and, thus, did not list themselves as residents of the Island. Ten years later, Cantley said of the labour conditions on the Island:

. . . the working-population is almost constantly on the move. This is due largely

to the circumstance that for generations the fisheries have given employment to the Newfoundlander, and a relatively small class has as yet forsaken this vocation to engage in mining.<sup>24</sup>

In January 1950, No. 2 Mine became the first of the four mines that had been operating since the 1920s to shut down.<sup>25</sup> Even with this closure, by 1951 the population had risen to 10,291.<sup>26</sup> 1,994 of these were employed in ore operations and 7,499 were their dependents. These people made up 95 percent of the Island's population.<sup>27</sup>

A paper presented to the Canadian Institute of Mining and Metallurgy that year expressed great optimism for the future of the Wabana mines and talked of the millions of dollars worth of improvements which would be undertaken in the coming years.<sup>28</sup> From 1950-1956, an extensive expansion and modernization program was carried out at a cost of approximately twenty-two million dollars, and it was noted that "ore from Wabana is finding increasing acceptance in European markets."<sup>29</sup> By 1958, the number employed in mining had peaked at 2,280.<sup>30</sup> Then, in May 1959, No. 6 Mine was closed for good. Shipments from Wabana reached a zenith a year later at 2.81 million tons and the population peaked at 12,281 a year after that. It is little wonder that residents were confused by the close down of No. 4 Mine in January of 1962 and shocked when the closure of the final mine, No. 3, was announced on April 19, 1966.<sup>31</sup>

While all the expansion was going on and glowing

predictions were being made, Sydney, which had always been Bell Island's best customer, had been going to Labrador and Venezuela for higher grade, non-phosphoric iron ore concentrates in order to reduce high operating costs.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, competition had been increasing in the international iron ore market because of a growth in the availability of high-grade ores from West Africa and South America.<sup>33</sup>

Wabana was Canada's oldest, continuously operating iron mine when it ceased production on June 30, 1966.<sup>34</sup> The total ore shipped from 1895 to 1966 was 78,989,412 tons. Almost half of this was used in Canada, while the remainder was exported to such countries as West Germany, Britain, the United States, Belgium and Holland.<sup>35</sup> Despite its closure, it has been proven that ore can still be mined in accessible areas for a further twenty years at a rate of two million tons a year.<sup>36</sup>

### Labour History

The seventy-two years of the mining operation on Bell Island were not without labour problems. Low pay and a high rate of accidents caused much dissatisfaction among the workers in the early years. Wars, politics, depressions, world economy and market conditions all affected the operation of the mines, sometimes bringing boom, more often causing slow-downs or even compulsory "vacations."

On August 24, 1896, Bell Island had its first miners' strike. 180 men struck for twelve cents an hour, two cents more than they were already getting. They were pacified by the promise that their grievances would be brought to the company's attention. The raise never came through.<sup>37</sup> I. C. Morris, a writer, visited the Island in August 1899. While riding in an ore car, he noticed that someone had written on the side, "I am killing myself for 10c. H."<sup>38</sup>

In 1900 there was a second, more serious strike with 1,600 men involved, 1,100 of whom were organized into their first union, known as the Wabana Workmen and Labourers' Union. This time the demand was for fifteen cents an hour. It was also stated by Thomas St. John, the union president, that the strike had been precipitated when the Dominion Company had attempted to reduce the number of men hand-loading ore cars. One in every four men was to be let go, and three men were to load two cars between them, instead of the usual two men per car. When these orders came the miners stopped work and became involved in demonstrations and parades. Violence was threatened when longshoremen were brought from St. John's to load an ore boat. All available policemen were summoned to the Island. Things calmed down when it was believed that a settlement had been reached but soon there were more problems. St. John's police had to be called again when the Dominion Company had their office staff go to the pier to unload a



schooner of coal. The resulting riot ended with the union officials being arrested. The strike finally ended when E. M. Jackman negotiated with the companies for a settlement which became known as the "Treaty of Kelligrews." The agreement was for twelve and a half cents an hour for skilled miners and eleven cents for ordinary labour. The union did not last once the strike ended.<sup>39</sup>

Mining was extremely dangerous in those early days of the Wabana mines. There were so many accidents that the government passed Newfoundland's first Mining Act in 1906 to provide for inspectors to investigate practices and conditions in the mines. This "Regulation of Mines Act" was the basis for all such subsequent Acts.<sup>40</sup>

Another union, the Wabana Mine Workers' Union, was formed in 1922. This one was affiliated with the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers. Instead of negotiating directly with the company, this union negotiated through the government.<sup>41</sup> Troubles started flaring up in 1925 when the company introduced punch-clocks. Until then the men had always gone home when they had their quota of work done, whatever time of day that was. The workers won on this issue and the clocks were taken out. Another concession won at this time was the right to be paid in cash instead of by cheque.<sup>42</sup> By July 1926, this union had dissolved into a workmen's committee.<sup>43</sup>

It was not until 1941 that a union with some real clout

was formed by David Ignatius Jackman, known locally as "Nish." On the title page of the minutes book of Local 6 someone wrote, "From 1923 when the union was registered nothing happened. This union began to function when Nish Jackman took over in 1941."<sup>44</sup> Ron Pumphrey, who published and edited a weekly newspaper on Bell Island during the 1950s and 60s, remembers the union leader well:

Nish Jackman was a diminutive, ferocious, little man. A diminutive, ferocious man with big grey teeth, one of which was sparkling gold. . . . And he was a fighter, a real fighter. I can see him now in the union hall, stripped down to the shirt. And he had one leg. He had an artificial leg. And he was a real leader. And he incited the men to unionize, to go on strike, to get their rights and what have you. And I remember, but I won't name the prelate, a certain priest who got up and denounced him as being a communist. But Nish Jackman had a lot of power, a lot of power. I had a . . . reverence for him one time which was, which had the elevation that one would have for his god. Until I got to know him and then I realized he had a foot of clay. [Laughs] The other one was wooden. He<sup>45</sup> was a ferocious little man, but I liked him.

He was a nephew of E. M. Jackman, who had negotiated the "Treaty of Kelligrews" in 1900. Aside from a family history of union involvement, Nish had been involved in labour activities in the United States.<sup>46</sup>

He was in the States connected with the union up there for ten or fifteen years. That's what made him good. He had lots of experience he got in the States with strikes and everything else.<sup>47</sup>

Apart from this experience, however, the informants for this study recall that he "paid his dues" in the Wabana mines:

Nish Jackman had an awful lot of qualifications. Matter of fact, he was a lumberman first, Nish. He lost his leg in No. 2 mine.<sup>48</sup>

He worked in No. 2 mines. And he had an accident and lost his leg. That was in 1938, I believe. He was down in the mines flogging, putting trips in. He went down and went in and got his leg cut off. His foot and his leg removed.

Jackman believed in union ideals even when he was a boy, as demonstrated by the following narrative:

Myself and Nish and Ches Greening used to go around picking up rubbers, you see, and sell the rubbers, two cents a pound to old Nikosey, who lived on Town Square. The serving girls in the big houses, you see, used to put the rubbers out on the platform, so we'd get them too. And Nish was our treasurer. He never cheated us, not one cent from the time we started until we broke company, and we used to go all over the Island picking up rubbers. A pair of long rubbers would bring twenty cents.<sup>50</sup>

The company's announcement that work in the mines would be decreased to half-time was the catalyst that Jackman needed to get workers united into the new Wabana Mine Workers' Union.<sup>51</sup> He became president in October of 1941 and negotiated directly with the company.<sup>52</sup> When what was known simply as "the union" was first started, not everyone joined. It was not long afterwards, however, that union dues started to be deducted at the main office:

Nish got that [the union started]. I think all hands were pretty happy with the union. You see they were losing nothing and they were gaining all the time. So Nish got that. I don't think there was any dispute about it at all. Everyone was awfully glad to join, although I never did join the union. When

the union came in I was foreman, and the foremen didn't have to join. I would have joined if I had to. Some of our foremen were in the union, fellers on hourly pay were in the union. I don't think anyone complained too much. . . . The union did Bell Island good, and it didn't hurt the company. As long as they had a good person to negotiate with you could always get a reasonable settlement. The company didn't want to have strikes. But they didn't want to give you, you couldn't go in and ask for something that they couldn't give you. Nish got a lot of things with no problem at all.<sup>53</sup>

The union became an affiliate of the Newfoundland Federation of Labour in 1944.<sup>54</sup> It became a local of the United Steel Workers of America in 1948. From this time onward labour-management relations ran smoothly and there were no major strikes or disagreements.<sup>55</sup>

They were getting thirty cents an hour when Nish Jackman took over and in about five or six years they were the best paid men, when we went into Confederation we were the best paid men in, only one place in Canada better than we was. . . . He got a lot of concessions. I know one time he asked for twenty-four cents of a raise and we all thought he was crazy. He got it. And never lost a man hour.<sup>56</sup>

Len Gosse remembers one dispute over wage increases:

I was vice-president of No. 4 local, submarine local, for little over a year. On strike one day only, over wages. We notified the company we were going to be off and the company only laughed. Monday we called her off. When all the boys went to work, we called her off, and that was it. We lost that day and that was all. The next day we went to work. Got five cents an hour [increase]. That was '39. No, that was '41 because the war was on.

Jackman's ability to make gains for the miners was

legendary and, while he may have been firey at union meetings, he kept a cool head in his dealings with the company. Eric Luffman sat in on at least one negotiating meeting:

We had a meeting in the main office this morning over something that happened in the mines, the men went home for some reason or other. So we got in there and Nish listened to them, never opened his mouth for two hours, and he settled the whole thing just like that. They [the company] were just like children as far as [negotiating went]. . . . The Old Man, Proudfoot, said to me, "Eric," he said, "that's Nish Jackman. That's the way he's been," he said, "for the past twenty years. When he comes in here," he said, "there's times he don't speak for three or four hours. But when he speaks everybody listens. And he's always reasonable. He's always satisfied to compromise. If C. B. [Archibald] says, "Nish, this can't be done," he'll tell him why. They'll go to work on it. Like getting delay caps to the blasters. Delay caps cost a lot of money. . . . They were working on that so the blasters wouldn't have to go back in the smoke, you see. Nish worked on that for years. . . . But Nish Jackman didn't go bawling and roaring and swearing. He went in and talked like a gentleman, and they treated him like a gentleman. No use in trying to bribe Nish Jackman. He knew nothing about the like of that.

All evidence indicates that Nish Jackman was not the kind of union leader to take his men out on strike on a whim:

A strike would have spoiled everything. But Nish Jackman was too smart for that. Besides, that was too much work for Nish. He wasn't the kind of a man who was going to make work for himself. And he knew what he could do. Nish Jackman knew to what extent he could push, and he pushed that much and no more. He got what he wanted without any

trouble. Nish was a good leader.<sup>59</sup>

After the negotiating meeting mentioned above, Eric and Nish talked about strikes:

I said, "Nish, you've never had a strike."  
 "No," he said, "Eric. Strike never comes in my mind, because I know the men can't stand a strike and I'm not going to put them into a strike. My job is to get everything I can from the company in the peaceablest possible way. I never saw where I could do my men any good by putting them on strike. They're paying me a salary," he said, "and that's all I got to do," he said, "is try to get things. If I'm not able to get a raise of pay or get conditions without a strike, I'm no good. When I go in," he said, "I try to make things better for them. That's my job," he said. "If I put them on strike one week," he said, "it'll take them a month to get over it. If they're out a month it'll take them a year to get over it. Chances are some men, big families, chances are they'll be hungry. That's what they got me for," he said. And he was right. He was a good president. He had a lot of friends. An awful lot of friends. And, I guess, when he got broke there was a lot of those friends gave<sup>60</sup> him a scattered dollar or a drop of liquor.

Nish Jackman was a colourful character whose name became a household word on the Island, known by young and old alike. A good part of the colour was due to his love of alcohol. His drinking was outwardly scorned by many, but may have also served to make this larger-than-life figure more endearing by showing him to be as fallible as the next man:

He drank like a fish. He was barred from every tavern on Bell Island. He couldn't get a bottle of beer. Jackman was a funny man. He was a peculiar feller. Very agreeable. I suppose he was agreeable when he was drunk too, but he was very agreeable when he was

sober, and nothing bullying about him. . . . The booze rules many a man, but he didn't do the union no harm. He didn't do Bell Island any harm, I'll tell you, the men had a good, honest leader in Nish. Nish's only great failure was liquor. He liked liquor too much. It ruined him. And it was a sin, a sin. Old Man Proudfoot told me himself. He said, "Eric, it's a crime, a crime, that he's a, that he drinks."<sup>61</sup>

Eric remembers the Jackman family and some of the problems they had because of Nish's drinking:

His father was a merchant at the front of the Island, tinsmith and a merchant, Abe Jackman. . . . He had one sister. I used to know her real well, she was a pretty little girl. She married some feller in St. John's. And this morning when she woke up and went out, Nish was asleep on her back doorstep, drunk. Poor Frank [Nish's brother] was a parish priest up in Topsail. He put in a bad time with Nish when he used to get drunk. But they were fine people come from a good family of people.<sup>62</sup>

While he was serving as union leader, Jackman became involved in provincial politics. He was a member of the National Convention prior to Newfoundland's entry into Confederation with Canada, and was elected to the House of Assembly twice as a Progressive Conservative:

He never attended the House of Parliament only once. He was a P[rogressive] C[onservative]. That's what Smallwood couldn't understand. "I never seen a PC in my life," he said, "in the union." But Smallwood said this, "he was probably the best union leader in the Dominion of Canada."<sup>63</sup>

In the mid-fifties the union membership began to feel that he was neglecting them for the provincial scene. There was also dissatisfaction with some of his policies, and the

fact that his heavy drinking sometimes got in the way of the performance of his union duties. The combination of these things led to his being ousted as union president when the 1956 vote was taken.<sup>64</sup> Ruben Rees was elected president in his place, but resigned a year later.<sup>65</sup> Jackman was returned to office the following year and by 1963 he had gained such favour that the union voted him a pension for life. Only a year later, however, in the June 1964 election, he was voted out of office for the last time and was replaced by his long time rival, John S. Power. Power was to remain president until the union's charter was revoked in 1967. After twenty-two years as union leader, Jackman left Bell Island on October 3, 1964 to spend his retirement years with his children in Montreal. He died there in 1967.<sup>66</sup>

They finally got clear of him. I think he was fed up with it. He got pensioned off. They never replaced him with a man in class with Nish Jackman. And, of course, he wasn't there when the mines closed down, because if he had been they would have got a better deal. . . . I know fellers that worked with them for forty years and they got pensioned off for seventy dollars. It wasn't a pension, it was nothing. If Nish had a been around that would have changed. If they had had someone like Nish Jackman when the mines closed, the men would have got a more equitable pension. Smallwood made a mistake by saying that the Germans were going to come and people let a whole twelve months go by. And the union, by that time, had a chance to get out without doing their job. Bob Adams, at fifty-five years old, got \$250 a month in Glace Bay, the same union, the United Mine Workers of America. My poor brother, Joe, worked for forty years [on Bell Island] and



only got forty-seven dollars. After Nish got out they put Ruben Rees in. He was a complete failure. And then they put in John Power. And John Power was in when the mines closed down. And I'm not so sure if he could have done anything but, that contract on the desk [Smallwood's], people waited for a year and they spent more money than they should have because they were sure that was going to materialize. And Power didn't act for the people. He should have got better pensions and a better send off. But he didn't look after that. As a matter of fact, as far as I'm concerned, he wasn't the class of a leader that Nish Jackman was. Nish Jackman, as drunk as he was, and he used to be awfully drunk, Nish Jackman done an awful lot for the men.

Eric Luffman mined coal in Nova Scotia in his younger days and had in-laws who were coal miners all their lives. He returned to Bell Island from Nova Scotia because he had no patience for all the strikes that were constantly interrupting the work. He has some well-formed opinions on unions and what makes a good union leader.

A union is a good thing. But you must have a good common-sense executive. You've got to have a man who knows where to go and how to stop. Nish Jackman drank more rum than all them fellers [Nova Scotian union leaders] put together, but Nish Jackman was a good union man. And when he went in to look for something, he went in to look for his men, not himself.

### Significant Events in the Folk Memory

During World War II there were three significant events involving vessels in Conception Bay which had a major impact on the lives of the inhabitants of Bell Island. On two occasions German submarines sank ore boats, the first at

midday and the second in the early morning. During the second attack, the Island shook when a torpedo hit the pier, shocking most inhabitants out of their sleep. Some informants remember only this attack, perhaps because of the jarring effect in the middle of their night's sleep. Others recall that there was one attack but have actually blended factors from the two occasions. One individual remembers that there were three incidents.<sup>69</sup>

Previous to these unusual occurrences, two ferries collided in the tickle between Portugal Cove and the Island, involving the loss of twenty-two people, most of them commuting miners. Most informants remember the collision as having been caused by poor visibility due to a snow squall, however, as will be seen from the account of the official inquiry into the accident, the snow had stopped when the ferries embarked on their crossings and the sky remained clear throughout. Some people believe the boats were running without proper lighting because of the blackout imposed by the war.<sup>70</sup>

#### Collision of the W. Garland and the Little Golden Dawn

On November 10, 1940, at about 5:30 p.m. the W. Garland, which was used as a passenger ferry between Portugal Cove and Bell Island, left Portugal Cove with twenty-four passengers plus the captain and engineer on board.<sup>71</sup> As it was a Sunday afternoon, most of the

passengers were miners returning after spending the weekend at their homes around Conception Bay. The evening was dark but clear, with occasional snow flurries and a moderate wind from the northeast. The W. Garland did not have a passenger-carrying licence and was not equipped with lifebelts. A small life-boat, purchased with the ship, was not carried on it. Only the mast-head light and a search light were working. Bulbs in the port and starboard lights had blown several days earlier. Substitute paraffin lights were available, but the crew did not understand how to install them and their attempts to do so failed.

At about 5:40 p.m., the Little Golden Dawn, another passenger ferry on the same route, left Bell Island with only the captain and engineer on board. This vessel was licenced to carry freight and passengers. There were lifebelts on board but no life-boats. The captain observed the lights of the approaching boat from some distance, but neglected to check its compass bearings at regular intervals. Both ferries had each other in clear view, unobstructed by snow flurries. About a quarter of a mile from Bell Island, it became obvious that they were going to collide, but the captain of the Little Golden Dawn did not blast a warning because his sound signal was not in working order. Instead of pulling to starboard, which is recommended procedure, he pulled to port. At the same time, the captain of the W. Garland pulled to starboard and

crashed into the starboard side of the Little Golden Dawn.

The engineer of the W. Garland, who was also the owner, was below in the cabin taking the fares when the collision occurred. The passengers in the cabin all ran to get out while the owner shouted, "Take your time and see what happens." One passenger replied, "It is too late to take your time now. The whole head is gone out of her." The stem went into the water quickly and the passengers rushed for the back of the boat. One man got his pant leg caught in the wheelchain and block. He broke the wheelhouse glass with his fist and turned the wheel a half-turn towards him to free himself. He and the owner and two other passengers survived by holding onto debris, and were eventually picked up by a row boat from Bell Island.

It was less than four minutes from the time of the collision until the W. Garland sank. Twenty-one passengers and the captain drowned. The Little Golden Dawn did not sink right away. Immediately after the collision, the engineer shut off the engine and then could not get it started again. He and the captain put on lifebelts and proceeded to pump the water that was entering the boat. About forty-five minutes later, a motor boat towed them to shore, where the ferry immediately sank.

Many Bell Island residents remember at least one of the victims, often someone who boarded with them. One former miner recalls another miner who had a shack on the Island

that he lived in during the week.

Every Sunday when he returned from home he would get a kettle of water from Parnons. He had done this for years. One Sunday he didn't show up. He had been on the Garland which collided with the Golden Dawn in the darkness and sank.<sup>72</sup>

#### Torpedoing of Ore Boats at Bell Island

During the early 1930s, Bell Island miners experienced the effects of the Depression as did other Newfoundlanders. Many men were laid off due to lack of markets for iron ore, and those who were kept on could get only two shifts a week. In the latter part of the '30s, however, things improved greatly as Germany bought more and more iron ore. A week after the last German ore boat left Bell Island, Germany invaded Poland and precipitated World War II. Some products of that iron ore were to return to Wabana a few years later in the form of submarines and torpedoes. Never losing their sense of humour, Bell Islanders joked that "the Nazis were throwing back at us what they had bought a few months before."<sup>73</sup>

The first attack came about by accident. In August 1942, a German U-boat proceeded to the Strait of Belle Isle.<sup>74</sup> Its mission was to seek out and destroy allied shipping in the North Atlantic but, after ten days of patrolling the entrance to the Gulf of St. Lawrence to no avail, it moved south. It followed the Evelyn B., a coal boat, into Conception Bay where three loaded ore boats were

at anchor between Little Bell Island and Lance Cove, Bell Island, waiting for a convoy to accompany them to their destinations.<sup>75</sup> The submarine waited out the night on the ocean floor:

Jack Harvey had a garden on the back of the Island. And he was blasting foreman in No. 4. And some nights he used to go down and stay in his garden all night because there was fellers stealing his cabbage and that. And he was right along side the edge of the cliff on the back of the Island because there was good soil over there. And this morning was a very foggy morning. And when the fog lifted, this submarine was off the back of the Island. So he immediately went over and reported it. They kept him there all day. And on the last of it, someone rang up from St. John's and asked Head Constable Russell if there had been any insanity in this feller's family that he know of. The devil got into Jack. He said, "you go to hell. And if I ever see the whole goddamn German army coming again, they can come in and eat ya." That was the submarine that sunk the first one a couple<sup>76</sup> of days after, twelve o'clock in the day.

Around noon on September 5, the Germans discharged a volley of torpedoes at the S. S. Lord Strathcona, but the battery switch had not been set to fire, and they passed beneath the Customs boat and sank without exploding. The submarine surfaced briefly and was spotted by the gunners of the Evelyn B., who opened fire, hitting the periscope. The submarine disappeared again and fired on the S. S. Saganaga, sinking it. The Customs boat went to its aid and picked up five survivors. Small boats from Lance Cove also headed for the scene. The crew of the Lord Strathcona abandoned their ship and went to help the survivors as well. Thirteen men

were rescued.

In the confusion, the Lord Strathcona swung about, hitting the submarine's conning tower, from which the steering and firing are directed when the submarine is on or close to the surface. The U-boat recovered quickly and sank the Lord Strathcona. The Evelyn B., now moving away from the area, once again unknowingly provided pilotage for the Germans as they left the bay, heading out to sea in order to repair their damage. In the excitement, they did not have time to reload the torpedoes and, therefore, did not attack the Evelyn B.

Most of the crew of the Saganaga were from the United Kingdom. Twenty-nine died, but only four bodies were recovered. They were laid out at the police station, where residents came to pay their respects, and were buried at the Anglican cemetery.

So now all the corvettes come in, that lollipop navy the Canadians had, and back and forth, and it died down again.

Late in October, a brand new submarine left Germany with the specific mission of entering Conception Bay, Newfoundland, to destroy ore boats. German intelligence had decoded a message which stated that at least two would be at Bell Island the first week of November. Some of the German crew were chosen specifically because they had navigated the waters around Bell Island during peace time, when they were there loading iron ore.

So this morning Joe Pynn was going down on the Ledge fishing and he saw this submarine on the bottom. He went over them. . . . When he come back he reported it. And it got that bad that they were going to put him away. And Joe Pynn, he got that mad, he called them down to the dirt. And that night they sunk the three boats up there. That was the bunch [Canadian Army personnel] over in St. John's over in the Newfoundland Hotel. They done all their business there and if you disturbed them at all you were likely to be put in the lunatic.<sup>78</sup>

The attack took place on November 2 at 3:30 in the morning. A torpedo, aimed at a coal boat which was at anchor off the Scotia pier, missed its target and hit the pier instead.<sup>79</sup> The explosion resounded throughout the Island, jolting the residents from their sleep:

I was in bed and there was this great shudder of the house. And I was practically thrown out of bed, it was that kind of shudder. And I know that suddenly I was standing up anyway. It was like the end of the world, you know.<sup>80</sup>

They meant to blow up the piers, the submarine did. And they fired a torpedo at the piers to try and blow them up and the torpedo jumped out of the water and went up and hit the cliff. And our, the place we lived in, at three o'clock in the morning, went like that, when the torpedo went up in the cliff and exploded. Shook Bell Island like that.<sup>81</sup>

Some people even got up and dressed themselves in their best clothes because they were convinced that the ~~big~~<sup>82</sup> Germans were going to take over the Island.

The first ship sunk was the S. S. Rosecastle, a DOSCO ore carrier.<sup>83</sup> Among the twenty-eight crew members who died was James Fillier of Bell Island, who had joined the ship



that day. Nearby was the Free French ship, PLM 27, owned by the British Ministry of Transportation. Its crew were members of the Free French Merchant Navy, most of whom were North Africans. This ship sent up a flare which lit up the area. It was immediately sunk by another torpedo. Twelve of its fifty-member crew died.

Even though the ships were closer to the Island than those of the September incident, rescue work was difficult because of the darkness and the fact that most people had been sleeping. Four men, who were rescued and taken to homes in Lance Cove, died there. Three others had been unconscious when brought ashore, but were revived. In all, fifty-three survivors were given aid on the Island. Twelve bodies were recovered and were laid out at the police station, where the residents once again came to pay their respects.

I remember going down and seeing the bodies in the Court House. Black men who were pale in death and who had cotton wool up their nostrils, and whose faces haunted me for a long time because I'd never seen that kind of thing.

They were buried in the Anglican and Roman Catholic cemeteries.<sup>85</sup> After the war the bodies of the Free French were taken back to their homeland for reburial. In total, sixty-nine people were killed in the two incidents.

After that they put a net around the place, you see, and anything that come in it would get caught in the net. But that was too late. They should have put that after the first one, you see, and they would have save

all those lives and those three boats.<sup>86</sup>

The Canadian Navy showed up and encircled both piers with giant steel nets, which served to protect the ore boats while loading and a haven for smaller craft, mine sweepers and corvettes when in port. The whole operation was known as the "boom defence" and it was aptly named since those employed with the navy enjoyed higher wages than the mines ever paid.

A folk belief, similar to the commonly held belief in ghost ships as ill omens, arose as a result of the ore boat sinkings. After November 2, 1942:

. . . it seems that if people saw a ship out in Conception Bay which looked like the ship which had been sunk by the torpedo, it would be an omen that they were going to die. When people did see the ship off shore, they would most assuredly die afterwards.<sup>88</sup>

The PLM went down off Lance Cove on November 5[sic], 1942 at about 3:00 a.m. Not long after, maybe a few days, I came downstairs at about 3:00 a.m. to shake up the fire. And when I looked out the window, I saw the PLM all lit up and fully rigged. I never got frightened but the next day I went to see the priest and told him what I had seen. He asked me if I believed it and I said, "yes." Then I gave the priest some money to have a mass said for all those on board who had been drowned. I never saw the boat after that.<sup>89</sup>

## Notes for Chapter II

<sup>1</sup> Albert Orion Hayes, Wabana Iron Ore of Newfoundland, Geological Survey Memoir 78, No. 66 (Ottawa: Government Printing Bureau, 1915) 5.

<sup>2</sup> Anspach 368.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Hakluyt, The Principal Navigations Voyages Traffiques & Discoveries of the English Nation, 12 vols. (Glasgow: MacLehose, 1904) 8: 15.

<sup>4</sup> Gillian T. Cell, English Enterprise in Newfoundland, 1577-1660 (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1969) 72.

<sup>5</sup> "Butler Family Papers," P6/B/62, Public Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador; Bown, "Newspaper" 2: 9-10. The holders of the leases were Jabez Butler, Topsail, farmer; John J. Butler, farmer; James Miller, Topsail, farmer; Jabez H. Butler, 300 Western Avenue, Cambridgeport, MA, electrician; and Esau Butler, Charlottetown, PEI. Also see Evening Telegram Mar. 11, 1895: 4; Wendy Martin, Once Upon a Mine (Montreal: Canadian Institute of Mining and Metallurgy, [c. 1983]) 52-54.

<sup>6</sup> "Tabloid History of Coal and Steel Industry in Nova Scotia," Financial Post July 2, 1926: 16. This company started out as the Nova Scotia Forge Company in Trenton in 1872 with a capital of \$4,000.

<sup>7</sup> C. R. Pay, Life and Labour in Newfoundland (Cambridge: Hefer, 1956) 217-18.

<sup>8</sup> R. E. Chambers and A. R. Chambers, "The Sinking of the Wabana Submarine Slopes," Canadian Mining Institute Journal 12 (1909): 139.

<sup>9</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8399.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Cantley, "The Wabana Iron Mines of the Nova Scotia Steel and Coal Company Limited," Canadian Mining Institute Journal 14 (1911): 274; E. R. Seary, Place Names of the Avalon Peninsula of the Island of Newfoundland (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1971) 26; Frederick Webb Hodge, Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico, Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 30 (New York: Greenwood, 1969) 2-6, states that the name Abnaki, used by Algonquian tribes living in the state of Maine and along the Atlantic seaboard, is from Wabunaki, meaning "eastland" or "morning land."

<sup>11</sup> Bown, "Newspaper" 1: 3.

<sup>12</sup> Cantley 276-77.

<sup>13</sup> Chambers 139; Bown, "Newspaper" 1: 8 reports that in 1898 Sir Charles Tupper, a Canadian statesman, told the Sydney Board of Trade, "The iron ore of the Wabana mine will lead to the establishment of a steel industry in Sydney, C[ape] B[retton]."

14 C. M. Anson, "The Wabana Iron Ore Properties of the Dominion Steel and Coal Corporation, Limited," Canadian Mining and Metallurgical Bulletin 473 (1951): 601.

15 Hayes 2.

16 Cantley 274.

17 Bown, "Newspaper" 1: 4, 7.

18 Neary, Bell Island, slide 2 shows miners with picks and shovels extracting ore from the surface in the early years of the mining operation.

19 Cantley 275.

20 Anson 599.

21 "Tabloid History;" Canada and Newfoundland, vol. 6 of Cambridge History of the British Empire, gen eds. J. Holland Rose, A. P. Newton and E. A. Benians, 8 vols. (Cambridge UP, 1929-36) 6: 666; Fay 214; Bown, "Newspaper" 1: 61.

22 Wendy Martin 58-59; Harry Bruce, R A (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1979) 221-300; Bown, "Newspaper" 2: 32.

23 Census of Newfoundland and Labrador 1901 (St. John's: HMSO, 1903) xxvii, 2, 6; Bown, "Newspaper" 1: 18.

24 Cantley 283; Bown, "Newspaper" 1: 11, 19, 20.

<sup>25</sup> E. E. Day and R. E. Pearson, "Closure of the Bell Island Iron Ore Mines," Geography 52 (1967): 324; Bown, "Newspaper" 1: 53, 2: 11, 17, 38-40; F. F. Jardine, "Forty-Fourth Anniversary of Wabana Mines," Evening Telegram, Dec. 24, 1938: 12, 14. The three other working mines were No. 3, No. 4 and No. 6.

<sup>26</sup> R. I. McAllister, The Structure of the Newfoundland Population (St. John's: Government of Newfoundland, 1965) 10.

<sup>27</sup> Anson 601.

<sup>28</sup> Anson 602.

<sup>29</sup> T. H. Janes and R. B. Elver, A Survey of the Iron Ore Industry in Canada During 1957, Mineral Information Bulletin MR 27 (Ottawa: Department of Mines and Technical Surveys, 1958) 15.

<sup>30</sup> T. H. Janes and R. B. Elver, Survey of the Canadian Iron Ore Industry During 1958, Mineral Information Bulletin MR 31 (Ottawa: Department of Mines and Technical Surveys, 1959) 56.

<sup>31</sup> R. B. Elver, The Canadian Iron Ore Industry in 1962, Mineral Information Bulletin MR 67 (Ottawa: Department of Mines and Technical Surveys, 1963) 47-48; "Disaster Hits Bell Island," Evening Telegram, Apr. 21, 1966: 6.

<sup>32</sup> Day 323-24.

<sup>33</sup> G. E. Wittur, Canadian Iron Ore Industry 1963, Mineral Information Bulletin MR 76 (Ottawa: Department of Mines and Technical Surveys, 1964) 50; "Dwindling Ore Markets Shatter Economic Life of Bell Island," Evening Telegram, Apr. 20, 1966: 1.

<sup>34</sup> G. E. Wittur, Canadian Iron Ore Industry 1964, Mineral Information Bulletin MR 80 (Ottawa: Department of Mines and Technical Surveys, 1965) 65.

<sup>35</sup> V. B. Schneider, Canadian Iron Ore Industry 1966, Mineral Information Bulletin MR 89 (Ottawa: Department of Energy, Mines and Resources, 1968) 1.

<sup>36</sup> Day 322; V. J. Southey, "History and Problems of the Wabana Submarine Iron Mines," C. I. M. Bulletin 62 (1969): 382.

<sup>37</sup> Bown, "Newspaper" 1: 5.

<sup>38</sup> Bown, "Newspaper" 1: 10.

<sup>39</sup> Bown, "Newspaper" 1: 12-13; J. Derek Green, "Miners' Unions on Bell Island," unpublished B. Comm. paper, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1968, 13.

<sup>40</sup> Bown, "Newspaper" 1: 19.

<sup>41</sup> Bown, "Newspaper" 2: 1.

42 Down, "Newspaper" 2: 7-8. For a discussion of the difficulty the Newfoundland fisherman-turned-miner had accepting the schedules and "living by the clock" required of industrial life, see Narváez 64-67 and Neary, "'Traditional' and 'Modern' Elements," 130.

43 J. Derek Green 34.

44 Minute books of the Wabana Mine Workers' Union, Rolf G. Hattenhauer Collection:079, Centre for Newfoundland Studies, Queen Elizabeth II Library, Memorial University of Newfoundland.

45 MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8417. For a picture of D. I. (Nish) Jackman on his retirement, see "Union Leader Leaves to Reside in Montreal," Evening Telegram, Oct. 9, 1964: 5.

46 J. Derek Green 48.

47 MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8415.

48 MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8404.

49 MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8415.

50 MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8400.

51 J. Derek Green 49.

52 J. Derek Green 52.

53 MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8404.

54 J. Derek Green 67-68.



55 J. Derek Green 71, 75; Labour Gazette 49 (1949): 1329, 50 (1950): 422, 1126, 51 (1951): 1444; Wendy Martin 54-58; "Bell Island," Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador, ed. Joseph R. Smallwood, 6 vols. (St. John's: Newfoundland Book Publishers, 1937-75) 1: 168.

56 MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8404.

57 MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8415.

58 MUNFLA, Tapes, 86-081/C8400, C8401, C8404.

59 MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8404.

60 MUNFLA, Tapes, 86-081/C8400, C8404.

61 MUNFLA, Tapes, 86-081/C8400, C8401, C8404.

62 MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8404.

63 MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8404. Joseph R. Smallwood was the Liberal premier of Newfoundland from 1949, when Newfoundland entered Confederation with Canada, until 1971.

64 J. Derek Green 83-84.

65 J. Derek Green 84-86.

66 "Union Leader;" J. Derek Green 96-97.

67 MUNFLA, Tapes, 86-081/C8404, C84012. Also see, C8415. References to "the Germans coming" and "the contract on Smallwood's desk" are in relation to announcements made by Smallwood during the 1966 provincial election that he had a contract on his desk which would see a German firm take over the Bell Island operation. "The contract" merely needed his signature, however, he eventually announced that the German deal had fallen through.

68 MUNFLA, Tapes, 86-081/C8404, C8401.

69 MUNFLA, Ms., 74-44/p. 22; MUNFLA, Ms., 78-175/p. 19; MUNFLA, Tapes, 79-85/C4422, C4423; MUNFLA, Tape, 80-15/C5547; MUNFLA, Ms., 81-194/pp. 23-28.

70 MUNFLA, Tape, 78-189/C4522; MUNFLA, Tape, 79-85/C4422; MUNFLA, Tape, 80-15/C5547; MUNFLA, Tape, 81-194/C8419. A "tickle" is a narrow stretch of salt water between land masses.

71 "Marine Court Inquiry into Bell Island Disaster 1940," GN 2/5:787, Public Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador.

72 MUNFLA, Ms., 78-175/pp. 20-21.

73 MUNFLA, Ms., 75-226/p. 2.

74 Herb Wells, Under the White Ensign, 1 vol. to date, (St. John's: By the author, 1977- ) 1: 42-45; Michael L. Hadley, U-Boats Against Canada (Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1985) 114, 116, 142, 149, 152.

<sup>75</sup> Addison Bown, "The Ore-Boat Sinkings At Bell Island in 1942," address, Rotary Club of St. John's, November 15, 1962. [Newfoundland Section, A. C. Hunter Provincial Reference Library, St. John's, Newfoundland]; A survivor of the PLM 27 gives a first-person account of the events surrounding the two attacks, the sinking of his ship, his attempt to save a shipmate, and being rescued on Lance Cove Beach in Trident 18.21 (1984): 12-13.

<sup>76</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8403.

<sup>77</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8403.

<sup>78</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8403. Also see, MUNFLA, Tape, 79-85/C4422.

<sup>79</sup> Neary, Bell Island, slide 27 shows an ore carrier being loaded at the rebuilt Scotia pier.

<sup>80</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8417.

<sup>81</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 84-119/C7621.

<sup>82</sup> MUNFLA, Ms., 70-20/p. 61.

<sup>83</sup> Hadley 142, states that on Oct. 20 this same ship, the Rose Castle, had been hit by a faulty torpedo while travelling in a Wabana-Sydney convoy. The ship was sixteen miles southeast of Ferryland Head at the time and, after a twenty-minute delay, continued on with the journey.

<sup>84</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8417.

<sup>85</sup> Neary, Bell Island, slide 15 shows a funeral procession through Town Square for some of the victims.

86 MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8403.

87 MUNFLA, Ms., 75-226/pp.2-3.

88 MUNFLA, Ms., 79-88/p. 8.

89 MUNFLA, Survey Card, 71-22/43. For a discussion of ghost ships, see Helen Creighton, Bluenose Ghosts (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1957) 118-56.

## III PERSONAL LIFE HISTORIES OF THE INFORMANTS

This chapter presents the life histories of seven former miners. Martin Lovelace defines the life history as "a stream of discourse recorded in an interaction between the informant and an interviewer which includes personal experience narratives and commentary by the informant on his life history."<sup>1</sup> I do not present the life histories here as a "stream of discourse" but, rather, have taken the facts of the informants' lives as they see them, put them in my own words and arranged them in chronological order.<sup>2</sup> This is done so that patterns of similarity may be more easily discerned and characteristics of a "typical" miner's life may emerge.

Eric Luffman

Eric Luffman was born at Pilley's Island in Notre Dame Bay, Newfoundland, on May 3, 1905. His father was Stuart Luffman, who was a miner before coming to Bell Island in 1910, having shovelled coal in New Aberdeen and Caledonia, both near Glace Bay, Nova Scotia, and also mined in Cobalt, Ontario and on Pilley's Island.<sup>3</sup> On Bell Island he went to work as a driller for Dominion Company. In 1912 he became a drill foreman with the Nova Scotia Company, drilling the new submarine slope which was to become No. 3 mine. Eric's

paternal grandfather had also worked on Bell Island. He was a boss-carpenter for Dominion. Eric's father was killed by an explosion in the slope on August 22, 1916. In those days "relief was starvation, so a widow had no chance." Thus, in October, at eleven years of age, Eric went to work to help support his mother and five siblings:

When my father was killed, my mother got two dollars a quarter from the government, eight dollars a year. That was a widow's allowance. She got twenty-five dollars a month from the company until she got fifteen hundred dollars.

Eric's first job was running messages. He did this for two years and also kept time for the surface crew. A boy's pay was ten cents an hour in 1916. The work day was ten hours long and the work week ran for six days, from Monday to Saturday. He worked at No. 3 mine, keeping account of the timber going down into the mine. He also measured all the lumber that was used in the buildings that were being constructed, the main hoist, the dry house and the boiler room.

Markets were bad in 1923 and all the single men were laid off. Eric decided to go to Nova Scotia with a fellow who had relatives working there. They knew other people who were working there as well.<sup>4</sup> He found Sydney to be a "beehive of activity, the hub of eastern Canada." First he worked in a tar plant in Sydney, tarring logs, then he got a job in a coal mine in Glace Bay. He might have stayed

there, but there were a lot of strikes in the coal mines at that time. He arrived there in 1923 and in January of 1924 the men went on strike. He found work in the lumber woods around Murray Bay until the strike was over. He also went to western Canada that year for the harvest, but the harvest was late so he worked with the railway in the meantime. He returned to the coal mines after the harvest was over. It was low seam coal, only three and a half feet high, so he was crouched over all day, making it very hard work on the back. Eric laughs when he says, "When I went home the first day, I had to eat my supper under the table." Then there was another big strike in 1925.

Eric met his wife when he boarded at her father's house during his work in the lumber woods. They married just after the 1925 strike started. He was twenty and she was eighteen. He could not see any sense to all the striking. It seemed to him that the coal miners had nothing else on their minds, so he returned to Bell Island, got a job in the mines and sent for his new wife.

The Wabana miners were only getting two shifts a week during the Depression. Eric was a driller by this time, making about nine dollars a week. Regular miners were getting six dollars. To augment his income, and because there was nothing else to do, Eric worked for a local farmer when he was not in the mines. For this work he was given a

dollar a day plus enough potatoes for the winter, lamb when one was slaughtered, chicken, eggs, milk and pork when a pig was killed. Some called him a sucker for doing such work, but he was glad to have it. He worked as a driller for fourteen years:

You would get your work down to perfection so that your work is light, what might be a hard day's work for somebody else, but you know all the tricks of the trade. You make your work light, especially on a drill. You learn every trick and your work is easy. It's when you don't know how to do it that your work is hard.

When Eric started work at age eleven he had little education. After he started working he took advantage of the company-operated night school and did very well. By 1939 he had worked his way up to section foreman in No. 3 mine. This meant he was in charge of one section in one area of the mine. He was made overman of all one side of the mine in 1940. Around 1945 he was assistant mine captain and in 1946 he was made mine captain of No. 3.

In 1965, the year before the mines closed, there was great concern because of the increase of accidents in the mines. The union and the company were in agreement that Eric was the best man to be in charge of safety, to try to cut out the accidents and cut down on the costs:

I was section foreman for a great many years, a lot of years. I was off sick for a while and, when I came back, Southey said to me, "I got a new job for you." So I wanted to know what was wrong with the job I was doing. He



said, "Nothing in the world. I want you to stop the accidents and watch the boys in No. 3 mine." The last year No. 3 worked we had three fatal accidents and thirteen more men broke up.<sup>5</sup>

Eric tore down the two-story home that he had built on Bell Island and rebuilt it as a bungalow in Portugal Cove, on land where he had formerly had a summer house. His two daughters and their husbands, both of whom had worked on Bell Island, built next door. Eric's wife moved to their new home in 1966, but he stayed on Bell Island for two years after the mines closed, working for the Newfoundland government, selling off mining equipment. He stayed in a shack on the Beach. He would like to have kept the shack when he was through with his job on Bell Island, to maintain a connection with the place, but he had to sell it:

.Sorriest thing I ever did in my life. But it was no good. I couldn't keep it in repair. It was in bad shape, broke into a couple of times. The neighbour man got afraid somebody would set afire to it along side his fish place there.

He retired then at the age of sixty-two:

I had to retire. I knew nothing in the world only mining. So it was just as well. I couldn't do anything else.

At age seventy-nine, Eric has had plenty of time to ponder his life as a miner. He sums up his working experience very simply:

Mining is an interesting job, you know. You gotta learn something. First going in the mines, one morning, going back when I was a

boy, it struck my mind, good god, if I'm going to have to come down here every day for the rest of my life. And it got so bad I had a mind to jump off and go home. And if I had I'd a never gone down there anymore. But then you forget that, and you finally get to a spot when you know, this is what's to be. Because we got laid off in 1922, bunch of young men, and I went to a coal mine. I had no job. I got hired on the first thing. But, there's certain things you learn. You must never take a gamble on it. I saw too many accidents of good men. A lot of accidents happened that should never have happened, just because, well, take a chance. That's one thing you cannot do underground, take a chance.

#### George Picco

George Picco was born January 21, 1911, in Portugal Cove, Conception Bay. For a time his father had commuted to Bell Island to work, but he moved the family there to live when George was a few years old. George was in his early teens, about to take grade six examinations, when he left school to take a job on the picking belt at No. 6 mine for sixteen cents an hour. He went to work at that time because the family was a large one and needed the extra income. Everyone who could get work took the opportunity. He had an older brother who started work at age ten. After George had worked at No. 6 for several years, his father got him a job on the No. 3 picking belt.

His next job was on No. 3 marsh on the hind grips, locking the loaded cars to the main cable to take them out

to the pier. Steel cable ran right from No. 6 bottom across the Island to the pier. There the cars would be ungripped from the main rope to go in the tipllet, which tipped the cars over so that all the ore would go down in the pockets. He worked on the Scotia line for several years. Each winter the line would close down and the ore was stock-piled at the mine surface until spring.<sup>7</sup> As he did not like being laid off each fall, he got a job in No. 2 mine shovelling iron ore, which was hard work:

I stood it out for six or eight months. I'd have two or three buddies every week, strange buddies, and I was nearly broke up. The last thing, I gave it up. Got<sup>8</sup> a job on the surface, on No. 2 deckhead.

George stayed working at No. 2 deckhead for a while. Then he heard that men were needed for No. 4 mine to keep the small cars in repair. These cars ran in twelve-car trips up and down No. 2 and No. 4 mines. He got a job in the No. 4 car shop and worked there for several years. Next he went to work in the No. 3 car shop working on the twenty-ton cars which brought the ore out of No. 3 mine. He worked there for years before moving on to the machine shop. At first he was cleaning up and helping different men. Then he worked at sawing off long pieces of iron. He worked as a drill press operator for a long time before going on to the threading machine, threading pipes of various diameters. He was fifty-five years old and still working at the machine

shop when news came of the closure of DOSCO's operations.

He had only left Bell Island once to look for work elsewhere and that was one year when the mines closed for three or four months. He and a friend went to Argentina and did "pick and shovel work" until the mines opened up again.

When he learned, in April 1966, that the mines were to close down in June, he decided not to wait until the end to look for a job. He thought he might have trouble getting one then with so many other people looking for work. He took a few days off work and went to St. John's, where his eldest daughter was living. He went to see the superintendent at McNamara's on Topsail Road and asked him for a job. When he told the superintendent what he had been doing in the machine shop on Bell Island, the latter told him he had a good trade. "You can call it that if you like," was George's reply. As it happened, they needed a man to work on their big electric drill, so he started work there the very next day. His wife, Sara, and their youngest daughter stayed on the Island until the end of October, then they rented out their home there and moved to St. John's. They received \$1,500 moving allowance from the Government. Several different families rented their home before George got tired of making repairs to it. Finally he sold it for \$6,000.<sup>9</sup>

Harold Kitchen

Harold Kitchen was born in Harbour Grace, Conception Bay, on October 24, 1914. His father worked on Bell Island in the Scotia barn, looking after the horses that were used in the mines. He moved his family to Bell Island from Harbour Grace in 1922 when Harold was seven years old.

Harold remembers well the trip to the Island and his first impressions of it. They travelled in a motor boat and, after landing at the Beach on the south side of the Island, were taken up the steep hill on a tram car that was pulled by an engine-driven cable. Harold's father made a phone call from the tramway station for transportation. They were then picked up by a horse-drawn, covered wagon. The driver sat out front on a very high seat and held a long whip in his hand. The cost of the ride to their new home on the Scotia Ridge was fifty cents each for the two adults, while the four children rode free.<sup>10</sup>

On October 8, 1928, sixteen days before his fourteenth birthday, Harold went to work with the company. He had attended school until then and had attained grade six. His first job was on the picking belt of No. 2 mine, picking rock out of the iron ore as it came out of the mine. There was a house over the picking belt, but the bottom was all open. It was fifty feet or more up in the air, with chutes that the boys threw the rocks down into. The wind blew up

through these chutes, making it very cold working there. He "suffered it out" for over a year just to have a job. He was paid nineteen cents an hour for a ten-hour day.

The Depression caused a temporary closing of No. 2 mine in 1930, at which time he went to No. 3, boiling kettles for the men to warm their bottles of tea. His next job was in the office of No. 6 mine, sending supplies into the mines, answering the telephone and running messages. Around 1936 he went into No. 6 mine, driving hoists and running trips. He worked there until 1943. That year the mines were closed all winter, so he went to St. Lawrence and worked in the flourspar mines, going back to Bell Island again when the mines there reopened. On two other occasions he went to work at the United States naval base in Argentia for short periods. He had no trouble getting hired back on in the mines after each of these breaks. Another year, when the mines were working only two shifts a week, he went to St. John's and worked in a shoe factory on Job Street for the winter. When he returned to Bell Island this time, however, his former job was gone, so he worked at digging out the basement for the Salvation Army school.

He got a job next shovelling iron ore. He spent eleven months at this and also "worked at just about every job there was in No. 3 mine." After working all day in the mines he would spend his evenings gardening. In the late

1940s, he took on additional work on a part-time basis as an undertaker's helper, laying out corpses and assisting with accidents in the mines. He continued this part-time work until 1965.

In 1949, Joy loaders were brought in and Harold was one of the men picked to "come on the surface" to learn how to drive the machines.<sup>11</sup> Then he went back into the mines to teach others how to drive them. A short while after that he was promoted to foreman, a position he held until the mines closed. He worked until the last day of the mining operation in June 1966.

The year before the mines closed he attended classes at the Trades School and earned a grade eleven diploma. After the mines closed he returned to the school and learned how to operate diesel equipment. He had been driving electrical equipment in the mines. He then got a job in Dunville, Placentia Bay, for a short period. After that he worked at a series of custodial jobs at Memorial University, the St. John's airport and the various hospitals in St. John's.

When they left Bell Island, Harold and his wife, Una, sold their twenty-nine year old home to the Provincial Government. They received \$1,500 for it, the same as everyone who took advantage of this scheme, whether the house was old or new. The owner could buy back his home for one dollar with the provision that he tear it down. He

could then rebuild it off the Island, and a number of people did this. When the Kitchens moved out, the Department of Welfare retained their home and a family receiving social assistance moved into it.

Harold could have gotten a pension at the time of the mine closing even though he was only fifty-one years old. It would have been for a very small amount, however, so he drew out the money he had paid into the pension plan and "I finished with Bell Isle."<sup>12</sup>

#### Len Gosse

Leonard Gosse was born January 8, 1916, on Bell Island. His father, who was born in Spaniard's Bay, had worked in the Tilt Cove copper mines before going to work on Bell Island in 1910. He was a driller for fifty years. He worked until he was seventy-one. In his last working years he worked on the surface, "on the deck, firing the big boiler, keeping the steam up."

Len got his very first job at the Dominion Pier when he was in grade five. His father had a small boat tied up at the pier, and Len and a buddy of his would sneak down the back way over the cliff to the boat. The man who was superintendent of both piers, Dominion and Scotia, called to them one day and asked if they wanted a job. He sent them to the office to get a number and then put them to work



slacking a rope back and forth on an ore boat that was being loaded.

Len started working in earnest with the company in September 1928 at age twelve. Times were bad as the start of the Depression began to show its effects on the mining operation and, with eleven in his family, the extra income was badly needed. His father was earning \$2.20 a day, two days a week. Len and his buddy went to the superintendent of the pier and, perhaps because his buddy's older brother was courting the superintendent's daughter, they were hired on as shovellers. They would work on the pier two days and then spend another two days working on the construction of the United Church parsonage. The superintendent of the pier was working as a carpenter there and the boys worked as his helpers. Between the two jobs Len was earning \$9.60 a week, more than twice what his father was making.

Following this, in 1934, he worked in the last of the surface mines, No. 35, loading iron ore. From 1936 to 1938 he loaded iron ore in No. 2 mine. He then went back to working on the pier and, in 1939, got married. The pay was not so good at the pier, so he went back working underground. He spent three years pipe-fitting, and then worked as a "chucker." A chucker was a man who worked along with a driller, changing the steel in the holes, and fetching. "The driller just drilled, but the chucker had to

do all the work." He also worked as a "road maker," laying down tracks with sixty-pound railing for the four-ton cars to run on.

The only time he ever considered working off the Island was in 1942 when there was a ten-week layoff due to slow markets during World War II. Like many other men from all over Newfoundland, he went to seek work at the U. S. naval base which was under construction in Argentina, but was unable to get work there. He returned to Bell Island and obtained work in a grocery store as a salesclerk and delivery man.

When the Joy loaders were introduced, many men feared for their jobs because these loaders would do the jobs normally done by men. One day the walking boss asked Len if he wanted to go to work on a loader because one of the operators had gotten hurt. He agreed to do it, but the boss warned him that the other men might despise him for taking such a job. Other men had refused to work on the loaders because they did not want them in the mines. The next morning, when he got in one of the twelve cars for the trip underground, the men in his car left and sat in other cars to show their displeasure.

No one would sit in the car with me. That's the way they felt, but it didn't fizz on me.

He also worked at "carrying steel," bringing in various lengths of steel for the drillers to use. It was when he

was doing this work that he was given a chance to try his hand at drilling.<sup>13</sup> He continued as a driller until 1958, when he had an accident which left him unable to work for long periods. One day as the shuttle car passed by going around a turn, it struck a lump of ore which hit him on his right leg and foot, badly injuring his shin. He spent the next eight years undergoing operations to correct the damage.

Prior to this accident he had also spent fourteen years as "spare foreman." Harold Kitchen was foreman of Len's section. When Harold went on holidays, Len would take his place. When Bill Jardine, the walking boss, took his holidays, Harold would replace him and Len would again replace Harold. Then when the assistant mine captain, Fred Hammond, took his holidays, Bill Jardine replaced him, Harold Kitchen replaced Bill and Len replaced Harold. Len would spend as much as eight months a year as spare foreman.

When the mines closed down in June 1966, he was off work receiving workmen's compensation of \$176 a month. He was attending a meeting, at which badges for twenty-five years service were being presented, when the announcement was made that, "this will be the last badges for twenty-five years service; the mines are closing down next week." In fact, the mines operated for another month, but some of the men that Len knew did not bother to go to work the next day.

They simply packed their belongings and left for Galt, Ontario, where there was the promise of factory jobs, and where hundreds of former Bell Island miners had already made their home. Even though his brother had found work in Galt, Len decided to stay on Bell Island, perhaps because of his injury.

In June 1968, he decided to try and get a job in St. John's. His daughter knew some people at Confederation Building she thought might be able to help, so she went with him and introduced him to them. After some shuffling from one office to another, he went home to Bell Island to await a phone call. At the end of the week the call came saying that he had a job with security at Confederation Building.

He had a house on Bell Island which he barred up. With so many people leaving the Island at that time to find work elsewhere, it was impossible to sell a house for a reasonable price. Also, many people did not want to sell their homes because they had hopes of returning to the Island either when the mines were reactivated, or when they retired. Len bought a house on Portugal Cove Road. One day the R.C.M.P. came to his door and notified him that his house on Bell Island had been broken into. After going there to survey the damage, he decided it would be best to give up the house, which he sold to the Provincial Government for its fixed price of \$1,500. Again he went to

Confederation Building, this time to see the man who was in charge of buying homes on Bell Island.

He said, "You're selling your house?" I said, "Yes." "Okay," he told me, and he just wrote off the cheque for \$1,500. No more than that. And I passed him over the deed.

Len reckons that the value of the house was \$10,000.<sup>14</sup>

### Everett Rees

Everett Rees was born at Lance Cove, Bell Island, on April 29, 1917. His father had also been born there and his grandfather had been a fisherman there.<sup>15</sup> When Everett was ten years old, he worked on the coal boats that docked at the pier, shovelling coal for about eighteen cents an hour. He went as far as grade four in school, but schooling took second place to work. Any day he was needed at home to work in the garden, or when he could get work on the coal boats, he simply skipped school.

In 1934, when he was sixteen years old, he was "hired on" with the company. His father, who was a mechanic, had become too sick to work, and Everett was hired in his place. There were two wage rates for mechanics doing repair work. Low rate was twenty-four cents an hour and top rate was twenty-eight cents an hour. At sixteen he was earning top rate. When his father was well enough to go back to work a year later, the company kept Everett on and rehired his father as well. In 1935 Everett worked at firing a steam

crane, that is, he shovelled coal to keep the steam up. A short time later he began operating the crane, and continued this work until 1949.

In 1950, along with a lot of other men, he was laid off for five and a half months, from February 21 to August 26, while the "change over" was being carried out in the mining operations.<sup>16</sup> Following this he went to work in the steel shop. Even during the time he was laid off he never left Bell Island to work elsewhere. He always had a small vegetable garden, as his father did before him, and he would sometimes jig for fish after work.

In 1963 he was sent down into the mines to work for the first time, and continued working underground for the next two and one-half years, until operations ceased. He was forty-nine years old when word came that there was no longer work to be had in the Bell Island mines. He spent the next year living on unemployment insurance because he did not know what else to do. He was not sure why the mines closed down but, at the time, he did not think they would be reactivated.

When his unemployment benefits ran out his son got him a job as a truck driver with a St. John's company. By this time the government plan for purchasing homes at \$1,500 each had come into effect, so he sold his home and, in June 1967, he and his family moved to Long Pond, Conception Bay, where

he and his wife, Alma, still live.<sup>17</sup>

### Albert Higgins

Albert Higgins was born on Bell Island on January 2, 1920. His father was a miner who originally came to the Island each Monday to work and returned home to Goddenville, near Spaniards Bay, each Saturday. He moved to the Island permanently when he married. In Goddenville he had kept cattle for meat and fished on the Labrador. On Bell Island he was a driller and, in later years, a blaster.

Albert left school at thirteen to work at unloading the coal and freight boats at the pier. In 1936, at sixteen, he was hired by the company to work on the picking belt, also called the rubber belt. He put in a ten-hour day, six days a week. He worked on the rubber belt for a year and then went on the steel belt. Working on the steel belt was considered a man's job. It involved picking larger rocks from the ore when it first came from the mine. Once the large rocks had been picked out, the ore went through a crusher. It then went on the rubber belt where the younger boys picked the now smaller rocks from it. Later he worked on the rock car which hauled away the waste from the iron ore.

He went down in No. 3 mine as a "spare man" in 1942. This job involved filling in wherever the boss directed.

For example, if there was a man off work, the spare man took his place that day. This was full-time work because there was always something to do. One of the jobs he did was "flogging" or "trammimg," taking the cables from the empty cars and putting them on the full ones. From there the cars were sent back to the headways, or to the lower levels to go out to the "pocket," where the ore was dumped before being taken up out of the mine. After some time at that he worked at pipe-fitting. He also drove the electric hoist which lowered ore down over the headways to the pocket. He later went to work in the pockets and became foreman there.

He left Bell Island only once to look for work elsewhere. In 1943, when the mines closed down for two months in the winter, he got a job doing construction work on the Southside in St. John's. He stayed there for two weeks but did not like it and, so, went back to the Island again.

Even when the announcement was made that the mines were closing down, Albert stayed on and worked to the end. There was talk that a German company would take over the operation, so he stayed on the Island for a few months after the closure. He finally left Bell Island for good in October 1966, when it became obvious that no takeover was forthcoming. He was forty-six years old.

He owned his home on Bell Island and "gave it away" for



seven hundred dollars when he left there. The government scheme for buying homes had not yet come into effect, however, he was given a grant for the removal of his furniture to St. John's. He obtained work there as a security officer with Memorial University.<sup>18</sup>

### Ron Pumphrey

Ronald Pumphrey was born February 6, 1931, in Harbour Grace, Conception Bay. His father, who was also born in Harbour Grace, went to work on Bell Island as a cook in a mess shack. Ron went there with him at an early age and slept in the kitchen on a bunk that his father made for him of ploughed and tongue board. He had to stay in the kitchen while his father served supper. He recalls one occasion when two men got into a scuffle and one of them threw a bowl of soup in the other's face.

My father went down the aisle of long tables and, resting one hand on one of the tables, lept over the table, struck this fellow square in the chest and face with his boots and knocked him out.

He remembers going to Bell Island on the ferry with his father and the other North Shoremen after spending the weekend at home. Although his father did not approve, the men made a game of hiding the child behind them on the bench while the ticket taker went through.

Later, his father became a company policeman. He wore

a black uniform with brass buttons and a badge that had "Company Police" encircled by a wreath emblazoned on it. The remainder of the family was still living in Harbour Grace while Ron and his father lived in a watchman's shack at No. 6.

At about age twelve, Ron worked summertime liming the fences of company-owned houses. An inspector would be sent around to make sure the boys were doing a good job. The pay rate was a quarter of a cent per paling, which worked out to about ten dollars a week. He also worked on the coal boats that came into the pier, before getting a job liming the West Bottom. This was where the loaded iron ore cars would come and be gripped onto cables for dumping. These were all short-term jobs so, at fifteen, he asked the foreman, John Charles Vokey, for full-time work. Mr. Vokey gave him a job gripping, along with a lecture about how he should be in school getting his diploma. Ron was attending night school, however, and passed with honours when he was sixteen. He tells what it was like to be fifteen years old gripping ore cars:

You had this . . . three-feet long steel wrench-like object that you put on the front of an iron ore car. You lifted on this large nut on the upper front of the ore car, which brought two iron jaws together underneath the car to grip a running cable. And you forced up on that until it snapped and then, as the car went ahead, you jumped on the back of the cable, holding on to the car, and with one foot you shoved the cable under the jaws

behind the car. And then . . . you placed [the wrench-like bar] atop the nut in the upper part of the back of the car, and you pushed down on it now to bring the jaws in to grip the running cable. . . . I was pushing up one time on the fore nut . . . and my scapula caved in on my lung. And I fell forward in a paralytic stupor and . . . could hear the nut click loose as the car went. . . ahead on a rise. And I knew the car was coming back and I tried to move away . . . and as I moved away the car took the sleeve out of my coat. And I couldn't move. The men rushed out and grabbed me and pulled me aside. And I was just there like this and they took me to the clinic. But I was all right the next day.

His next job was "spragging." Spragging was the term given to slowing down empty ore cars which were released from the cable by the gripper after they had been unloaded at the pier. The empties would come down to be refilled at the stockpile. There a spragger would kneel beside a long log on which there were three-foot steel bars, pointed at one end, which were called sprags. Starting at the far left of the log, the spragger, kneeling in a squat position, took two sprags and, as the first car came, threw them with great force at the wheels. The wheels had curved supports for the purpose of accepting the sprags. The car would stagger ahead and the spragger would continue to sprag the cars coming behind it, the idea being to stop the cars from banging into each other and going off the track.

His career with the company ended when he was sixteen. He left Bell Island and took a position with the Western

Star newspaper in Corner Brook. Some years later he returned to edit and publish a local newspaper, The Bell Island Reporter. In the fall of 1966, after the mines had closed, he was unanimously elected chairman of the Bell Island Economic Improvement Council. This was a group of concerned businessmen who banded together in an effort to attract mining interests to the Island, and generally seek ways and means to lessen the detrimental impact that the pull-out of DOSCO had on the whole community. He resigned the following summer when it was found that the Newfoundland Government would not recognize the council or cooperate with it. The Council's correspondence with a German firm was then passed over to the Government, but nothing concrete ever came of its efforts.

In the years since leaving Bell Island, Ron has worked in public relations and has continued his work as a writer and publisher. For a time he was a radio talk-show host and a St. John's city councillor. In recent years, he served as a captain with the Salvation Army. He presently describes himself as a writer-publisher-public relations man who is also a part-time volunteer minister.<sup>19</sup>

## Notes for Chapter III

<sup>1</sup> Martin Lovelace, "The Life History as an Oral Narrative Genre," Papers from the Fourth Annual Congress, 1977, Canadian Ethnology Society, ed. Richard J. Preston (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1978) 213. For examples of life histories, see Barry Lee Pearson, "Sounds So Good To Me" (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of this subject, see Jeff Titon, "The Life Story," Journal of American Folklore 93 (1980): 276-92.

<sup>3</sup> Bown, "Newspaper" 1: 25 records the coming of Pilley's Island men to Bell Island in 1908, after the iron pyrites mine there closed in March.

<sup>4</sup> There was a history of Conception Bay men going to Nova Scotia to work in the coal mines there. Bown, "Newspaper" 1: 11, 19, 28, 32 reports that in 1900 workmen were scarce because many of them had gone to Sydney to work. An ore boat stopped at Carbonear in August 1909 to pick up men who were going to Sydney to work in the coal mines and, in 1910, the Scotia Company had a labour agent in Conception Bay recruiting men to work at Springhill, Nova Scotia.

<sup>5</sup> Eric Luffman, telephone interview, Dec. 11, 1984.

<sup>6</sup> MUNFLA, Tapes, 86-081/C8399, C8400, C8401, C8404, C8411, C8412.

<sup>7</sup> Neary, Bell Island, slide 26 shows ore cars running along the old track system which ran across the Island, connecting the mines to the pier.

<sup>8</sup> The story of George's experience shovelling iron ore is told in Chapter 5 below. Neary, Bell Island, slide 4 shows one of the deckheads.

<sup>9</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8408.

<sup>10</sup> From Harold Kitchen's own written history.

<sup>11</sup> Neary, Bell Island, slide 25 shows a Joy loader in operation.

<sup>12</sup> MUNFLA, Tapes, 86-081/C8405, C8406.

<sup>13</sup> Neary, Bell Island, slide 24 shows a driller operating a modern pneumatic drill.

<sup>14</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8415.

<sup>15</sup> The Rees name of Lance Cove goes back to before the mining operation started on Bell Island.

<sup>16</sup> The "change over" refers to the modernization program in which the conveyor system, Joy loaders and other machinery were introduced into the mines in the early 1950s.

<sup>17</sup> Everett Rees, unrecorded interview, Apr. 7, 1985.

<sup>18</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8410.

<sup>19</sup> MUNFLA, Tapes, 86-081/C8417, C8418.

## IV OCCUPATIONAL FOLKLIFE

While chapter two outlined the history and labour problems of the mining operation and chapter three detailed the life histories of some of the miners, this chapter will reveal the basics of everyday life in the mines. Much of what is discussed will have been experienced by every man who went underground, from the shoveller, through the driller and on up to the mine captain. As most miners began working in the first instance to obtain money with which to support themselves and their families, the chapter will begin with a look at wages over the years.

Wages

A boy's pay was ten cents an hour when Eric Luffman started working for the mining operation on Bell Island in 1916. Men shovelling iron ore received thirteen cents an hour. When Harold Kitchen started working in 1928, boys were earning nineteen cents an hour. Len Gosse recalls that his father was earning twenty-two cents an hour at this time. The Depression brought poor markets, however, so that the men worked only two days a week and took home pay packets of only \$4.40. A man's pay had risen to thirty-two cents an hour by 1936. Miners were paid a "war bonus" during World War II. The amount depended on what each man was

earning. "Road makers," who laid down track for the ore cars to run on, and "teamsters," who handled the horses, got thirty dollars, paid over a year. Drillers, who earned more, received forty dollars, and foremen received more still. During the 1950s, regular miners brought home thirty dollars a week. Harold Kitchen was a foreman when the mines closed in 1966. He was then making \$480 a month, which was considered good pay at that time. By comparison, his next job in security at the General Hospital in St. John's paid only two hundred dollars a month.<sup>1</sup>

At one time the men were paid by cheque, but they had a basic distrust of this method of payment and asked to be paid in cash.<sup>2</sup> From then on, they each received a small brown envelope with their weekly pay in cash inside. Any deductions were written on the back of the envelope. People who lived in company-owned houses had deductions made for rent, electricity and coal. Other deductions taken out of everyone's envelope were taxes, two per cent for support of churches and, in later years, unemployment insurance.<sup>3</sup>

Monday was payday in the 1930s and '40s. The company changed that to Tuesday, however, when it was found that some men came to work on Monday just to get paid and then took the rest of the day off for an extended weekend.<sup>4</sup> Friday was payday in the later years. The shops remained open during the evening on that day and, after supper, the



grocery and other shopping was done.<sup>5</sup>

#### Working Hours

When Eric Luffman's father started working on Bell Island in 1910, there were two shifts a day, six days a week. The men worked a ten-hour day, which actually involved eleven hours because the dinner hour was on the workers' own time. The ten-hour day was changed later to include the dinner hour. The drillers would go down on the day shift and drill, and the blasters would go down for the night shift to do the blasting.<sup>6</sup>

For the ten-hour shift the work itself began at seven o'clock, but the men had to be ready to board the man trams to go into the mines when the company whistle blew at six forty-five.<sup>7</sup> In the fall, it would be dark when the men went down in the morning and dark again when they came back up at the end of the shift. When the mines worked the full six days a week, the day-shift workers would not see daylight until Sunday, their day off.<sup>8</sup>

One week a month the men had Saturday off. They would work six days for three weeks and then the next week was a five-day week. The idea was to give the men who resided on the mainland a long weekend home with their families.<sup>9</sup> The shift ended for the men shovelling iron ore when they had their twenty "boxes," or cars, loaded.<sup>10</sup> They could load

more and get overtime pay but, as a rule, the men who resided on Bell Island would call it a day when they had their complement.

A lot of miners, however, were not residents. They lived in company-owned "mess shacks" during the week and went home to their families around Conception Bay on weekends.<sup>11</sup> They were known by several names: "baymen," "mainlandsmen," "mainland fellers," and "mainlanders" or, since a lot of them came from the north shore of Conception Bay, "North Shoremen."<sup>12</sup> When the mines worked six days a week, Friday for these men was "preparation day" and Saturday was "rush day," or "scravel day." On a normal day each pair of men hand-loaded twenty boxes of ore and perhaps a few extra to go towards Saturday's complement of twenty boxes. On Fridays, a special effort was made to load as many extra cars as possible in "preparation" for the next day. Then, on Saturday mornings, they would often go down into the mines earlier than usual and "rush" to finish loading enough to make up the twenty boxes for that day. As soon as that was accomplished they could leave for home.<sup>13</sup> A popular Bell Island folk narrative was associated with scravel day:

A man, having come up early from the mine, was confronted by the supervisor, who commented, "you're up early today." "Yes sir," the miner replied, "I was sot early." [i.e. I went down into the mine early.] "What happened to your buddy? Wasn't he sot

early too?" asked the supervisor. "Oh yes, sir," said the other, "he was sot early enough but the grubs cut he off." [i.e. He was slower loading the cars.]<sup>14</sup>

The mainlanders would also load extra cars for extra pay. The men would leave the deck to enter the mines at six forty-five a.m., get off the trams at seven and arrive at the working face, ready to start loading, at seven fifteen. In the room where they were working, there would probably be six cars on the siding.<sup>15</sup> Each car held a ton and a quarter. Once those six cars were loaded another six would be drawn in and the six full ones would be drawn out. There would be three six-car trips to be loaded, plus two cars from the next six-car trip. Then there would be four cars left over. Since the mainland men had nothing to look forward to when they finished work for the day, except killing time in the mess shack, they would often stay underground and load the extra four cars, getting twenty cents extra pay for each car.<sup>16</sup>

Changes in the work day came about with the advent of the union in the 1940s. When the eight-hour day was achieved in 1943, shifts ran from eight a.m. to four p.m., known as the "day shift," four p.m. to midnight, known as the "four o'clock shift," and midnight to eight a.m., known as the "back shift" or the "graveyard shift." The drillers' routine then became one in which they spent the first part of the shift drilling and the second part blasting. They

spent five days on day shift, five on the four o'clock shift and five nights on the back shift.<sup>17</sup>

### Retiring and Pensions

Men did not retire from the mining operation until the late years when, sometime in the 1950s, one of the managers "started retiring people." Before that, men simply kept working until old age or failing health prevented them from doing so any longer. One man was working on the picking belt when he was over eighty years old. When he had become less fit to work in the mines, he had been put back to the lighter job that he had done as a boy. When he could no longer do that work, he was pensioned at twenty dollars a month. Another man, who had been working in the mines for forty years when the mines closed down, received a pension of forty-seven dollars a month.<sup>18</sup>

Paid vacations were not a part of the miner's life until the union won that benefit in the 1950s.<sup>19</sup>

### Foodways

In earlier years the men ate lunch wherever they could find a dry place to sit down. In later years they made up lunch rooms, which were actually not much more than a "hole in the rock."<sup>20</sup> The lunch rooms were called "dry houses," a name also used for the change houses on the surface. Since

the bottom in the mines was running at an angle all the way down, sticks were put across and plank laid on top of them to make a level room. There were benches all around the room for the men to sit on to eat their lunches. There was an old oil stove and a large boiler to warm the water in. For many years men were employed to keep the water boiling. These were often older or injured men who could no longer do hard labour. The miners would put their bottles of tea in the boilers to keep them hot. Anyone who had a tin of soup or such could also heat it up in the boiler. For the men who worked on the surface, boys were employed to boil kettles and fetch water. These boys were called "nippera."<sup>21</sup>

There were no breaks for the men underground until they stopped to eat their lunch. Up until the eight-hour shift was introduced in 1943, for the day shift the men went down at seven a.m. and worked until eleven or twelve o'clock before breaking to eat. The men working the evening shift and the graveyard shift called their lunch break "supper," probably because that was what the evening meal at home was called. For the men drilling on the midnight shift there was a certain amount of drilling that would have to be done. Then all the men would go into the dry house for their supper. "Probably that would be four o'clock in the morning but we called it supper anyway."<sup>22</sup>

In the 1930s, at nine a.m., after having been at work

for two hours, the boys would take turns leaving the picking belt for their break. They called it a "mug-up." At noon they had dinner. There was another "mug-up" at three o'clock. There was a set amount of time that each person had for their dinner, but for the mug-ups "you had to scrawl and get right back to work."<sup>23</sup>

It was usually the miner's wife who "rigged," or prepared, his lunch, either in the morning before he left for work or the previous night.<sup>24</sup> Common lunch items were sandwiches, which were often made of baloney, since it was the cheapest meat, or, instead of sandwiches, buttered bread, accompanied by such items of food as small tins of beans or sardines, fried sausages, "black" or "blood" puddings, ham, meat, fish cakes or meat cakes. To top off the meal there would be a small tin of juice or small can of fruit. Flat tins of pineapple chunks were popular with the young fellows.

Besides the officially sanctioned breaks and the normal food items, there were other food events which some miners participated in. For example, when Harold Kitchen was a young man, if he was working the midnight shift and his parents happened to be out somewhere for the evening, when they were going home they would stop by with some chocolate bars as a treat for him. Some men would have a frying pan in their dry house. Sometimes they would fry onions at

night in the mines. There were a couple of maintenance men, a mechanic and electricians, who had a shack of their own. It was said of them that they used to cook "feeds" on company time.<sup>25</sup>

Lunch was transported to work in various containers. In the early years of mining the men used a gallon lunch can which was round like a paint can with a wire handle.<sup>26</sup> The handle could be pulled up over the arm for easy carrying, much like a lady's handbag. There were nails in the dry house to hang the lunch can on to keep it out of the reach of rats. These cans were specially made up in the tinsmith shop. At lunch time the can could be filled with boiling water, and loose tea steeped in it. Some men carried their lunch in a paper bag.<sup>27</sup> The men from Freshwater, a community at the western end of the Island, were noted for their custom of having their lunch wrapped in brown paper which was then put in a big red and blue pocket handkerchief. When they went into the mines they would hook this handkerchief on a nail in a post along the rib, again, to keep it out of reach of the rats.<sup>28</sup>

There was always fresh water available to the men while they worked. This was brought down in large cans. Most men took a bottle of tea down to drink with lunch. As already mentioned, the tea bottle was heated in a boiler in the dry house. Some men would rest the tea bottle against the rib

while they shovelled, preferring the cold tea as a thirst quencher when they became overheated with the strenuous work. The most popular "tea bottle" was an empty rum bottle with a long, narrow neck or a Purity syrup bottle, which was similarly shaped. The bottle was filled with tea, which was often sweetened with sugar and canned milk at home, and then corked. The cork was secured around the bottle neck by a string. In a humorous story that circulated on the Island for a while, it seems that the miner involved must have been in the habit of leaving the cork out of his empty tea bottle. It is reported that it was always told as a true experience, and in many instances the man was named:

A certain miner had to go and look for his cows after ending his shift at twelve midnight. He had put them to pasture in Kavanaugh's Meadow, a lonely, level stretch of land at the east end of the Island. Though the landscape was forboding enough, the man was further frightened by curious sounds which he had been hearing ever since a few nights before when he had been forced, because of his new shift, to come looking for his animals at such an unwanted and forbidding hour. He was so anxious to get the job over with as quickly as possible that he would start to run as soon as he reached the meadow. On this night, he had no sooner entered the pasture when the weird whistling began - who-oo-oo-oo. The faster he ran, the louder the noise became, and he was convinced that it was the horrible moan of a restless spirit. As he came within sight of his cows, the man somehow slipped and, as he lay motionless on the ground, he noticed the sounds had ceased. At the same time he felt an uncomfortable bulge in his back pocket and pulled out his tea bottle. Then it struck him. ~~Here~~<sup>29</sup> was the cause of those unearthly sounds.



### Pit Clothes

It is in the nature of mining that there is a certain amount of dust flying which settles on the miner as he works. This dust, coupled with the damp air underground, forms a mucky layer which necessitates the wearing of sturdy working apparel. Pit clothes must be able to withstand both the stress of accumulated layers of this muck and the harsh scrubbing required to get the muck out periodically.<sup>30</sup> The type and amount of clothing worn by Bell Island miners was also determined by the fact that the temperature in the submarine slopes was always at least cool and sometimes freezing:

The mines was comfortable to work in becaur you never had no summer, you never had no winter, never no fall, never no spring. It was always the one temperature, about thirty-two degrees [F.]. And you never found it cold. You'd wear Penman's underwear. Then you'd have heavy pants on, have the overalls [with a bib and straps] on top of that again. And then your body, you'd have your Penman's shirt. Then you'd have another fleece-lined shirt. Then you'd have a vest on top of that. And then you'd have the overall jacket over that. And going up on the submarine everyone had to wear an overcoat, summer and winter . . . because when you'd get on the trams . . . the further up you'd go, the colder it would get. And in the winter you'd have to put down your ear flaps, it would be that cold. Talk about cold. And the ice hanging down everywhere in the winter.<sup>31</sup>

The men who shovelled iron ore could not work for very long wearing the full rig-out of clothes. Once they started

shovelling, they would strip off all the clothing down to the belt, including the inside shirt, because they would get so warm.

Myself and Jack started to load and we started to perspire. And we got so hot we had to peel it all off. I <sup>32</sup> tied my braces around my waist, naked body.

Since it was damp and cold in the mines, as soon as they stopped loading they would have to put all the clothing back on again while waiting for another empty car to come, because they would get cold very quickly.<sup>33</sup>

If you were working in a wet place they would give you a pair of long rubbers and oil pants, but that was only on very rare occasions. On the last of it, drillers used to buy rubber clothes and they would last about twelve months. Oil clothes were no good because they would only last a few weeks, and they were two or three dollars a suit. They were made for fishing. The rubber was much better. You could scrape the dirt off it and, anyway, it <sup>34</sup> did not take the dirt the way the cotton did.

Dry houses, where the men could change clothes and clean up after work, were located on the surface. When the men finished work they would come up on the man trams. Some of them would go to the dry house and strip off. There was plenty of hot water there and big, white enamel pans. There were ropes on pulleys going up to the roof above rows of seating. They would put their work clothes on hooks on these ropes and then hoist them up over the seats. Then they would get washed and put on their going home clothes,

cleaner overalls and a cleaner coat, which were kept in lockers there. When the men went back to work the next morning the clothes left in the dry house would be warm and dry, ready to put on for another day's work.<sup>35</sup>

Some men did not bother to go to the dry house to wash the iron ore off, but would walk home completely covered in iron ore dust. They would wash themselves in the back porch or, on warm summer days, on the back bridge, or doorstep, and hang their work clothes in the porch for the next day. Some took off their outer work clothes and washed just the face and hands at the dry house but that did not really do much good:

By the time you got home your hands would be just as dirty again because the inside clothes would be as dirty as the coveralls that were taken off.<sup>36</sup>

After a week, the iron ore muck on a miner's clothes would be "like hard icing, red and greasy."<sup>37</sup> Drillers' work clothes would get particularly dirty because of the exhaust from the drill, so that sometimes the dirt would be a quarter of an inch thick. They were then brought home to be washed. The mainlandsmen carried their clothes home in canvas bags or in cardboard Carnation milk boxes, tied up with string. When they arrived home they would leave the laundry outside the house because of bed bugs that infested the mess shacks.<sup>38</sup>

For many years there was no running water. The miner's

wife had to bring the water from a well or pump, and boil it in a large boiler on the wood stove. She dissolved Gillette's Lye in this boiler, put in the clothes and swished them around with a wooden stick to loosen up the muck. She then had the tricky task of lifting the clothes out with two wooden sticks. and over to a large galvanized tub. There she poured water over the clothes to rinse the lye out so that her hands would not be burned by it during the washing. The lye was, nevertheless, still strong enough to cut the clothes, so it can be imagined what effect it had on the hands. She had to dump the rinse and wash waters outside the house because the iron ore would clog the drains. She did the wash "with her knuckles," using a scrubbing board and, most often, Sunlight soap. By this time the clothes would be "right slick and mucky." She used three changes of water, all of which had to be fetched and then dumped again. The clothes would be very heavy and hard, making them difficult to scrub and wring out. A suit of clothes lasted three or four months. One man had three suits of clothes at any one time and says proudly of his wife's washing ability, "I used to be the best dressed man going in the mines."<sup>39</sup>

#### Pit Boots

Many men repaired their own boots. A pair would last

one and a half to two years. Eric Luffman's father taught him how to make boots out of seal skin and how to sew a tap on them, how to take off the tap and sew an insole in the boot. Eric remembers getting a pair of boots in January which lasted him a full twelve months. He would put hob nails in them after he put the tap on and that would last about six months. Then he would strip them right down and do them over again and they would last for six more months. In the 1950s safety-toed boots became a requirement.<sup>40</sup>

#### Hats

Hard hats were not worn until the later years in mining on Bell Island. Nobody wanted to wear them because they were so heavy. Then one day in 1950, a man was killed when a small rock fell down and hit him on the head. The doctor said that a hard hat would have saved his life. After that the company made it a rule that the men had to wear the hard hats. Up until that time a soft canvas cap was worn. It had a little piece of leather on the front to clip the carbide lamp onto. The men lit the lamp and hooked it down over this piece of leather. These caps were purchased at the company store, which used to be located where the town hall is now, for about ninety-five cents. Gloves and safety glasses also became required items in later years.<sup>41</sup>

### Lamps

In the early years of the mining operation, the men wore little tin oil lamps which attached to their caps. This lamp resembled a small teapot. It had a bib and a little cover on it and was stuffed tight with cotton waste. A piece of cotton was pulled out through the bib and the lamp was filled with seal oil. When a man was shovelling or such work he would set the lamp on something, but when he was teaming a horse this lamp would be hooked into his cap and the seal oil would run out and down over his face each time he bent over. These lamps did not last very long on the work scene. The lamp was a miniature version of lamps used by fishermen to light their fish stages, and may have been adapted from that tradition.<sup>42</sup> It was not peculiar to the Bell Island mines, however, as a similar lamp was used in Pennsylvania.<sup>43</sup>

The Nova Scotia Company brought in the carbide lamp, which gave a better light. This kind of lamp was used for years. The regular miner had a small one that could be hooked into his cap, but the foreman used a large one with a handle on it so that it could be hand-carried. It was called a high fidelity lamp. The men knew when the foreman was coming when they saw this bright light approaching.<sup>44</sup>

Carbide resembled crushed stone and was about the size of peas. Each man would carry a can of it in his pocket.

That was enough to last him all day. The carbide was put into a little container which was screwed up into the lamp. A small pocket on top of the lamp was filled with water. A little lever was turned which would allow a drop of water to drip down onto the carbide. A flint was used to light the resulting gas.

In later years the electric light was introduced. Each man would carry a seven and a half pound storage battery on his belt, connected by a cord which came up over his back to attach to the lamp in his cap. It was introduced for safety reasons because there had been some accidents caused by gas in the mines coming in contact with the carbide lamps. At first there had been no problem but, as the mine was extended further and further from the surface, some people were burned. The electric light did not give as good a light as the carbide light, but still it was a better light to work with. For example, the carbide would often burn out and had to be relit. One miner recalls that if the flint was used out and he had no matches, he would just continue drilling without any light whatsoever.<sup>45</sup>

#### Brass

When a man was hired to shovel iron ore in the 1930s, he first went to the company store, where he got a pit cap, pit lamp, a can to fill with carbide and keep in his

pocket to refill his lamp when necessary, and an iron ore shovel. In later years he would also get a "brass." This was a round piece of brass, four centimeters in diameter. It had the name of the company, DOM. WABANA ORE LIMITED WABANA NFLD., and a number stamped on it. It was placed in the check office. There was one of these at the entrance to each mine. When the men went into the mines, they had to go through this check office and go past a wicket in single file, calling out their brass numbers as they did so. A man inside wrote down the numbers called. There were two big boards with finishing nails all over them and numbers below each nail. When a man was hired on his brass was placed on one board. After the men had all gone down into the mines the brasses with the numbers that had been called out were moved from one board to the other. In that way it was always known how many men were in the mines and who they were. Sometimes during the day, a timekeeper would go down into the mines and recheck to be sure. When the men came back up in the evening the operation was reversed.<sup>46</sup>

#### Horses in the Mines

Before small engines were installed to do the job in the 1950s, horses were used in the mines to pull the ore cars. They were large work horses, from 2,000 to 2,800 pounds and more, which were brought from Nova Scotia. They



were kept in barns down in the mines. "After months in the mines, when they would be taken to the surface, they would be unable to see for days."<sup>47</sup>

We had fourteen down in No. 3, big horses. We had one over in No. 6 was down there twenty-six years. She was thirty year old when they brought her up. She was called Blind Eye Dick. She had one eye, you see, so we called her Blind Eye Dick. And she was down in the mines twenty-six years, down in the mines. And they brought her up and retired her. They put her in this big field, up by Scotia barn. And when she come to herself, she was just like a young colt, going around and she bawling. She was worth looking at. And she was about a ton, 2,000 pounds, the biggest kind of a horse. There was some beautiful horses down in the mines. They used to come from Nova Scotia. They pulled the empty cars in to the loaders, the men to load. Albert Miller was down in No. 3 mines, that's who was looking after the horses down there. Mr. French was up in No. 4 mines. Andrews was down in No. 3 barn. Anderson Carter, he was down in No. 1 barn. The fellers that were teamsters, that would be their job. Well, if you had a horse, well you'd look after it. You'd go down, when you'd bring her in, probably two o'clock or half past two or three o'clock, you'd take your brush and put her in the stall, haul the collar off her. That's all they'd have on was the collar. Take the collar off and the reins, hang them up. You'd take your brush and brush her all down and comb her down and everything else, till she'd be shining. And then you'd go over to the bin and take about two gallons of oats and throw in to her. And take the hay was there, take a block of hay, and throw that in her bin and break it up for her.<sup>48</sup>

Eric Luffman remembers that, when he was a boy working in the mines, he and his friends used to have "a pretty good time riding horseback coming out over the levels, and

driving the horses when there was nobody watching."<sup>49</sup>

George Picco recalls his first experience working with a horse in the mines. He had been working underground for only a short time and was not familiar with the slopes. One day he was asked to "go teaming" because one of the men who usually did that job was off sick.

Poor old Dick Walsh, Uncle Dickie Walsh, he said, "Picco, were you ever teaming?" I said, "No, sir." He said, "You were never teaming?" Now this is taking a horse out of a barn, and going in wherever you had to go with the horse, and pull empty boxes into the face of the room to the hand-loaders. . . . I said, "No, sir, I was never teaming." "Well," he said, "Ern Luffman is off now today and," he said, "there's nobody to take the horse out of the barn to go in where you'll be working. . . ." He said, "You'll have to go in and take his horse out and go in west." "Well, sir," I said, "I don't know me way in west." He said, "You needn't to worry about that." He said, "The horse will take you right where you got to go." I said, "I hope you're right, sir." He said, "I know I'm right." He said, "Don't have any fear if you don't know where to go." He said, "The horse will take you there." I said, "Okay, sir. I'll go in and I'll take the horse out of the barn." Bloody big red mare. I went in the barn and got the horse out of the barn, and I held the reins behind him and he started off. I didn't know where to go. I didn't know where to go. And he kept on going and going. And by and by he made a turn and he got out in the middle of the track, and he went, kept on going and going and going. By and by he turned off of the track . . . and he went this way and he brought up against a big door, enormous big door, and he stopped. I went and I sized up the door. There was a big handle on it. I takes hold of the door and pulls it open and he went on in through. He went on in through, not a light, no lights. And he waited for me and I closed

the door. I got the reins and I walked behind him. I walked behind him, and he kept on going and going and going. By and by he comes to another bloody big door. He stopped and I had to open that and, after I opened it, he went through the door. And I closed it and I took hold of the reins and he went on again. I was tired, not knowing when he'd get there. He was taking me. I wasn't taking him. And he kept on going, going, going and, by and by, like I was telling you before, I thought I see a light. I said, "That's a light, if I knows anything." A little sparkle of light about that size. You're a hell of a way from it then, see, looking right ahead in the dark. And the horse kept on going and going and going. And by and by the light started to get bigger and the horse kept on going. And he brought me right into the headway. Right into the headway. Now the headway was where the trips of ore used to be running up and down on a slant. And he passed over the tracks and he went on. I still had the reins in my hand. He kept on going and going and going, and by and by he made a turn. Kept on going down the grade, and by and by he makes another turn, going in this way. And here I sees two lights way into the face in the room. And, as poor old Skipper Dick Walsh, he's dead and gone now, as poor old Skipper Dick Walsh said it, he said, "He'll take you right where you got to go." And he went on in this room and right where poor old Ern Luffman, God bless poor old Ern, where he took the swing off of him - the swing was two ropes on either side of the horse and a bar here and a hook where you used to hook into the cars, and where he [Ern Luffman] took the swing off of him and dropped on the ground - this is where he come. He come and stood right by the swing. And the two hand-loaders got up and put the swing on him, and I had to go right out on the landing and hook the swing into two cars and the horse hauled them right into the two men and they loaded 'em up. Well, that was my job for that day. As they had the first two cars there loaded, they took them out on the landing and I had to go out with the horse again, hook two more and haul them in

until they got their twenty 'oxes loaded. Then I had to take the horse back to the barn again. But you couldn't fool a horse in the mines, because they were down there that long, they knew, they knew where to go better, better than any man. <sup>50</sup> Yes sir, they really knew their way around.

### Rats in the Mines

The miners' other "companions," that also "really knew their way around," were the rats. As one miner put it, "the rats were thousands." Some of them were a foot long, "big as cats."<sup>51</sup> In fact, the rats thrived in the mines because of the horses, eating the bran and oats that were brought down to feed them.

While the horses were down there, there was no chance of them being hungry because they'd live around the ~~stables~~<sup>52</sup>, you see. They'd get in the oat boxes.

The oats were stored in large molasses puncheons, the insides of which were very smooth. Sometimes there would be a cover on them but, at any rate, it was rare for the rats to be able to get into them. One time the mines were shut down for a couple of months and some rats got into a puncheon to get the remaining oats. Then they could not get out again because the inside was so smooth. Harold Kitchen saw one of these puncheons half full of rats that had eaten out all the oats, and then had started eating each other.<sup>53</sup>

Another source of food for the rats was the scraps from the miners' lunches. When it was dinner time the rats would

come around and "they wouldn't knock at the doors either."<sup>54</sup> When he was eating a piece of bread, one man says he would eat down to the part that he was holding in his ore-coated hand and then throw the remainder to the rats. There was usually a rat there to run and get it. If there were no rats around he would throw it in the garbage can. "They'd get in there and get it anyway."<sup>55</sup>

They'd almost tell you when it was mug-up time. . . . You couldn't lay [your lunch] down on a bench, or anything like that.<sup>56</sup>

The dry houses were set-up to take account of the rats:

They used to serve your lunchroom barbarous, you know. You had to have a string right up on the ceiling tied right along on a wire, put your lunch on the wire. They'd even get out there and cut off the lunches and let them drop down when they were real hungry.<sup>57</sup>

Some miners killed rats whenever the opportunity arose, kicking them with their boots or hitting them on the head with a rock. Others would not think of hurting them:

. . . no miners would kill a rat. But young miners used to do this and the old guys said that if you killed a rat, the rest of 'em would come along and eat your lunch and clothes up and so on. They were fooling,<sup>58</sup> but that's what they thought, those old guys.

I never killed one in my life. But I seen fellers that if they see them they had to catch them. Chase them all over the place. Not easy to catch them. One feller, Tom Mercer, he died last winter, if he see a rat he'd shift a pile of rock from here over to that door to get the rat out. Had to catch him. But I never did. Never killed one in my life.<sup>59</sup>

Other miners were oblivious to the rats, while still others treated them like pets. Albert Higgins said that the rats were company. He did not mind them. When he was working on the hoist, he tamed a couple of young ones. He would throw crumbs to them and they would come up to his feet.<sup>60</sup>

Rats were common in the mines for a long time but were practically cleaned out in later years. This was partly due to the modernization program in the early fifties which saw the horses replaced by small engines. The other reason was a concerted effort to clean up the mines.

You'd hardly see a rat down there when the mines closed down. I think it started when Mr. Dickey went manager over there. He started to clean out the mines . . . and the garbage, everything, used to be taken up. And they dropped stuff [poison] down to get rid of them. When the mines went down I don't think there was hardly a rat down there, in No. 3.<sup>61</sup>

#### Beliefs Concerning Rats

A common miners' belief in many parts of North America and Europe is that the rats would run from a mine when disaster was impending.<sup>62</sup> It was believed by some Bell Island miners that seeing rats leaving a mine meant something was going to happen. Others believed more specifically that it meant flooding, although none of the informants reported having observed this phenomenon.<sup>63</sup>

Narratives about Rats

Harold Kitchen recalls experiences he had with rats:

There was a rheostat, a heater, from the engine that used to use up the electricity. It had an iron top on it which would get very warm. It was a nice place to lie down for a nap.

Harold would lie down on it sometimes. "The rats would be there in the dark, but as long as you kicked the iron every now and then they would stay away." If he fell asleep, when he awoke there was sure to be a rat on his leg.<sup>64</sup>

While Albert Higgins says that he tamed rats to come up to his feet when he was working on the hoist, Eric Luffman tells a bizarre tale of another man, Georgie Parsons, who also tamed a rat while he was working on the main hoist:

In those times, the hoist was boarded right in. It was a pretty warm place because there was no ventilation in there. Georgie had this rat, oh, a big rat. He told us it took months and months and months to get that rat to go and eat. The rat would eat the food he'd fire to him. But he wouldn't come handy to him. Georgie knew the rat. Matter of fact, he had the rat branded with a piece of copper wire, G. P. marked on it. The rat ran away for days and didn't come back after that happened. But he edged his way back and anyone who'd go in, the rat would disappear. And nobody believed Georgie. Some of the boys then began to sneak around and they saw the rat sure enough. Now Georgie had a bench to lie on with a piece of brattice filled up with grass for a pillow. When there was no cars running, Georgie would lie down and go to sleep. You could do that before in the iron mines. And the rat used to lie down on the pillow and have a nap. Georgie was telling about the rat now every day and telling his sister to put a little bit of

extra bread in for the rat. He was living with his sister, and his father lived with them. He thought the world of the rat. He used to wash the rat, look after him, clean him up. The rat loved him. This is what Georgie was telling the other fellers that worked around there. There was no doubt about the rat, because Dick Brien, the boss, walked in this day and there was the rat, laid down on the couch, on the cushion. And the minute he saw him, he was gone. So there was no doubt about the rat. After a long time a good many fellers now saw the rat. This day Georgie started the motor and the rat was in the motor. Something happened and the rat ran and this is where he went, right into this motor. And Georgie didn't know that he was there. Bye and bye he smelled him and he stopped the motor and there was the rat. Georgie wouldn't work there after that. They had to give him a change. He thought the world of the bloody rat.<sup>65</sup>

One day, when some miners were in a particularly idle mood, they caught a rat and connected its hind leg and tail to the terminals of a blasting battery. They then let the rat run into a puddle of water to ground it out more, then they pulled the battery. "All you could see were sparks."<sup>66</sup>

Apparently, when the opportunity presented itself, rats were not the only creatures that could be used to help ease the tedium of work. Some miners caught a buck goat once and hauled oil pants on over his front legs and an oil coat over his hind legs, stuck an old cap on its head and put an old carbide pit lamp on it and let the goat go.<sup>67</sup>



## Notes for Chapter IV

<sup>1</sup> MUNFLA, Tapes, 86-081/C8399, C8405, C8410, C8415.  
Jessie Hussey, unrecorded interview, Aug. 9, 1985. See  
George Picco's description of "teaming" on pp. 107-09 below.

<sup>2</sup> J. Derek Green 35. This happened in 1925. See Ch.  
2, p. 34 above. See Submarine Miner 3.12 (1956): 7 for a  
picture of the pay station at No. 3 slope.

<sup>3</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8415; Hussey, unrecorded  
interview, Aug. 9, 1985.

<sup>4</sup> Jenkin 284 reports that in Cornwall "The Monday after  
pay-day was customarily known as Bad Monday or Maze Monday,  
on account of the men's habit of spending it in drinking."  
Hand, "California Miners' Folklore: Below Ground," 150 says,  
"in some camps Monday was referred to as a 'Cousin Jack  
holiday,' probably because of the layoff occasioned by  
excessive weekend drinking."

<sup>5</sup> Rees, unrecorded interview, Apr. 7, 1985; Hussey,  
unrecorded interview, Aug. 9, 1985.

<sup>6</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8404.

<sup>7</sup> Man trams were tram cars fitted with seats that could carry thirty-two men; MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8406; Neary, Bell Island, slide 6 is a picture of a man tram loaded with miners about to go underground to start the shift. See Submarine Miner, 1.2 (1954): n. pag., which states that the company whistle, known locally as the "bull-dog," was installed at No. 2 Sub Station on Mar. 24th, 1924. It was later moved to No. 3 Main Hoist. It blew automatically to signal the changing of the shifts and the mid-day meal hour. When there was a house fire, the telephone operators at the Avalon Telephone Company activated a switch which caused the whistle to blow a certain number of times, dependent on which section of the Island the fire was located; Hussey, unrecorded interview, Aug. 9, 1985.

<sup>8</sup> MUNFLA, Tapes, 86-081/C8405, C8410. Also see James Taylor Adams, Death in the Dark ([Norwood, PA]: Norwood Editions, 1974) 16 who reports, "From dawn to dusk was the work day. I very distinctly remember that during the winter and spring of 1913 that I did not see my home [in Virginia] in daylight, except on Sundays, for nearly six months." Also see Brestensky 8.

<sup>9</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8405.

<sup>10</sup> The "boxes" were the ore cars which the men shovelled iron ore into. Two men loaded twenty boxes a day between them.

<sup>11</sup> These were the four long, low buildings that consisted of three bunk houses and a dining hall, which were occupied by non-resident miners. For an excellent account of mess shack life see MUNFLA, Ms., 78-189.

<sup>12</sup> MUNFLA, Ms., 78-189/p. 2 states that when the buses carrying these men arrived in their home communities on the weekend, the children would be there waiting for "the Bell Isle men." From the nomenclature used to describe them, it seems that these men were seen as a separate group by both of the communities in which they resided for part of each week. MUNFLA, Survey Card, 70-20/73 gives two versions of a rhyme about the economic climate of Bell Island which show how that economy was viewed one way by the people of the home communities of the miners and another way by the people of Bell Island. The first version shows a reserved acceptance of the poor state of affairs at home, and a resignation to the situation of having to go to Bell Island to find work that would provide relief for a bad situation:

Harbour Grace is a hungry place  
And Carbonear is not much better,  
So you've got to go to old Bell Isle  
To get your bread and butter.

The second version is a proud proclamation by the residents of a boom town who knew when they were well off:

Harbour Grace is a hungry place  
And so is Carbonear,  
But when you come to old Bell Isle  
You're sure to get your share.

13 MUNFLA, Tapes, 86-081/C8408, C8416. To "scraffel" is to rush through a task for a special reason. Richard M. Dorson, Land of the Millrats (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1981) 86 says that in the steel mills that ring Lake Michigan, there was a group of electricians who considered Fridays "horseplay day." They would work exceptionally hard on Friday morning so that the afternoon could be spent playing tricks on the other men.

14 MUNFLA, Tapes, 86-081/C8405, C8416; MUNFLA, Survey Card, 70-20/122. The miner in this narrative is often identified as Jim Adams, an Island Cove man. The miners from Upper Island Cove in Conception Bay were singled out by the informants as having been especially quick-witted men. "There was a real bit of fun wherever the Island Cove fellers were," and "There was no one get over the Island Cove men," are typical of the comments made about them.

15 The area in the mines where the men were working was called the "room." The wall of rock from which the ore was being removed was called the "face."

16 MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8415; MUNFLA, Survey Card, 70-20/121.

17 MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8415.

18 MUNFLA, Tapes, 86-081/C8404, C8410, C8411. See Neary, Bell Island, slide 19 which shows two miners after their last shift, receiving retirement clocks.

19 MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8415.

20 Neary, Bell Island, slides 16 and 17 show typical dry house scenes. Douglass, Pit Talk 38-39 says that miners in Durham, England, call their dry houses "cabins," which are "generally places hewn out of the stone and whitewashed."

21 MUNFLA, Tapes, 86-081/C8399, C8405, C8408, C8409, C8410.

22 MUNFLA, Tapes, 86-081/C8408, C8415, C8416; Rees, unrecorded interview, Apr. 7, 1985.

23 MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8407. Cf. traditional Newfoundland eating patterns in Hilda Murray, "The Traditional Role of Women in a Newfoundland Fishing Community," MA Thesis, Memorial U of Newfoundland, 1972, and Pamela Gray, "Traditional Newfoundland Foodways: Origin, Adaptation and Change," MA Thesis, Memorial U of Newfoundland, 1977.

24 Douglass, Pit Talk 33 says men "very, very rarely prepare [lunch] themselves - this being one of the jobs left for women."

25 MUNFLA, Tapes, 86-081/C8407, C8408.

26 See Brestensky 59 for a picture of such a lunch can. Douglass, Pit Talk 33-34 says that lunch was called "bait" and describes the lunch can or "bait tin."

27 See Ch. 5 below for an account of a prank played using lunch bags and p. 110 below for a description of how lunches were kept out of reach of the rats.

28 MUNFLA, Tapes, 86-081/C8405, C8407, C8408; Rees, unrecorded interview, Apr. 7, 1985. Also see Korson, Coal Dust 205-07 for accounts of rats getting at lunches in the coal mines.

29 MUNFLA, Survey Card, 70-20/91.

30 Men who worked underground commonly referred to their surroundings as "the pit." Thus, work clothes and boots were "pit clothes" and "pit boots." The iron ore was called "muck," and those who worked directly with extracting it were referred to as "muckers".

31 MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8416; Neary, Bell Island, slide 29 shows a group of miners in full "rig-outs" of overalls with bibs, work jackets, shirts and undershirts, pit boots, soft caps and hard hats with electric lamps.

32 MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8408.

33 MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8405.

34 MUNFLA, Tapes, 86-081/C8401, C8405.

<sup>35</sup> MUNFLA, Tapes, 86-081/C8407, C8408. Neary, Bell Island, slide 28 shows a dryhouse with clothes hung on ropes. Also see Anthony Burton, The Miners (London: Andre Deutsch, 1976) 86-87 for a picture of a 1920 Northumberland changing-room, "where the clothes hang like flags from the ceiling." Hand, "California Miners' Folklore: Below Ground" 141 talks of pit clothes being put in baskets which were raised and lowered from a cable by means of a pulley. In Hand, "The Folklore, Customs, and Traditions of the Butte Miner," 17 the locker room is also called the "dry" room.

<sup>36</sup> MUNFLA, Tapes, 86-081/C8405, C8410.

<sup>37</sup> Hussey, unrecorded interview, Aug. 9, 1985.

<sup>38</sup> MUNFLA, Ms., 70-20/p. 6; MUNFLA, Tape, 78-189/C4522.

<sup>39</sup> MUNFLA, Tapes, 86-081/C8401, C8405, C8408, C8416; Hussey, unrecorded interview, Aug. 9, 1985; Rees, unrecorded interview, Apr. 7, 1985.

<sup>40</sup> MUNFLA, Tapes, 86-081/C8401, C8405, C8410; Rees, unrecorded interview, Apr. 7, 1985. Also see Jenkin 272 in which it is reported to have been said of Cornish miners in 1842, "A man . . . would think it a disgrace not to be able to do this. They do it as well as a cobbler, the father teaching his boys."

<sup>41</sup> MUNFLA, Tapes, 86-081/C8401, C8405, C8406. Also see Brestensky 78.

42 There is an example of the lamps used by fishermen in MUNFLA. The main part resembles a tin can in shape, and is 11 1/2 cm. high by 8 1/2 cm. in diameter. The cover is flat with a ring soldered onto it. There is a wire handle, twisted to facilitate hanging. Two bibs are soldered onto opposite sides coming upwards from near the base. The miner's lamp would have a clip in place of one of the bibs. The fisherman's lamp was used to light the fishing stage at night and was usually filled with cod oil. Also see Submarine Miner 1.5 (1954): 8 for a picture of the different lamps used by miners over the years. The use of seal oil lamps was discontinued around 1911. The carbide lamp was used until the mid 1930s, after which the electric lamp was used. Neary, Bell Island, slides 5, 12, 13, 17 and 24 all show miners wearing electric lamps.

43 This description of the miner's oil lamp sounds like the Anton lamp which was manufactured in Pennsylvania especially for miners. The only difference was that the fuel used was solid paraffin, which was called "sunshine." For a description and picture, see Brestensky 8-10. On p. 77 the evolution of mining lights is given. A whale oil lamp was used previous to the Anton lamp, suggesting that the Anton brothers adapted their lamp from the fishing tradition.



<sup>44</sup> Douglass, Pit Talk 37 states that at one time officials in Durham mines wore spotlights on the cap lamps which gave out a long beam. The workers could see them coming from a long distance away and would warn one another.

<sup>45</sup> MUNFLA, Tapes, 86-081/C8401, C8405, C8406, C8408.  
Also see Brestensky 77.

<sup>46</sup> MUNFLA, Tapes, 86-081/C8406, C8407, C8408. In fact, except for the crushed iron ore which was stock piled and never sold after the mines closed, these brass disks are the only easily obtainable surviving material artifacts of the mining operation. They have been attached to key rings and are still sold in various retail establishments on Bell Island.

<sup>47</sup> From Harold Kitchen's own written history. Cf. Korson, Minstrels 145.

<sup>48</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8416. See Musick, West Virginia Folklore 10: 29-31, 12: 45-47 for stories about horses in the mines.

<sup>49</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8411.

<sup>50</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 84-119/C7621. Hand, "Folklore from Utah's Silver Mining Camps" 156 talks of mules pulling trains underground without benefit of light. See Submarine Miner 1.5 (1954): 8, and Neary, Bell Island, slide 5 for pictures of horses hauling ore cars underground.

<sup>51</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8416.

52 MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8411. Also see Korson, Coal Dust 205-07.

53 MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8405.

54 MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8408.

55 Rees, unrecorded interview, Apr. 7, 1985.

56 MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8410. Also see Hand, "Folklore from Utah's Silver Mining Camps" 157.

57 MUNFLA, Tapes, 86-081/C8411, C8415. Also see Dorothy Mills Howard, "Some Mining Lore From Maryland," Western Folklore 9 (1950): 164.

59 MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8411.

58 MUNFLA, Ms., 74-44/p. 21.

60 MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8410. Also see Fish, "European Background" 160; Hand, "Folklore from Utah's Silver Mining Camps" 157; and Korson, Minstrels 144.

61 MUNFLA, Tapes, 86-081/C8410, C8411. H. P. Dickey was Vice-President and General Manager of Dominion Wabana Ore Limited in the early 1950s.

<sup>62</sup> See Korson, Coal Dust 205; Brestensky 16, 19-20; Musick, West Virginia Folklore 11: 44; Dorson, Bloodstoppers 212; Fish, "European Background" 160; Hand, "Folklore from Utah's Silver Mining Camps" 157; Bancroft 323, 329-330; Fish, "Folklore of the Coal Miners" 123, and app. F 64; Davies 89; Wayland D. Hand, Anna Casetta, and Sondra B. Thiederman, eds. Popular Beliefs and Superstitions: A Compendium of American Folklore from the Ohio Collection of Newbell Niles Puckett [hereinafter cited as the Ohio Collection] 2 vols. (Boston: Hall, 1981) vol. 2: nos. 19044-19053; and Harry Middleton Hyatt, Folk-lore from Adams County Illinois, 2nd and rev. ed. ([New York]: Alma Egan Hyatt Foundation, 1965) no. 13354.

<sup>63</sup> MUNFLA, Ms., 71-109/p. 37; Hussey, unrecorded interview, Aug. 9, 1985; Rees, unrecorded interview, Apr. 7, 1985.

<sup>64</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8405. Cf. Dorson, Millrats 88.

<sup>65</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8411.

<sup>66</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8405. Cf. Dorson, Millrats 100. Joyce K. Horvath in "Mining Folklore From Kellogg," Western Folklore 24 (1965): 286-87 relates the story of a jack-ass that was used by a Kellogg, Idaho silver miner. After the miner died, the animal became a nuisance to the other miners. In an attempt to get rid of him, some of them "took him out to the edge of camp, tied on some sticks of dynamite, lit the fuse, and swatted him on the rump to send him on his way." The jack-ass, however, tore into the middle of town, "where he blew himself to smithereens."

<sup>67</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8407. Cf. Hand, "Folklore from Utah's Silver Mining Camps" 157 in which the case is recorded of a frog that was dressed in red and let loose in a mine, causing one miner to think he had seen the devil. Cf. also Korson, Minstrels 141-42 in which he reports that some miners tied a lighted candle between a goat's horns and set it loose in the gangway, frightening the other miners into thinking they had seen some sort of ghostly apparition coming through the darkness. This may have been a traditional prank for the Bell Island miners to play on a goat as Bown, "Newspaper" 1: 40 reports the following incident which took place in 1912:

There was considerable amusement around the mines one day when a "Billy Goat" was seen leading a herd of goats attired in a sou'wester and a pair of ladies corsets secured around him, with his horns out through the top and the strings tied under his chin.

## V OCCUPATIONAL FOLK NARRATIVES

Chapter four was a discussion of the routine of the miner's work life, his clothes and paraphernalia, foodways, the horses that worked alongside him and the rats that were also his companions. This chapter will present occupational narratives which illustrate two opposite aspects of the miner's life: the danger that constantly surrounded him in his work, and the sense of humour that functioned to relieve the tension created by that danger. As Jack Santino says, "occupational narratives provide insight into and an index of the specific challenges and problems that arise in a job." He lists among common subjects of narratives such themes as "the first day on the job" and "stories about initiation pranks," and it seems appropriate to give some examples of these as a background to the narratives dealing with danger.<sup>1</sup>

Obtaining Work

In chapter three, some of the informants told how they first obtained work with the company. Following are two humorous narratives describing the events surrounding the appeal for work of two men from Upper Island Cove:

An Island Cove man was looking for a job from the manager, Mr. McDonald, who announced, "We're filled right up and can't take anyone else on." The man replied, "Well, would you take me on and bust?"<sup>2</sup>

When Leander Hussey of Island Cove first went to Bell Island to get a job, he was asked if he had a preference as to which mine he wanted to work in: No. 2, 3, or 4. Hussey replied, "I don't care if you puts me in Primer so long as it's a job."

### First Day on the Job

Once the young man had gotten "hired on," the next hurdle was getting through his first day on the job. One man describes how he was introduced to his new co-workers:

You were always introduced to the others as, "Maurice Gorman's oldest son. Now that's Maurice married to Elizabeth Hickey from the eastern end of the Island." Your whole history was told before you uttered a word to them. One thing that stands out was that you were always recognized as Maurice's<sup>4</sup> son instead of by your own Christian name.

George Picco's first day working underground was particularly memorable for him, as it must have been for most men, for the experience was so completely different from anything that had gone before in his life. Perhaps it was because he only continued working underground for six months that the memory has stayed fresh in his mind. His first job had been on the surface, but it was seasonal work and he was laid off each winter when shipping ended. He and a buddy of his decided they wanted to work year round, so they went to see Billy Tucker, the man who did the hiring, to see if they could get a job underground. There were many different jobs in the mines but the one that an unskilled

man would be most likely to start out doing was shovelling iron ore. Mr. Tucker told them that this was the only job available and that they both seemed too slight of build for such work. George's reply was, "Slight, or slight not, I wants to get down in the mines." They were given the jobs, but were cautioned that they had to "get twenty boxes a day," that is, they had to load twenty ore cars between the two of them. Each car held  $1 \frac{3}{4}$  tons, so that each man was expected to hand-load  $17 \frac{1}{2}$  tons of iron ore a day.

The next day they went to the company store and each got a pit cap, a pit lamp, a can filled with carbide to keep in his overall pocket and an iron ore shovel. They then headed down into No. 2 mine. This was George's first time ever underneath the "collar," the entrance to the mine. When they got off the man trams in the main slope, half the men went east and half went west, all going in different directions to their particular jobs. Skipper Billy Reader, who was foreman down in the tunnel, addressed George and his buddy:

"All right, you two strange fellers," he said, "come on with me." We had the iron ore shovels on our shoulders, and we followed poor old Skipper Billy Reader. And he opened up a big door and, gentle God, the steam come out. You couldn't see hardly anything. "My Christ, Jack," I said, "where in the hell are we going to go?" "Come on," he said, "come on with me." [George deepens his voice to imitate the stern authority of Mr. Reader's words.]

The stairway going down was very steep and seemed to be about seventy-five or eighty feet long. They came to a level and then went down another flight which was equally long, so that they thought they were never going to be able to get back up out of it:

Anyway, we followed poor old Skipper Billy Reader into the face, into the room. By and by he stopped. And here was the big pile of iron ore right into the face. "Now," he said, "get your twenty here today. We wants twenty boxes."

There were horses and teamsters there, hauling in boxes to the hand-loaders. One of them pulled in a box for George and Jack. They were given a sprag each. This was a piece of round iron about two feet long that was shoved into the wheel so the car would not roll away:

Myself and poor old Jack started to load the iron ore car. Anyway, we started to perspire. And we got that warm and hot, be golly, we had to peel it all off. I tied me braces around me waist, naked body. I don't think we loaded our twenty that day. We loaded eighteen. Anyway, to make a long story short, all that week, meself and poor old Jack, we kept loading iron ore. Saturday, we used to work Saturdays and all, Saturday, when we had our last car loaded with iron ore, poor old Jack he looked at me, and he took the shovel that way, [holds arms straight up in grasping position] and he said, "George, there's better ways than this to try and make a living. Now," he said, "this finishes me." And he took the shovel and let it go up by the rib and he said, "Shovel, bye-bye." The two of us went out to the main slope and waited for the trams to go on, and we went up on deck, and poor old Jack never went underneath the collar after.



### Initiation Pranks

Richard Tallman defines the practical joke as:

. . . a competitive play activity in which only one of two opposing sides is consciously aware of the fact that a state of play exists; for the joke to be successful, one side must remain unaware of the fact that a play activity is occurring until it is "too late," that is, until the unknowing side is made to seem foolish or is caused some physical and/or mental discomfort.<sup>6</sup>

The initiation prank is the form of practical joke termed the "fool's errand" in which "the newcomer to a job is sent searching and asking for a variety of nonexistent tools, materials, or other items."<sup>7</sup> There seemed to be no hope of collecting any such pranks concerning newcomers to the Wabana operation after five informants had been interviewed and none of them could recall anything of this sort. Persistence paid off, however, and the sixth informant, Ron Pumphrey, gave the following account of an initiation prank played on him:

Oh, they play tricks on you. Oh yes, they do. Like, they told me the first day on the job, to go down and get something. I forget what it was, but it was perfectly ridiculous. And I, because I wanted to please, was half in a turn, with a foot half down to go in the direction, when I realized that this fella was pulling my leg, and I turned back and laughed, you know. Everybody laughed and that was it. But, no, part of your initiation was that, go down and get a wheelbarrow full of smoke or, you know, go down and fill this up with air, bottle, ygu know, get a bottle of mist down by the dam.

He also remembers when his foreman tried to pull an old

initiation prank on a boy from Island Cove. The Island Cove men were renowned on Bell Island for their ability to get the better of the bosses, and the boy in this narrative, young though he probably was, proved himself a worthy member of that community:

John Charles Vokey said to this little Island Cove fella, "Now, you're starting work and I want you to go down and get me a wheelbarrow full of smoke." And the little Island Cove said to him, "All right, Cock. You load it and I'll bring it up."<sup>9</sup>

The prank backfires in the next narrative as well, when the boy who is the intended dupe of the prank gives his own interpretation to the ridiculous command. The "round square" is simply meant to be two opposites juxtaposed so that they negate one another. Instead of becoming the victim of the prank, the boy uses other meanings for "round," in this case a round of drinks, and "square," to pay a debt, to make the prankster the victim:

In 1950, when the No. 6 deck-head was in the process of construction on Bell Island, the foreman, in an attempt to have some sport with the "nipper boy" (a young lad engaged to bring drinking water to the workers) ordered him to produce a round square. The ingenious boy, who had been offered no explanation or description of what was requested, proceeded to the home of [Mrs. Nolan] a lady who made and sold spruce beer and, returning with a dozen bottles, handed them around saying, "Here's your round, sir, and you can square it at Mrs. Nolan's later."<sup>10</sup>

### Practical Jokes

"Skylarking," "horseplay" and "playing tricks" were terms used by the miners to refer to the playing of pranks or practical jokes. The informants generally agreed that prank playing was a common practice with the boys and the men, both above and below ground, whenever the opportunity presented itself.<sup>11</sup> They thought of these events as humorous affairs and laugh now when relating them. Even though some of these events involved acts of vandalism, usually it was vandalism directed at a fellow worker, perhaps in retaliation for some previous practical joke. One of Eric Luffman's early memories is of an incident of unpremeditated vandalism which, consciously or not, was directed at the company and almost got him, and the group of boys with whom he worked, fired.<sup>12</sup>

A lot of the boys were twelve and thirteen year old orphans who had come to Bell Island to work from various places around Conception Bay. Their fathers were among 173 crewmen lost when the sealing ship, the Southern Cross, mysteriously disappeared in early April 1914. The foremen treated these boys as if they were their own sons. Eric's foreman was Richard Brien of Topsail. Brien had a boat at the pier and he and the men on his crew used to row home across the tickle every Saturday evening after work. Naturally they were eager to get away as soon after work as

possible, leaving the boys, who stayed on Bell Island, to finish up. They were working on an electric shovel at the time of this incident. When the shift finished on Saturday afternoon and the shovel came off the tracks, the boys would make everything safe before getting on the trams to come up on deck. There were nine or ten of them in the group.

The slope was all lit up with white and green lights in the bays for safety and red lights where the cars used to pass. On this occasion, one of the boys idly began taking pot shots at these lights, using rocks that were on the floor of the tram. Soon all the boys joined in the fun and the upshot was that they broke all the lights in the slope. On Sunday, Eric was summoned from home to go to the office to see Mr. McLean.<sup>13</sup> McLean told him that he had men working all morning replacing the broken bulbs:

He said to me, he was a big man, "Luffman, I could fire all ye fellers and that wouldn't do ye any harm because," he said, "ye'd love it. But your mothers would pay for it." He said, "I'm not going to fire you," he said, "but," he said, "I'll tell you this, just like I'd do to me own son, I'm going to do to you. Take down your pants and lean across that chair there." First I was going to say no. Then I thought about what he said about losing my job and so forth. I thought he was joking. He was a big man and he had a big belt about three inches wide, for buckling over a big old coat he used to put on for coming up on the car where it was so cold, his fur-lined coat. So anyway, I finally decided I'd take the crack. I leaned across the chair and he gave me a crack. Well first I thought I might cry, and I couldn't do that. But the tears began to come out and I

knew I wasn't going to sit down for a while, not in comfort. "Now," he said, "don't you speak of this to nobody. Now, get out of here." [Eric raises his voice in a stern command to illustrate how Mr. McLean spoke to him.] I went out a little ways and I met Jim Harvey going in. "How did you get on?" he said. Now Jimmie George was after being in and telling him what time to come. "Best kind," I said. "I'm going to work again tomorrow morning." There was a lot of woods, timber, woods around there then where it wasn't cut out at that time, and some grassy spots in among it. So I got in there and I lid down in the shade and I waited until Harvey come out. Well, he got up along side of me and he began to curse on me, blue murder: why didn't I tell him. And we see Jimmie Pike going in. Don't say nothing. Wasn't very long before he come out. Anyway, I suppose there was Heber Anthony and, anyhow, the last feller went in, his name was Parsons, Georgie Parsons. He was fifteen years old. He was well developed. He could put a man three hundred pounds over his head. I seen him do it. He was a bit of a fighter. Nice feller. So when he went in, the old man said to him, Mr. McLean, he said, "Parsons," now he was the one driving the shovel, "what happened to you?" Now he knew nothing at all about what was taking place, that there was fellers moaning up in the woods. He knew nothing about this. He said, "Mr. McLean, I'm responsible for everything that happened." He said, "I was the driver of the shovel. I'm the man that Mr. Brien left in charge. I'm awfully sorry," he said, "the thing had to go the way it did," he said, "but that's how it is. I was just as bad as any of them, and I should have had better sense." He was perhaps fifteen or sixteen years old. He come from the Labrador that year anyhow. "Parsons, [McLean said,] "I got a proposition to make to you. Every feller that came in here," he said, "see that belt there, leaned across the chair there," he said, "and I belted him. And," he said, "some of them are going to have a problem sitting for a while. I done that," he said, "to remind you fellers that when you're

sitting down, you're not supposed to throw rocks. Now, if you're satisfied to take that," he said, "the same as the other fellers," he said, "Parsons, fine. If not, I got your time wrote out here. You can get your money and quit. He said, "Mr. McLean," now if Parsons didn't want to let him do it, he wouldn't have been able to do it because, as I said before, he was as tough as anyone, "whatever you give them young fellers," he said, "you give me twice as much." Now we all decided that perhaps it was best not to talk about it at all to nobody. First we were ashamed to think that we were humiliated to such an extent. And I don't suppose anybody ever told that story after, because we were ashamed, see. But we didn't have too much choice. It was that or be hungry, because things weren't so good as they are now. Anyway, we went back to work the next morning. But, me mother had to get a cushion for me to sit on for three or four days.<sup>14</sup>

This prank was juvenile in nature, which is not surprising considering that all the boys in the narrative were quite young. Being fatherless, they had to bear a great deal of responsibility for their ages, both at home and at work. This act of vandalism may have been a spontaneous rebellion against that responsibility, with company property providing a convenient outlet. It allowed them to release their frustration for the position they were in and, by taking their punishment and returning to work, they were better equipped to accept their lot in life.

When the practical joke was aimed at an individual, it was usually of a less serious nature with no real punishment involved. Albert Higgins recalls that there was always a lot of fun of a trivial kind going on with the boys on the

picking belt:

There was a bunch of us young fellers. I was only sixteen then. We'd be carrying on. We'd play tricks on each other and on the boss too. I remember our boss on the picking belt, Mr. Davis, he had a big mustache. And I sneaked down behind him one day and I held onto his mustache and I kept holding on. I was afraid to let him go. I finally let him go and I had to take off. He threw the rocks at me. He was pretty good, you know. He was a little bit good on that stuff himself. He played tricks too on the boys. As long as you done your work he was okay. If you never done your work he'd get mad. The most kind of things he used to do to the boys was call you names and then you'd do something to him. He wouldn't do very much playing tricks<sup>15</sup> or anything cause he was a real old man.

In the following narrative, Harold Kitchen recalls how a group of boys played an old practical joke on a boss. The belthouse door consisted of a large door with a smaller door cut out of it:

The smaller one was used most of the time. When you came in through that door at the bottom of No. 2 belthouse, you had to stoop to get in through. One old chap, Tom Craig from the West Mines, was boss over the samplers. This day when he came in, the boys had a bucket of water rigged up over the door. When he came in the door he stooped to get in and the water all poured down the back of his neck.<sup>16</sup>

Lunch was a popular time for playing a practical joke on someone. It was a break from work when there was no danger of being reprimanded for goofing off. There were also lots of props handy that made prank playing easy.<sup>17</sup> When Harold was younger, one of his jobs was heating water

for lunch time. He and the other boys had a lot of fun heaving water at one another:

You would get a can of water and hide behind a corner. When another feller would come around the corner, you would give it to him in the mouth.

Sometimes Harold had to go to the home of one or another of the men to get his lunch for him, so that when the man saw him coming with a paper bag in his hand he knew it was his lunch. Harold would play a trick on him by filling up a paper bag with water and then putting it into another paper bag. When he would get up close to the fellow he was going to have the trick on, he would hit him in the side of the face with the paper bag:

It would burst and the guy would be drowned with water. That was an old trick and<sup>18</sup> you could only get away with it a few times.

One day Harold was the butt of a prank. When he went to get his lunch can from the cupboard, he could not budge it. On examining it, he found that someone had taken out his lunch, driven a four-inch nail down through the can and on through the shelf, buckled the nail under the bottom of the shelf, and put the lunch back into the can.<sup>19</sup>

It often happened though that, what started out as a bit of fun would end in a row. This happened on one occasion when a prankster took advantage of a religious observance to play a prank. The miners generally respected each other's religious beliefs, one of which was that devout



Roman Catholics and Anglicans alike would not eat meat on Fridays:

The Catholic people, they wouldn't eat meat on Friday. No odds if they starved to death, they wouldn't eat meat on Friday. And there was one feller worked with us, Uncle John Fitzpatrick. And one day a feller by the name of Dinn Sheehan from Harbour Grace, he was a devil for carrying on, one day he went over in the old cupboard and he found this great big junk of salt beef. And he said to Uncle John Fitzpatrick, he said, "Would you like to have a piece of salt meat?" "Yes, Dinn boy," he said. So Dinn takes it out of the cupboard and lays it on Uncle John's lunch paper. We used to have lunch in a paper, you know. And he took the piece of salt meat up, not knowing anything, you know. And he had about two bites took out of it, and he said, "God damn you, Sheehan, this is Friday." Then he chased Sheehan with the piece of meat.<sup>20</sup>

There were also times when the men had some free time while still on the job. When the work was held up while the face cleaners removed loose rock after a blast, or while the shovellers were waiting for empty cars to load, they were said to be "delayed in the day." These delays were passed in various ways. Usually the men simply "took a spell" and smoked a cigarette. It was a chance for them to chat and exchange gossip or stories. They also tossed horseshoes on the level or played checkers in the cryhouse. A humorous narrative uses the game of checkers as a metaphor. The miners are the "checkers," and the foreman is the "player":

Two Island Cove men were working down in a huge opening when one of them noticed that the foreman had been staring at them for a

long period of time. One of the men said, "Say, Skipper, can you play checkers?" "Yes," replied the foreman, "why?" "Because if you<sup>21</sup> don't move you're gonna lose two men."

It is reported in one MUNFLA paper that songs were sometimes sung as a means of passing the time, although no indication is given as to what kinds of songs were sung.

As might be expected, idle time like this was ripe for a little horseplay, which sometimes took the form of a "sham fight." Two men were chosen to fight and all the others would make bets of a few cents each on who would win. One day the men persuaded their overman, or foreman, who was a very serious man, to be the referee. Everything was going well until one of the fighters struck one of the observers. When the overman/referee tried to break it up, he got pushed around, and the whole crew ended up in a free-for-all.<sup>22</sup>

One miner took advantage of another's physical pain to play a practical joke on him one day. The victim was known as a "comical stick" and had "queer old sayings." Perhaps, because of these traits of his personality, it was felt that he could take a joke, and this may have been why this grotesque prank was played on him. He was complaining of a toothache, so one of the boss men told him that Doug Somerton could charm teeth.<sup>23</sup> Unknown to him, Somerton went to the tubs, as the sawed off barrels that served as toilets in the mines were called, and hooked up some faeces on a

stick. He put a bit on his finger and then went and told the man that he was going to charm his tooth, but that he should not tell anyone that he had done it. He told him that after he put his finger on the tooth the man should keep his mouth closed for a while. So he put this on the man's tooth and the suffering man closed his mouth. "If he hadda caught him after, he would have made away with him."<sup>24</sup>

Another miner found himself at work one day without his cigarettes, a situation which put him in mental anguish until he was given a substitute by a more than helpful fellow worker:

Neddie George used to drive the stock pile hoist. He used to pull the car up to the stock pile, shut off the engine when she dumped and lower her back. If it went too far it would go over. Anytime he was off work we were sure to have a stock pile car off the road. This morning he came to work and he had no cigarettes. He thought she was going to go over if he didn't have a cigarette. The cable man was in the shed. He knew all about ropes and cables. He took a piece of manila rope, chopped it up in small pieces and rolled it up. "Here," he said, "try that." Well, Neddie got so gay, and from that day on he smoked it. Then, of course, other men tried it.<sup>25</sup>

It was noted that in later years the rules got stiffer and anyone caught playing practical jokes could get laid off for a period. This seems to have been a result of tighter control by management, combined with the more delineated regulations for behaviour that come with the presence of a union. One miner emphasized the change from early to late

years by saying, "If you did some of these things in later years, you wouldn't be fired, you'd be hung."<sup>26</sup>

#### Accidents in the Mines

The Wabana mines were relatively safe and comfortable when compared to other mining operations, yet fatal accidents occurred with amazing regularity.<sup>27</sup> The miners interviewed for this study said that they never worried about the danger involved in their work. The narratives they relate about mining accidents indicate that they probably always were aware of it unconsciously though.<sup>28</sup> The humour and fun they sought to inject into their work lives undoubtedly arose from conditions that, while not oppressive, were far from ideal.<sup>29</sup>

There were no major disasters in the Bell Island mines. "Two or three men trapped was the usual thing." A methane gas explosion in No. 6 mine in 1938 in which eight or ten men were involved was the worst mine accident that any of the informants could recall:

A lot of men got burned. One day an inspection was being made of the rooms to see if they were safe for the men to work in. Eight or nine men went into a room and one man took out a match to light a cigarette. They were blown to pieces. Work had to be shut down. Stretchers were gotten and a lot of men were brought out to the main slope. Their clothes had caught fire. They were just about burned to death. A lot of them lost their noses and their ears. They had to be rushed over to St. John's. Some of them

died. That was the first time that ever happened.<sup>30</sup>

Another miner comments on the same explosion:

It killed Sam Chayton and Bobby Bowdring. Bobby's son Frank was maimed and another feller. That explosion was caused by methane gas. . . . The other five weren't so badly burned. What happened there was the place was loaded with gas and a feller went to light his pipe.<sup>31</sup>

An accident could happen at any time, taking the life of a buddy and friend without any warning:

I remember my next door neighbour was walking up the mine one day, getting off work. And had his head bent some to help pick his steps, when a piece of ore no bigger than a fist fell and hit him on the head. Killed him. So you see, sometimes it didn't matter how careful you were.<sup>32</sup>

There is great pain when a co-worker is killed, but pangs of regret linger on when one believes that a simple action on his part might have saved his friend's life:

You'd always hear stories from men who were working with men who died along side them, had an accident, or were killed. There was a man I knew well and I was talking to him and five minutes after, he was killed. If I hadda stayed with him a little bit longer, maybe he wouldn't. He went off cleaning down the side of a rib, you know. A piece of ground came down and hit him on the head. If I hadda stayed there talking to him he wouldn't have had to be, he wouldn't have been doing that, because it wasn't his job. I left talking to him and I just went out over the level and down the headway. And I was talking to the boss, Leo Brien his name was, and while I was talking to him a feller came running down the headway singing out for the stretcher. This man was after getting hit. He wasn't killed right out. He died on the way up.<sup>33</sup>

It was tragedy enough when a buddy was killed, but often the men had to bear the pain of being witness to the scene of an accident:

Once when I reported for work on the four o'clock shift, I had to go down the mine where a man had just been killed and shut off the air valve. I'll never forget the sight of him. His head was nearly blown off and several men had to strap him to a stretcher to hold him until he died. It didn't take long.<sup>34</sup>

Both Harold Kitchen and Len Gosse recall an accident in which a man was run over by an ore car on January 11, 1952. "Bunce was killed by the big car that ran back and forth in No. 3 mines." It was believed he was there four hours with the car running over him every eight minutes. Harold was one of the first to see the body and then helped to transport the remains to the company fire hall:

It was nearly one o'clock [a.m.]. It was just down under the collar of the mines. His body was scattered all around the area. Men cried, threw up,<sup>35</sup> did not know if they were coming or going.

This is how Len remembers the circumstances surrounding the discovery of the body and what he was told at the time about the recovery of the body:

That night we were coming up on the trams, and Harold Kitchener, he was sot over like this. And when we got up to No. 1 crosscut, he seen the man's leg, he seen part of the man's body. Up further he seen his head. This was a man was there when the big car come along, and he got runned over, chopped into pieces. He never said a word about it. [Len and the other men on the tram did not

notice the body.] We never had far to go, only about a thousand feet to go to the deck. We went up to the haulage and jumped off and changed our clothes. Harold took his time and dodged in and went in and said to Peter Nixon, he said, "Peter, there's a man dead down there. He's cut to pieces with the big car." Peter said, "Is that right?" "That's right," he says. He said, "Get Billy Jones." Billy Jones was foreman. And he got Walt Jackman and he went back himself and showed them, walked down. The first thing when they got down, oh, about 300 feet or 400 feet down, there was a man's leg. And about 50 feet farther than that, another part of his body. And they got a big piece of brattice and rolled it all up in it.<sup>36</sup>

In the early days of the mining operation, many accidents and deaths were caused by "missed holes." These were holes plugged with dynamite that had been missed or had not fired when the blasters went through. Later a driller or a shoveller using his pick to loosen the rock might unknowingly penetrate a missed hole and set off an explosion. This is probably what happened one day when a man was literally blown to pieces. His son, who worked in the same area, had to take up the only part of him that could be found, his fingers. After the funeral, the son went back to work there again.<sup>37</sup> This type of accident was rare in later years but, unfortunately, continued to occur even to the end of operations:

Paddy Kelly . . . was only a young feller. I believe he was about thirty year old, thirty-one year old. He blew up. He and Harold Quinlan, they had the drill set up and Harold says, "Paddy." He shook his light and Paddy stopped. "Hold on now Paddy till I

pulls up and takes that lump out of the way." On back of the lump there was nothing but a full load of powder. And when he started in drilling, it struck there. The lump popped out of the way, and she went right in this hole, into about fifteen plugs of dynamite. And the whole works come right down across the aisle where he was at and killed him. And the feller that done it, he never got hurt. The big drill threw the whole thing right up over his head and pitched on the other side of him. If she had of dropped, come down like that, it would have killed the two of them.

As if the witnessing of a buddy's or even a relative's death underground were not enough, there then came the agony of informing those on the surface:

When the whistles would blow to notify all the womenfolk that there was an accident in the mines, you'd get sick to your stomach, because you'd hate to come to the surface to face the wife to tell her that poor old so and so was killed instantly.

In the last few years that the mines were in operation, Eric Luffman was asked to take the job of trying to find ways of preventing the accidents that had been on the increase. He has thought a lot about what causes accidents:

Most of them, if you trace them, most of them were man-made accidents. I'll give you one case of a feller. His job was, there was a little sally, off grade sallied down, and when the trip used to go there, she'd stop [the trip of cars would stop because of this dip in the ground]. His job was to hook a little cable onto [the trip], pull it out of there and he had nothing else to do only just sit down until that come out. His name was Hayward George, a great friend of mine. So this day he gets an idea, there's a piece of ground hanging off, so he gets the bar to pull it down. But he didn't see the cap was



on the piece of ground. That came down and killed him. It was just a matter of the man with nothing to do and he had no business to use the bar. That was one case. Another case is gambling. A man driving a shovel and the face cleaner told him the piece of ground was bumpy. So he got up on the boom of the shovel and put a wedge in, a piece of wood to wedge it, because when it starts to come it's too late. So he was killed on the shovel.<sup>40</sup>

Foremen were compelled to take first aid classes so that, in the event of an accident and while awaiting medical assistance, some help could be given on the spot. It was sometimes an hour or longer before the injured could be gotten to the surface.<sup>41</sup> Until the 1940s, the ambulance consisted of a horse and wagon, which was driven by a man named Arthur Clark. Not all of the accidents he attended to were of a serious nature, as is illustrated in the following narrative:

One time . . . he went to No. 6. A feller hurted, see, so he got a call. When he got a call, he had to go to what they called the barn down in the slope . . . he'd go and pick them up. So buddy had his foot hurted, see . . . and I suppose, the poor old bastard, his feet were dirty. And he belonged to down on the Green. And when they got down [to the area of the Island known as the Green], he opened the doors on the back and got out. And Arthur went on. Arthur didn't know he was gone. And when he went over to back the horses into the surgery doors, Old Dr. Lynch came out and opened the door, and not a soul. And he had to go back on the Green and look for buddy, and got him back home washing his feet.<sup>42</sup>

### Premonitions

Mining accidents are sometimes sensed before they happen, either by the miner himself, or by some member of his family. One miner, who had left his house to go to work one morning, is said to have returned and kissed his wife after having gone only a short distance. He was killed that day by a rock fall. When his wife told acquaintances about the good-bye kiss, it was surmised that he had had a premonition of his own death.<sup>43</sup>

Eric Luffman's father was killed in an explosion at seven a.m. on August 22, 1916, after having worked a twelve-hour shift starting at seven p.m. the previous evening:

My mother knew. . . . She went to bed and all of a sudden she woke and she never did before. Something on her mind. This was early in the night. She got up and came down, and she stayed downstairs because she knew there was something wrong. But my father wasn't expected home until half past seven. And the Salvation Captain was there before that. When she see him come to the door she knew exactly what he was going to tell her.<sup>44</sup>

Eric recalls two occasions when he "knew" something was wrong in the mines:

I remember one time, I got so nervous that I wouldn't go to bed until Jack [his step-father] was home. He was blasting, and used to come home ten o'clock. Wouldn't go to bed. I had to make sure he was home. And every day I'd go in the pit, I'd be frightened to death. And this day Sam Cobbs was killed and it left me [snaps his fingers] just like that.<sup>45</sup>

This same feeling came over Eric again prior to the deaths of Randell Skanes and James Butler, who were killed by runaway cars in October 1949:

I was working in No. 6 then, and I went to go home in the evening, and Randell said to me, "Stay down. We're going to do something with the road." I said, "I can't do it. I got to go home." I had something to do. I got home and Stella says, "What's wrong with you?" I said, "I don't know. I'm after losing me appetite." That was about six o'clock in the evening. "There's something wrong, Stella," I says, "but I don't know what it is." So I called up to see if Jack was home. He was home. All the family was home. By and by, Jeanie come home from Charlie Cohen's store. She worked to Charlie Cohen's then. She said, "Mr. Skanes and Mr. Butler was killed in No. 6. this evening." And it left me right away.<sup>46</sup>

Len Gosse had a similar thing happen to him, in which he stayed home from work because of intuition, perhaps saving his own life:

Walter Rees, he got killed in the section [where I worked]. And that day I stayed off, never went to work. And he was killed that morning, eleven o'clock. I woke up six o'clock as usual. I said, "Nina, you got the lunch for me yet?" She says, "No." I says, "Okay, I'm not going to work, not today. I can't go to work. There's something wrong somewhere. I can't go to work today." And he only had two more shifts to work and he'd be finished in the mines. He and his wife were going away to Galt. He had his notice and everything put in with the company, put in a week's notice, and he got killed Thursday.<sup>47</sup>

On another occasion, Eric Luffman's ability to sense danger saved the lives of two men. One night he and Bob

Basserman, an efficiency expert brought in near the end of operations to cut down on the work force, went to investigate a problem. Two men had shut off their drills. Neither of them spoke English very well, and they were trying to communicate what was wrong, when Eric sensed that something was really wrong. He told the men to come with him but, because of their lack of understanding of the language, they did not move. So Eric told Basserman what he wanted him to do:

So I took one feller and I said, "Bob, take the other feller by the arm and let's lead them out of here." "What for?" he said. "When we gets out now I'll tell you," I said. "Don't talk. Don't make no noise at all. Just take them by the hand and just laugh and keep going out of here."

No sooner were they out, than the spot where they had just been caved in. Basserman asked him how he had known what was going to happen. "'I smelled it, Bob,' I said. I don't know how I knew . . . instinct . . . intuition."<sup>48</sup>

#### Customs Concerning Death and Accidents

It has been reported in collections of American and European mining folklore that it was a common custom for all the men to walk off the job when a man was killed in the mines.<sup>49</sup> The informants for this study did not agree on what was the usual practice on Bell Island. One said that walking out may have happened occasionally, but not usually.

When a man was hurt, those who worked with him would leave off working to bring him up out of the mines. When a man died in the mines, it would be only his fellow workers and friends who would attend the funeral.<sup>50</sup>

Several other informants said, however, that if a man was killed, the other men in that mine usually stopped work. Some said the men would stay off until after the funeral, while others said that they would stay off for one day.<sup>51</sup>

I remember one day, I was working on the Scotia Line, over in No. 6 bottom, about one or half past one o'clock I think it was. And t'was an accident in the mines. And when anything happened in the mines it would go like that [snaps his fingers], spread like wildfire. And this evening about one or one-thirty the news come up out of the mines, there were two men squat to death by a fall of ground. Called the whole shebang off. All the mines closed where the two men were killed, you know.<sup>52</sup>

The men would close it down theirselves. They wouldn't work. If they knowed that anyone got killed, say for instance, Leander Gosse got killed seven o'clock at night and nobody never knowed it. They never told nobody, only them fellers was in that headway. If they had ringed and said they knocked off working, they would have stopped and that's it. But they never sent in to us. If they had a sent in to us, we would have stopped too. But the next day everything was off.<sup>53</sup>

A man who was hit by a fall of ground while working with Albert Higgins did not die immediately, so the other men continued to work when he was taken out. When it was learned that he died on the way to the surface, the others

all quit working.<sup>54</sup>

Alma Rees' father, Sydney Warford, was an electrician in the mines on Bell Island, having come there from Pilley's Island in the early years of the operation. He was killed on August 30, 1927 when the ropes broke while he was being lowered down a mine shaft. Alma was nine years old at the time. She remembers that the mines closed down for the day, which was the practice at that time as she recalls.<sup>55</sup>

Hunt writes that Cornish miners do not like the form of the cross being made underground.<sup>56</sup> To the contrary, Hand reports that Catholic miners in Eureka, Utah, crossed themselves whenever they passed a spot where a fellow miner had been killed.<sup>57</sup> It was the custom on Bell Island to mark a cross on a rib near the spot where a man was killed.<sup>58</sup> These crosses served as a memorial to the dead men.

When a miner was accidentally killed by a rock-fall in the 1920s, his mug was left in its usual place, suspended from the ceiling, and never moved "lest it occasion his spirit any unrest."<sup>59</sup>

#### Beliefs and Taboos Relating to Death and Misfortune

One of the best known beliefs concerning the Bell Island mines was that it was extremely unlucky for a woman to go down into the mines.<sup>60</sup> Many people there believed that if a woman went into the mines someone would be killed

shortly thereafter, as exemplified by the following narrative:

Years ago it was strictly taboo for a woman to go underground. They had this belief that if a woman went underground there was sure to be an accident. This sort of thing was built up in their minds. The older mine captains, they didn't want anyone whatsoever to bring a woman in the underground workings cause there was sure to be an accident, and sometimes someone was killed. It usually happened that if a woman came down, probably a week or a month after that, someone got killed. They'd say, "That's what happened. He brought that one down. He shouldn't have had her around here at all." You know, it wasn't until about fifteen years before the mines closed down that women were really allowed, given permission, to go down underground. I worked underground for about eighteen years. Even when I worked down there, if you see a woman coming, my god, it was terrible. Most of the women you would get going underground was probably women who worked on a magazine, or some paper somewhere, you know. She came down to see what the mines was like and probably get a story on that. But it was strictly taboo. It didn't matter a darn where she was working on a paper or what she was working on. It was still the same thing. They didn't like to see her there.<sup>61</sup>

Visiting company officials doing a tour of the operations sometimes were accompanied into the mines by their wives:

That was considered bad luck, for a woman to go down in the mines. The men didn't want that at all. They more or less kicked up a fuss if they knew that there<sup>62</sup> was a woman going to go down in the mines.

The miners would not go so far as to walk off the job over the intrusion of a woman into their territory though.

Len Gosse recalls actual accidents that the miners believed were direct results of women visiting the mines:

A man never wanted to see a woman come in the mines. Every time a woman went down in the mines, there was a man killed. That's the truth too. It really happened. When they were putting the belts in, there was a Canadian, a French-Canadian. Two women went down in the mines to see what was going on, with the captain of the mines there, Mr. Tommy Grey. He brought two women down. They were looking at the new pockets and the new tiptlet and what was going on, cause me brother, he was there looking after it all. And someone said, "Here they goes again. We'll have it in a couple of days time." [They were saying things] like that.

Len goes on to say that it was two nights later, when they were riding to the deck on the trams, that they found the body of the man who had been run over by the ore car, as described on pages 143-44 above. The curse did not end there, however:

There was a young feller, he used to work with us. He was an orphan, and the welfare [Provincial Department of Welfare] reared him up. He come down in the mines when the belts was going in. And he was an auto mechanic, see. And he was doing something and shoved his head in under the belt like that, and someone shoved on the switch. Cut the head off him. That's where the two women just went down before that. That was two men dead. And before Leander Gosse died, there was a woman went down in the mines. And there was one down before Paddy Kelly. There was one down there before Walter Rees. And there was a woman went down in the mines when Martin Sheppard got killed. And there was a woman went down in the mines when Hayward George, he got killed. Every time <sup>63</sup> woman went in the mines, a man got killed.



It seems that womankind was not the only jinx for the miners. A mine official, H. B. Gillis, who was Superintendent of Pits and Quarries for DOSCO, occasionally visited Bell Island to inspect the operation. "Every time he came to Bell Island, this is an actual fact, somebody was killed. That's an honest fact." None of the reports about this man mention how he died, although it seems unlikely that the news would not have gotten back to Bell Island to bolster the belief about him. He was a passenger on the steamer Caribou when it was torpedoed on October 14, 1942, while travelling from Nova Scotia to Newfoundland. He was one of the 137 victims of that tragedy.<sup>64</sup>

In mines in other parts of the world there is a belief that to call a miner who has overslept will bring misfortune on him.<sup>65</sup> This does not seem to be known by some Bell Island miners, as one relates that he often helped out fellow miners by calling them when it was obvious that they had slept in:

I've often done that. Yes, I've done that often. That was just the common thing to do. If you looked out through the window and never seen no smoke coming out through the chimney, you'd say, "He's sleeping in this morning." You'd pull on your boots and take off over and knock on the door. And he would say, "Thanks, buddy." And you'd go back home again.<sup>66</sup>

Other miners, however, believed that to call such a person would be tantamount to calling him to his death.<sup>67</sup> One

miner remembers what a buddy of his told him about a time when he called another miner and regretted it afterwards:

"I called so and so. He was slept in that morning and I called him. By hell," he said, "that day he was killed. So," he said, "I'd never call a feller again." And somebody said that happened to so and so too. When so and so was killed, he was called that morning.<sup>68</sup>

Another belief in other parts of the world is that it is bad luck for a miner to return home for something he has forgotten.<sup>69</sup> Although none of the informants professed to having this belief, there is an amusing anecdote which could be rooted in it:

Billy Pynn, he lived over on the Green, see. He's a cousin of mine, lives in Clark's Beach now. He worked in No. 4 and he had a good mile to walk, see. So this morning he gets out of bed kind of late, and he gets up and scrawls on his clothes, puts on his boots, and instead of taking his lunch, he grabbed the clock and put it under his arm. He took off, this is a true story, and he took off and he got up as far as Suicide Dam, and he heard the clock ticking. He looked down like this. "To hell with this," he said. He took the clock and fired it out in the dam,<sup>70</sup> and went back home. He stayed home that day.

Whether or not the men dwelt on the danger that was an intrinsic part of their lives, there is no doubt that they all sensed it to some degree as they went about their work. It is not surprising then, to find that some of them would use a familiar and easily accessible object, thought by many people everywhere to have the power to fend off misfortune and bring good luck, as their talisman.<sup>71</sup> Belief in

horseshoes as such a good luck charm was common among the miners. One man reports that horseshoes used to be nailed up in the mines by almost everyone. "You had to hang them with the open end up or the luck would fall out." They were mostly hung up on posts in the dry houses where the men ate. If a miner found a horseshoe on the footwall, he would nail it up on a nearby post. He says that he did that himself "with no belief into it that it was going to bring me luck."<sup>72</sup>

#### Narratives Concerning Mishaps and Accidents

Not all of the mishaps that occurred in the mines ended in tragedy. Some of the comical narratives came out of accidents that ended happily:

The mines had a pitch of thirteen percent in some places and there would be always water left on the low side, you see, from the drills and so forth. And we had a feller, this day, putting on a piece of rope around the shovel head, and he slipped off and got down and got his feet wet. "Well, well, well," he said, "now, look what I got to do now. Right in the middle of winter I got to wash my feet."<sup>73</sup>

While it is understandable that when a man was killed his fellow workers would be shocked and grieved, the man "left behind" in the following narrative seems to have been more concerned with the practical aspect of life going on and a pair of good boots going to waste:

Fred Newton was working with a feller one

time, and Fred got a crack on the head. Knocked h<sup>m</sup> out, stunned him for a minute. When he came to, his buddy had his boots off. "What are you doing with me boots?" he said. "I thought you were dead, buddy."<sup>74</sup>

### Ghosts

Where there are tragic deaths, there are often reports of ghost sightings. Several informants recall other men talking about seeing ghosts of miners who had been killed in the mines. "They thought they saw the ghost alongside them drilling." The informants themselves had not had that experience though.<sup>75</sup>

George Picco tells of an experience his brother, Leander, had sometime in the early 1950s, involving the ghost of a dead miner. According to reports, there was a driver killed in the headway in No. 3 mines. Sometime later, Leander got a job working the graveyard shift there. After midnight he would be there by himself until morning. After all the men had gone up it was a lonely place, but he did not seem to mind. Then one morning, at half past two, George's telephone rang:

This was Leander, my brother. I said, "Where are you to, Leander?" He said, "Boy, I'm down in the mines, No. 3 mines." He said, "I'm down here by meself now. I don't know whether it was my imagination, or whether it was true or what, but I was going up the headway and I saw the man [who had been killed there] in the chair, and I got that lonely I had to give you a call, boy."

Leander found out afterwards that the first man who took this job after the man had been killed, had had the same experience:

One night he was coming from somewhere, from getting a mug-up and, going up the headway, he seen the man sitting in the chair. He said that before long, just like that [George snaps his fingers] there was nothing there. He applied for another job and got away from there.

When Leander got the job, this other man did not tell him of his experience. Leander only found out after he saw the ghost himself. He left the job then as well.<sup>76</sup>

Ghosts of miners were not restricted to the underground slopes where they had worked. A woman, whose home was close to the collar of No. 2 mine, recalls an occasion when she, her husband and son were playing a game of cards with three other women. No. 2 mines had been closed down for some time so, when one of the women noticed someone near the slope, everyone became curious and went to the window to look:

They couldn't believe what they saw, for men were coming up out of the slope, two by two, and going past the check house. They counted from ninety to a hundred men. After the last one had come up, the men went to check. The slope was still barred, and no trace of these men could be seen, not even their footprints in the snow.<sup>77</sup>

Another ghost of a miner is reported to have had tea with his mother before she knew that he was dead:

Francis Hedderson's mother was surprised one afternoon when his brother came home from the mines early. He sat down at the table, had

something to eat with his mother, chatted for a while, and then left. An hour later, she found out that he had died in<sup>78</sup> the mines before he had come to the house.

If the circumstances are right, even when a ghost is not actually seen, an individual may come to expect a sighting, as in the following case. A man who had worked on the haulage, or steam hoist, for many years, hauling out the loaded ore cars to be dumped, passed away:

One night sometime later, the watchman on duty heard the machinery start, even though he knew no one was supposed to be working there at that hour. It soon stopped, so he believed it was his imagination. But shortly after, he heard it start again and stop as before. He felt now that it was not his imagination, so he decided to investigate. As fast as he could, he ran up the flight of steps to the building, fully expecting to see his late friend with his hand working the lever, but there was no one there and everything was quiet. It was puzzling, but belief in ghosts was not unusual, so the watchman was, to say the least, sceptical.

The watchman waited for his relief to come on duty and together they examined the haulage to see if there really was a ghost or if something else had caused the machinery to start up. They discovered that a leaky valve was allowing steam to escape so that enough pressure was building up to start the machine, but not to keep it going. Men who were of a more nervous disposition might have fled the scene to disseminate the story of "the ghost of the haulage."<sup>79</sup>

In a similar case, a man believed that he had been dogged by a ghost, but was embarrassed a few days later to

find that his "ghost" had been something else:

One time, in No. 6, the horses used to be brought up at Christmas. But on the weekends they weren't brought up, but the stable boss used to have to go down and feed the horses. So he was coming up, and he didn't see a light . . . but he did hear foot tracks behind him. Now he got nervous and used to stop. And when he'd stop, the foot tracks would stop. And he went on again and eventually came to the building. And when he looked back he couldn't see anything. But on Monday morning, [he learned that] one of the horses got out of the stable and chased him up, and they had to look <sup>80</sup>for it. So that must have been his ghost.

It is easy to understand how the willingness to believe a ghost has been encountered could be so prevalent when one knows the surroundings and general atmosphere in which the miner worked. The following narrative illustrates how easy it was to find oneself alone in the mines, and some of the things a man alone had to worry about. It is told by a man who got lost in the mines shortly after he started working underground, around 1930. One day he was told he would have to go "in west" to work. This was about two miles in from where he had been working all along. He had no trouble getting in there because he simply went with a couple of other men who knew the way. As it happened, he had "an early shift" that day. In other words, he finished loading early, so he was able to go on home. He went to the dry house, or lunch room, to wait for some of the men to finish so that he could go out with them, but grew tired of waiting

and decided to try and find his own way out:

I took the carbide lamp out of my cap, put it on my finger and went on, happy as a lark because I had an early shift. I started off and I kept going, going, going, going, going. Finally I didn't hear a sound of anything. Didn't hear the sound of cars or nothing at all. And I stopped. The rats were like that, [he makes a sign to show that there were lots of them] darting around. I started to look around the place and I said, "My god, where am I?" I said, "I'm astray. Now," I said, "which direction can I go to get back on the right track again?" I said, "I'll try this way." And I went on. I didn't know where I was going, and I went into an old room that was worked out, and brought up against a solid face of iron ore. I couldn't get out. I turned around and went in another direction. All I was afraid was my lamp would go out, cause I didn't have too much carbide. I'd be in the dark, because there were no electric lights, no nothing. I went in another direction and went into another old room, went on in, in, in, in, in, and I brought up against a solid face of iron ore again, and couldn't get out. "Gentle god," I said, "where am I to?" I came out. I said, "In god's name, I'll go in this direction." I kept on going, going, going. I said, "I'm finished. They'll never find me." Now in the dark when you see a light in the distance, it will be very, very small. I kept on going and going, and by and by I thought I saw a little light, appeared to be about that size [indicates his thumb nail]. "My god," I said, "I wonder is that a light? What is it?" And I kept on going for it. And the farther I went ahead, this little light started to get bigger. I said, "Thanks be to god. I think that's a light." And I kept on going for it. And I went right back from where I started. That's what I did.

This narrative shows that when a man was alone underground, he was really alone. Another informant puts it



this way:

Everything was silence. You never know what silence is until you get underground and it's quiet, <sup>82</sup>dead silence, grave silence, fearful."

Some miners got to the point where they had to quit mining because working underground bothered them too much. One miner relates the reason a relative of his decided that mining was not the work for him:

He was down in the night-time, quiet, deadly quiet, loading away, no one there, perhaps by himself. And he heard the sand, the sea rolling above him. No. 6 only had two hundred feet above [between the roof of the mine and the ocean floor]. . . . And he was loading away and he heard the beach rocks rolling.<sup>83</sup>

With this kind of loneliness, and stories being told of ghosts of dead miners, it can be expected that there would be some practical jokers who would take advantage of this situation to set the scene for their pranks. One such prank caused another nervous man to give up mining:

This story is true and concerns [a miner who was easily agitated]. . . . On this particular occasion, a fellow workman stripped himself of his clothes and hid in an area where a workman had previously been killed, knowing that his intended victim would pass nearby on his return from the mines. When he heard the victim approaching, he began to moan and make peculiar noises, giving the impression that he was a ghost of the departed one in anguish. The unfortunate man received such a fright that he became mentally disturbed and gave up his<sup>84</sup> job, never to work underground another day.

### Some Other Taboos and Beliefs

Not all the taboos of the miners were related to death. A belief that is shared by miners elsewhere, as well as by other occupational groups such as fishermen, is that it is not a good practice to start new work on a Friday.<sup>85</sup>

The older miners didn't want to start anything on a Friday, you know, start any new workings or a certain job or anything like that on a Friday. . . . They didn't mind carrying on at their old work, but to start a new job, that was out of the question altogether.<sup>86</sup>

Similarly, not all the supernatural sightings by miners were of ghosts. Many miners believed in the existence of fairies. A man who worked at No. 4 compressor claimed that one night when he was on duty the fairies visited him. He said they were little men about three feet tall and they were all wearing red stocking caps on their heads. "He started to cuss and they went away." Also, at a certain time each year in an area near the mines, numerous people are said to have seen a fairy celebration with dancing and merry making.<sup>87</sup>

Another miner gives the following vivid account of something that happened while he was working on the surface around 1918:

Meself and me buddy were working on the buckets one day, you know. We had to wait for the ore to come up and dump it. It's getting on in the morning and he says to me at about eleven o'clock, "Tom, will you cover for me for ten minutes. I gotta go down in

the woods for a while." I said, "okay, Jim." So he goes on down in the woods. Time goes by. Half an hour, hour. Still no Jim. I says to meself, "That son of a bitch is down there sleeping." So I rounded up a couple of me buddies and we went down for him, but we couldn't find him. So we came back and told the foreman on the job and he goes and tells the big boss. I can't remember his name now. Anyway, this is something big now, you know, cause Jim was never one to run away from work. The boss comes and forms a search party of about fifty men and we still couldn't find him. Then he sent someone to get the police. It wasn't the RCMP then. It was the local fellers. My son, we searched high and low. Had people come from town and everything but, you know, we couldn't find Jim. This kept up for two or three days. Then one day when I was back to work, up walked Jim outta the woods, a beaming like an electric bulb. I says, "Where have you been?" He says, "Where have I been? I been down in the woods. That's where I been. Sorry to be so long but, Jesus, no need to be mad. I was only gone an hour. I just met the nicest little people. You go on to lunch now and I'll take over." "Take over," says I. "You son of a, where have you been this past three days? We was all worried to death over you." "What are you talking about?" says Jim. "Tis only twelve o'clock. Listen. There goes the whistle." And so it was twelve o'clock, but three days later. Jim was telling me later that he met a whole pile of little people and they had food and beer, and danced and played the accordion. Real friendly, he said. Well, it was some going on when everyone found out he was back cause we all thought he was dead, you see. After falling off the back of the Island or something. Yes sir, he was the only one that was ever treated that good by the fairies. But people always thought him a little queer after that. And you know, he swore that was the truth right up until he died.<sup>88</sup> And you know something else, I believe him.

## Notes for Chapter V

- <sup>1</sup> Jack Santino, "Characteristics of Occupational Narratives," Western Folklore 37 (1978): 204.
- <sup>2</sup> MUNFLA, Ms., 71-109/p. 47.
- <sup>3</sup> Jessie Hussey, unrecorded interview, Aug. 9, 1985.  
 "Primer" was the equivalent of kindergarten in the pre-Confederation school curriculum.
- <sup>4</sup> MUNFLA, Ms., 79-87/p. 4.
- <sup>5</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8408.
- <sup>6</sup> Richard S. Tallman, "A Generic Approach to the Practical Joke," Southern Folklore Quarterly 38 (1974): 260.
- <sup>7</sup> Jan Harold Brunvand, The Study of American Folklore (New York: Norton, 1978) 291. Also see Douglass, Pit Talk 74; Fish, Folklore of the Coal Miners 117-18, and app. E, 57-58; Hand, "California Miners' Folklore: Below Ground" 143; Hand, "The Folklore, Customs, and Traditions of the Butte Miner" 164-65; Hand, "Folklore From Utah's Silver Mining Camps" 157-58; and Smith 15.
- <sup>8</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8417.
- <sup>9</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8417.
- <sup>10</sup> MUNFLA, Survey Card, 70-20/98.
- <sup>11</sup> See the special issue of Southern Folklore Quarterly 38 (1974): 251-331, which is devoted to prank playing as a folklore genre. Also see Douglass, Pit Talk 7-8.

12 See Dorson, Millrats 90 for a definition of occupational vandalism.

13 Neary, "Wabana You're a Corker" 58n1 explains that Lockey McLean was "boss man" with the Scotia Company during the early years.

14 MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8411.

15 MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8410.

16 MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8407.

17 Dorson, Millrats 92 says, "A subtheme of horseplay revolves around the lunch boxes or buckets. Young millrats bent on mischief find them inviting targets - visible, often untended, and highly prized by their owners." Also see Davies 104.

18 MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8407.

19 MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8407.

20 MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8407.

21 MUNFLA, Ms., 71-109/p. 46. Cf. Douglass, Pit Life 1-2 in which he tells how miners refused to be supervised, and 6 in which he relates the following:

I remember a new manager coming to the pit, and he came down to inspect a team of caunchmen working. Gradually they all stopped work and looked at him; he looked at them not knowing quite what was the matter. Then one of them said: "Ey gaffer, does thee play chess?" "Well, yes I do," said the gaffer, "Well thee gaan away an play chess and we'll get on with woork."

<sup>22</sup> MUNFLA, Ms., 72-97/p. 3; MUNFLA, Tapes, 86-081/C8401, C8416. Also see Hand, "California Miners' Folklore: Below Ground" 151; Hand, "The Folklore, Customs, and Traditions of the Butte Miner" 176; and Jenkin 290 in which it is reported that the favourite sport of the Cornish miners was wrestling.

<sup>23</sup> It is commonly believed on Bell Island, as in Newfoundland generally as well as many other parts of the world, that a seventh son could charm toothaches and put away warts, among other things. Cf. Wayland D. Hand, ed., Popular Beliefs and Superstitions from North Carolina, vol. 6 of The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore [hereinafter cited as the Hand/Brown Collection], gen. ed. Newman Ivey White, 7 vols. (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1961) no. 2421; Hyatt no. 4021; Korson, Minstrels 148; and Ohio Collection 1: nos. 6934-6936, and 2: no. 12573.

<sup>24</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8407.

<sup>25</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8411.

<sup>26</sup> MUNFLA, Tapes, 86-081/C8405, C8407, C8410.

<sup>27</sup> See Eric Luffman's description of some other mines in Ch. 5 below. For a list of mining fatalities see John W. Hammond, The Beautiful Isles ([St. John's]: By the author, 1979) 26-27.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Davies 80; Jenkin 263; and Hand, "California Miners' Folklore: Below Ground 140. For narratives concerning mine accidents and disasters, see Brestensky 24-27; and Musick, West Virginia Folklore 8: 54-68, 10: 18-36, and 11: 47-50.

<sup>29</sup> Santino 205 says, "It seems that the dangerous physical conditions that gave rise to tales of daring physical feats have been superceded by uncomfortable social conditions that give rise to tales of tricks and practical jokes, which are, in their own way, socially daring." A. E. Green, "Only Kidding," Language, Culture and Tradition, eds. A. E. Green and J. D. A. Widdowson, CECTAL Conference Papers Series 2 (Sheffield: Centre for English Culture Tradition and Language, U of Sheffield, 1978) 51 says, " . . . humour assuages anxiety, provides a licensed release of aggression, and offers individual self-aggrandizement." Also see Fish, Folklore of the Coal Miners 66; and Davies 104-05.

<sup>30</sup> MUNFLA, Tapes, 86-081/C8405, C8409.

<sup>31</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8412.

<sup>32</sup> MUNFLA, Ms., 78-175/p. 26.

<sup>33</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8410.

<sup>34</sup> MUNFLA, Ms., 78-175/pp. 24-25.

<sup>35</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8405.

<sup>36</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8416.

<sup>37</sup> MUNFLA, Ms., 75-230/p. 13.

<sup>38</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 086-081/C8416. Patrick Kelly was the last man killed in the mines. He died on Oct. 22, 1965.

<sup>39</sup> MUNFLA, Ms., 79-87/p. 7. Also see Brestensky 24.

<sup>40</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8400. Hayward George was killed in November 1942. For narratives of mining accidents caused by carelessness, see Musick, West Virginia Folklore 10 (1960): 20-21, and 11 (1961): 47-48.

<sup>41</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8406.

<sup>42</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 80-15/C5547.

<sup>43</sup> MUNFLA, Ms., 73-171/p. 19.

<sup>44</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8399.

<sup>45</sup> Samuel Cobb was killed by a dynamite blast on Feb. 28, 1928.

<sup>46</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8399.

<sup>47</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8416. Walter Rees was killed June 5, 1964, by a cave-in. For beliefs concerning a miner's working his last shift, see Tristram Potter Coffin and Hennig Cohen, eds., Folklore from the Working Folk of America (Garden City, NY: Anchor P/Doubleday, 1973) 251-52; Hand, "California Miners' Folklore: Below Ground" 138; Hand, "Folklore from Utah's Silver Mining Camps" 155-56, and Hand, "The Folklore, Customs, and Traditions of the Butte Miner" 16.



<sup>48</sup> MUNFLA, Tapes, 86-081/C8399, C8403. For beliefs concerning hunches and premonitions, see Bancroft 323-25; Helen Creighton, ed., Bluenose Magic (Toronto: Ryerson P, 1968) 129; Davies 94; Douglass, Pit Talk 64 in which he defines "pit sense"; Fish, "European Background" 158-59; Fish, Folklore of the Coal Miners 119, 121, and app. F, 63-64; Hand, "California Miners' Folklore: Below Ground" 139-40; Hand, "Folklore, Customs, and Traditions of the Butte Miner" 13-14; and W. G. Wilson, "Miners' Superstitions," Life and Letters To-day 32 (1942): 88.

<sup>49</sup> See Fish, Folklore of the Coal Miners 118, and app. E, 59-60; Hand, "California Miners' Folklore: Below Ground" 149; Hand, "Folklore, Customs, and Traditions of the Butte Miner" 15; Hand, "Folklore from Utah's Silver Mining Camps" 152; Hyatt no. 13348; Korson, Coal Dust 233; Ringwood 424; Rorie 389; Roland H. Sherwood, Legends, Oddities, and Facts from the Maritime Provinces (Hantsport, NS: Lancelot P, 1984) 69; and Smith 9.

<sup>50</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8400.

<sup>51</sup> Also see MUNFLA, Ms., 75-230/p. 13.

<sup>52</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 84-119/C7621.

<sup>53</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8416. Leander Gosse was killed Mar. 4, 1965, in a cave-in. In other mines a death sometimes went unannounced to prevent a shutdown. See Korson, Minstrels 142.

<sup>54</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8410.

<sup>55</sup> Everett Rees, unrecorded interview, Apr. 7, 1985.

<sup>56</sup> Hunt 349.

<sup>57</sup> Hand, "Folklore From Utah's Silver Mining Camps,"  
153.

<sup>58</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8416. A belief reported by  
Davies 89 that miners considered the place of death to be  
unlucky may be related to this practice. Also see Fish,  
"European Background" 167; Hand, "The Folklore, Customs, and  
Traditions of the Butte Miner" 24-25; and Korson, Minstrels  
147.

<sup>59</sup> MUNFLA, Survey Card, 70-20/93.

<sup>60</sup> MUNFLA, Survey Card, 70-20/57; MUNFLA, Ms.,  
71-109/p. 38; MUNFLA, Ms., 72-97/p. 13; MUNFLA, Ms.,  
73-171/p. 24; MUNFLA, Ms., 74-74/p. 6; MUNFLA, Ms.,  
75-230/p. 12; MUNFLA, Ms., 79-88/p. 7; MUNFLA, Tape,  
86-081/C8410; Rees, unrecorded interview, Apr. 7, 1985.  
Also see Bancroft 331; Brestensky 67; Davies 88; Coffin  
247-48; Creighton, Bluenose Magic 129; Dorson, Bloodstoppers  
211; Fish, Folklore of the Coal Miners 123, and app. F, 72;  
Hand, "California Miners' Folklore: Below Ground" 134; Hand,  
"The Folklore, Customs, and Traditions of the Butte Miner"  
19; Hand, "Folklore from Utah's Silver Mining Camps" 146;  
Hand/Brown Collection nos. 3481-82; Horvath 287; Korson,  
Coal Dust 201-03; Korson, Minstrels 146; Musick, West  
Virginia Folklore 11: 44, 59-60; Ohio Collection 2: nos.  
19039-43; and Vene 5.

61 MUNFLA, Tape, 72-95/C1278.

62 MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8409.

63 MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8416. Martin Sheppard was killed by a fall of ground on July 15, 1937.

64 MUNFLA, Ms., 72-97/p. 13; MUNFLA, Ms., 74-74/p. 6; MUNFLA, Ms., 75-230/pp. 12-13. Cape Breton Post, Oct. 17, 1942: 1. Whether or not an individual can actually bring bad luck to those with whom he comes in contact is something that has not been proven scientifically. Jonah's is probably the first recorded case of a man being labelled a jinx. He was thrown overboard when his fellow sailors concluded that it was his presence on the ship which was causing God to send the stormy seas that threatened all of their lives. Hand, "California Miners' Folklore: Below Ground" 142 talks of men as jinks in mining, but it is in relation to causing the ore to "pinch out" rather than causing accidents.

65 See Davies 84; and Fish, Folklore of the Coal Miners, app. F, 75.

66 MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8416.

67 MUNFLA, Ms., 72-97/p. 13; MUNFLA, Ms., 74-74/p. 6.

68 MUNFLA, Tape, 72-97/C1284.

69 See Davies 87; Fish, Folklore of the Coal Miners, app. F, 73-74; and Rorie 389.

<sup>70</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8416. Cf. Hyatt nos. 13008-10, which support the belief that if a person mistakenly has something in his hand when leaving home, he should never carry the article back into the house, but lay it on the ground to avoid bad luck.

<sup>71</sup> For beliefs about horseshoes, see Bancroft 340; Dorson, Bloodstoppers 116; Fish, "European Background" 161-62; Fish, Folklore of the Coal Miners 122, and app. F, 76, in which she says it was not the horseshoe itself, but the cold iron which was the lucky thing; Hand, "California Miners' Folklore: Below Ground" 142-43; Hand, "The Folklore, Customs, and Traditions of the Butte Miner" 22-23; Hand/Brown Collection nos. 7128-35; Hyatt nos. 8761-63, and 12968-92; and Jenkin 297.

<sup>72</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8410.

<sup>73</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8400.

<sup>74</sup> MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8400. Bancroft 336 reports the belief that an article of apparel from a dead miner was prized for its protective value.

<sup>75</sup> MUNFLA, Tapes, 86-081/C8410, C8416. 18,A,380. For stories of ghosts in mines, see Bancroft 326-29; and Musick, West Virginia Folklore 7: 2-3, and 10: 28-29.

76 MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8409. It was a common practice in other mines not to tell a new man that he had been hired to replace a man who had been killed in the spot where he was going to work. For examples of this and the belief that a ghost would return to haunt the place of the fatal accident, see Fish, "European Background" 166; Fish, Folklore of the Coal Miners 125, and app. F, 85; Hand, "Folklore from Utah's Silver Mining Camps" 145; Hunt 353; Korson, Minstrels 141; Ringwood 424; and Smith 9.

77 MUNFLA, Ms., 72-95/pp. 48-49.

78 MUNFLA, Ms., 71-75/pp. 26-27.

79 MUNFLA, Ms., 73-171/pp. 13-14.

80 MUNFLA, Tape, 72-97/C1284. For examples of "ghosts" that turned out to be something else, see Bancroft 328-29; Brestensky 16; and Vane 40.

81 MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8408.

82 MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8412.

83 MUNFLA, Tape, 86-081/C8412.

84 MUNFLA, Ms., 73-171/p. 19.

85 See Brestensky 67; Creighton, Bluenose Magic 129; Davies 82; Fish, Folklore of the Coal Miners 115; Hand, "California Miners' Folklore: Below Ground" 137; Hand, "Folklore from Utah's Silver Mining Camps" 154; Hand/Brown Collection no. 3455; Hyatt nos. 13306-09; Korson, Minstrels 146; Ohio Collection 2: nos. 18977-78; and Rorie 389.

86 MUNFLA, Tape, 72-95/C1278.

87 MUNFLA, Ms., 71-75/pp. 21-23.

88 MUNFLA, Ms., 81-055/pp. 3-6.

## VI CONCLUSION

The Final Years of the Wabana Mines

The men interviewed for this study all felt that the mining life on Bell Island had been a good life for the most part. They all said that if they were younger and had the opportunity to do it all again, they would. Some said they would go back tomorrow, but others said that they had "lost their nerve" for such work. The physical working conditions were better than in a lot of other mines, as Eric Luffman found out in 1954 when the company sent him on a tour of mining operations in the United States to see what kinds of equipment were being used elsewhere:

I went down in five or six mines belong to Tennessee Coal and Iron. They were just outside of Birmingham, Alabama. I went down in four or five mines in Missouri. And there wasn't one mine that I went into that was fit for a human being to work in. It took me three days to get the dust out of my eyes after I got out of Ozark Ore.

In one mine there was so much water "you wore a pair of, not tie rubbers, up to here [indicates breast height]." In another mine, if the power went off the men had to run for their lives because of the carbon monoxide that would quickly accumulate in the mine. Eric told the mining superintendent there that he would not work in a mine like that. That same superintendent later came to Bell Island to purchase some equipment that was for sale there. When Eric

showed him around No. 3, his guest remarked, "Luffman, this is a different place altogether. How in the hell do you do it?" Eric elaborates:

You could go down in No. 3 with your slippers on. You wouldn't get your feet wet. I seen men never lose a shift for years, they liked to work that well down in No. 3 mines. It was a picnic as far as we were concerned. We had one superintendent, that was his policy: treat the man like he was your own son and you can't go wrong. You cannot go wrong. Sometimes it's a bit tempting but, in the meantime, it works out. Well that's what made No. 3 so good. The old man, Grey, was very, very, very cautious. Very cautious. He worked a lot of time in the coal mines and he learned an awful lot of tricks. And then, he was the kind of feller who had a tremendous respect for his fellow man.

As this narrative indicates, there was a better rapport between the workers and management on Bell Island than, for example, Narváez found in the lead-zinc mines at Buchans. Things began to go bad on Bell Island in the late 1950s. Markets began to go elsewhere, such as Labrador, when it was found that ore there could be produced less expensively and with fewer impurities. Management on Bell Island changed and new people were brought in from mainland Canada and England in an attempt to find ways of cutting costs to make the operation more competitive:

All of a sudden the bottom dropped out of the bag, new management, didn't know what they were talking about. Mining is just as safe as walking the road, but you must follow the rules, not the rules of government, the laws of nature. Mother Nature will allow you to take just what you want if you don't stretch it too far. If you do, something will break.



The informants had many complaints about these late years of the Bell Island mining operation and the new people who suddenly appeared on the scene. Outsiders had always been imported for professional jobs in the mines and, even though there was always a certain amount of enmity for these people, those who came during the final years seemed to attain greater heights of resentment than ever before. The reason for this becomes clear when one understands why these men were brought in. Whereas earlier experts were hired for traditional jobs such as mining engineers and mining supervisors, these new people were hired to improve the mining operation. Their jobs involved trimming unnecessary spending, finding ways to cut inefficient practices, and recommending other cost saving procedures. In the process, it seems, the human factor was overlooked:

The last couple of years we worked we had a lot of accidents, first time in our lives. I was section foreman for a great many years, a lot of years, I don't know how many . . . perhaps fifteen years. I never had a fatal accident on my section. I had one feller lost his leg, and that was just pure stupidity. The last three years No. 3 worked, the last year, 1965, we had three fatal accidents, and we had thirteen more men broke up. And the whole lot was due to [too much ore being taken from the support pillars]. They sent a maniac in and he started taking a piece out of here, and a piece out of here, and a piece out of here, and here, all the way back. It was easy to get. But you see, finally it began to take pressure. . . . We had sixteen hundred feet above us, not counting the weight of the ocean, and that pillar was the only thing you

had to protect you. . . . So we had a feller one time, lets say this is a pillar here and he was mining here, taking 'ff too much. A piece, this was square, what we call a corner, and we had a feller on a Joy loader taking this out of here now, and this corner began to bust, and finally this popped off out here and a young feller got killed underneath the Joy loader. It popped off with weight. You couldn't judge it at all because the weight was so great. . . . [There were areas that were all mined out by the room and pillar method, but this boss] went back over it and she began to get weak. The man who could have stopped him didn't have guts enough to stop him, and the man who planned this was dead.

These new people were there for the short term and did not have a vested interest in the Island or its people. Indeed, any sentimental attachment to the miners was undesirable, as the results of their work often meant the closing down of unprofitable sections of the mines and a subsequent loss of jobs. Their presence led to the antagonism and alienation of the miners. The existence of a "dual sense of victimization and accusation" generated the above narrative as well as the following, which are of the kind that Narváez refers to as "protest lore."<sup>1</sup>

I have no ill will against anybody. But I've met so many people think they know so much, [they must think] either I am bloody stupid or they don't know what's wrong with me, why I can't think like them. In the dying years of Bell Island they came in, now we had lots of men come from the mainland, come from the coal mines, excellent miners and good men to work with, but they brought them in on the last from hell's creeks, from all over. They came in with chips on their shoulders, you could see them, with the very worst possible

thoughts in their minds of Newfoundlanders. You could tell them nothing, and on the last of it nobody would tell them nothing. The men, on the last, just done what they were told and nothing more than what they were told. You can't run that kind of a job. They came here from hard rock mines where you've got to chase gold and silver all over the place like a snake. This stuff [iron ore] is almost like a mat laid down and covered over. . . . But hard rock mines, you may have a piece of gold here today and you mightn't see another piece for five months, but you chase the little veins . . . and put in your test rods. We didn't want none of that, but on the last of it we had everything. They just thought they were into a gold mine, some of those fellers, but it's not gold. The mining is completely different from hard rock mining. I had a feller who come to work with me one time told me he never used a facebar in his life. He worked in hard rock all his lifetime. They wanted to condemn the facebar as soon as they were here. And in some cases they cut out the four-foot bar that was used along the stand. But they were hard-rock miners. They probably were all right around gold and silver, chasing stuff all over the place. . . And, of course, they could not admit to the like of me that they were wrong. That would be an insult to the Canadian dignity, to admit that a Newfoundlander knew more than they did. No way in the world could you ever get them to admit that. I remember one time I had a feller working with me, as a matter of fact I worked under him for years, a good feller, Fred Newton. Fred used to send down a few pieces of timber in the night-time along with the supplies and spread it along where we were going to use it the next night, see, because if he didn't, the timbermen would have to go down and wait for the shift to go down in the mornings and then come back and go to the deck and get their timber, and half the night was gone. There was no danger in the world because it was thrown down by the side of the track and it was no danger at all. So this day this feller was walking down and he come up and said, "I wants that

timber shifted." So poor old Fred tried to explain to him. But he said, "That's all I've heard since I come here is can't. Shift it." Newton took it to heart and went home and never come back for a month. The first son of a bitch that ever bawled at Fred Newton in his life. Nobody ever wanted to bawl at Fred Newton. Fred Newton was forty times a better man than the man that was talking to him. So anyway, this same feller came along to me after and he said, "I'm going to send my son down on C shift with the timber crew." I said, "All right." So he come back up to me the next day and he said, "Do you know that your timber crew don't get to work until three or four o'clock in the morning waiting for timber?" "You're the man who caused that," I said. "Do you remember you yelled at Fred Newton?" . . . This is the type of man we had to deal with on the last of it, you see. And the men hated him, hated him. And that was unusual for the men. I'll tell you the truth. I went to work on a drill and the mine captain gave me an eighteen inch Stelson wrench. During the fourteen years I worked on the drill, I guess he replaced the jaw and the nut and the frame perhaps twice or three times. But I had that wrench when I finished with the drill and passed it over to the other man. When we closed down you couldn't keep anything in the mines, absolutely nothing. It was stolen as fast as we took it down. The whole thing changed overnight. Thievery that we never knew anything of. A timberman could stick an axe in a piece of wood and come back two weeks later, it would be still there. And on the last it cost us forty thousand dollars a year for tool alone. The men didn't like their jobs, didn't like the people they were working for. That's what caused all the accidents. Foremen not allowed to be doing what they should be doing. Working on a note and what was on that note, that's what they done and nothing else. And that note was made out for every foreman every day up in the office, pass it over to them. No use in telling the men to do anything else or this feller would fire you just like that.

It is easy to understand why, in recalling the final years, the informants find these "outsiders" to be a convenient, tangible outlet for venting their anger at the close-down which, in reality, was brought on by economic circumstances beyond anyone's control.

It was mentioned in an earlier chapter that after DOSCO pulled out, Smallwood had a contract "on his desk" which would have seen a German firm take over the mining operation on Bell Island. This deal fell through because of economic ties between Germany and France:

The French were dealing with the Germans and, if this German firm had taken ore from here, [the French] intended to call off the business they were doing with them. So they called it off [the Bell Island take over].<sup>2</sup>

#### Wabana Without DOSCO

From 1895 until the first major lay-off in 1959, Bell Island was a growth area and a center of industry in Conception Bay. Many people found work there and moved their families in, while others commuted to the Island on a weekly basis. The Island's population, 95% of which depended directly on the mining operation for their livelihood, peaked at 12,281 in 1961. With lay-offs becoming a common occurrence, and rumours of the operation closing down for good in a few years time, people began to leave for Ontario, where jobs were said to be plentiful both

in mining and in the factories. One of the places that many Bell Islanders had gravitated towards in the 1950s was Galt, now called Cambridge. During the early '60s many more went there to work in the factories and to be close to relatives and friends, swelling the population to such an extent that the town was nicknamed "Little Bell Isle." Many of these former Bell Islanders return "home" regularly during vacation time, with hopes of reliving old memories of their earlier lives on "the Rock." Connections between Bell Island and its former residents who now live in Galt/Cambridge are so close that it is said that when something happens locally, half the population of Galt knows about it before it is common knowledge on the Island.

In spite of the fact that the only industry closed down in 1966, and large numbers of people moved away to find other work, the population soon stabilized at about 6,000. The main reason Bell Island did not become a ghost town is probably due to its proximity to the province's capital city. A ferry run of fifteen minutes, followed by a short car ride of twenty minutes, brings die-hard Bell Islanders to day jobs in St. John's. Thus, a town that was once a place that workers commuted to is now a dormitory town for people who commute to jobs elsewhere. In St. John's, many older miners who felt that they could not pull up stakes and resettle on the Canadian mainland, as many of their friends

were doing, found work at Government-run institutions as watchmen and security guards. Some of the younger miners found work in trades that were related to the kinds of jobs that they had held in the mines, driving heavy equipment, mechanical, electrical and construction work, for example. Office staff had little difficulty moving to similar office jobs off the Island.

Another factor that contributed to the stabilization of the Island's population was the relative ease with which it was now possible to obtain social assistance. Whereas, in former times it would have been deemed socially unacceptable to be "on welfare," after the mines closed down living "off the Government" became a way of life for a large percentage of the population. These people were, in a real sense, cheated out of their livelihoods by factors which were beyond their control. In their and their fathers' pre-mining days they had been, for the most part, fishermen-loggers who were masters of their own fate to a certain extent. When the fishing was poor they worked in the lumberwoods. They found employment as sealers and construction workers and kept gardens to supplement their incomes. Mining on Bell Island had been so steady for so long that they had gotten away from this manner of moving from one job to another. They had become spoiled to the extent that, when the mining was taken away from them, they

were unable to adjust psychologically to doing anything else.

Ironically, while Bell Islanders were leaving the Island, other Newfoundlanders were being resettled there. With so many people moving away, there was a surplus of housing. Government officials seized on this opportunity to move welfare recipients from other parts of Newfoundland to Bell Island and into these homes, thus easing the burden on other communities where low-rental housing was in short supply. In this way, non-Bell Islanders also helped to keep the population from slipping.

Essential services such as a hospital, schools, shops, a town council, churches and service clubs are "going strong" today. In the first years after the mines closed, the people who stayed behind had little money and less confidence to keep their properties in repair, for they knew that if things did not work out for them they would have scant hope of recouping any money spent on upkeep. The sad state of property in general, and the barred up houses and shops, all combined to give the town a dilapidated appearance. Today things are looking much better. The people who stayed on the Island are realizing that the world did not come to an end when DOSCO moved out. Those people who have steady work have come to trust their future as residents of Bell Island and are spending their earnings on



home improvements. Government housing programs are providing new, good quality homes to those who do not have the means to provide their own, and are giving assistance to those who live in their original homes, to help them upgrade. Thus, while many isolated mining towns go bust and disappear from the map, Wabana lives on as a suburb of St. John's.

#### Suggestions For Further Study

This study has been an attempt to fill a void in Canadian folklore studies, an attempt to document the occupational folklife of a mining community. It has also taken a step towards recording some of the oral folk history that relates to that mining community. What has been collected here, in summary, are the following items of occupational folklife:

- brief life stories of seven former miners
- personal recollections concerning Nish Jackman and the Wabana Mine Workers' Union
- the common denominators of occupational folklife on Bell Island: wages, hours of work, foodways, clothing and personal equipment
- the use of horses and the presence of rats in the mines

- work experience
- personal experience narratives concerning the first day on the job, initiation pranks, practical jokes, accidents and death, premonitions, customs, beliefs, taboos, and supernatural beings.

This study makes no claims to being a complete and finished work. There is much about the occupational folklife of the miners of Wabana which remains to be written. Personal histories of a handful of miners have been given here. There are thousands of other former Wabana miners with equally interesting and varying life stories to tell.

For the most part, this study has stayed underground or, more accurately, beneath the ocean floor, in the "pit," surfacing only to mention aspects of home and community life which relate directly to the miners' work life. I did not speak of miners' housing, other than a brief note about "mess shacks" for non-resident miners. Richard MacKinnon's article, "Company Housing in Wabana, Bell Island, Newfoundland," is a start on the subject but, since he deals with the structures that the company erected without relating them to the people who occupied them, there is more material to be documented.<sup>3</sup> The various aspects of the non-residents' living arrangements, from renting backyard

sheds through boarding with resident families, deserve further study.

In fact, the whole subject of non-resident miners is another area to be explored. Some of the topics to examine, along with living arrangements, would be commuting, foodways, leisure-time activities, preparations that were made for weekends at home, both by the miners themselves and by their families, how they were treated on returning home, attitudes towards them, and their attitudes towards Bell Island and their own home communities. I have given some samples of the wit and humour of the Island Cove men here, but there is so much more of interest that remains to be said about them.

Sports and other leisure-time activities of the miners, such as folksinging, partying and involvement in church and service clubs, went beyond the purview of this study, but deserve examination.<sup>4</sup>

A great deal remains to be written of the folklore of the people of Bell Island in general. Each neighbourhood on the Island had, and no doubt still has, its own identity and character, not to mention "characters" in the persons of specific people who captured the imaginations of other residents to the extent that legends grew up around them.

Apart from real people characters, there was a whole series of "night characters" in vogue at least during the

1940s and '50s:

In the fall of the year when it would be dark, no lights nowhere, dark as pitch, every fall there'd be somebody come up, a Woman in White, or the Claw.

The most commonly remembered of these characters was the "Woman in White," usually said to have been a man dressed in a white sheet and often carrying a gun. One explanation for his appearance on the scene was that he was a jealous husband, stalking his wife and her lover.<sup>6</sup> Many people simply did not know why he appeared, only that he would be "on the go" on dark nights to scare lonely pedestrians. He was sufficiently well-known to become entrenched in the people's imaginations to the point that he was used, along with the boogy man, as a scare tactic to get children in from their play before dark. Growing up on Bell Island in the 1950s, I was aware only of the Woman in White, and was surprised to learn from several informants that he was not the only such character to stalk the Island at night.<sup>7</sup> Such creatures as the "Claw," "Rifleman," "Batman," the "Whip," the "Lash," and the "Shadow" also appeared from time to time and gave rise to much speculation and fear. It can be seen from a few of the names that some of these characters were inspired by television and comic books, and no doubt movies played their part as well. It would be interesting to learn if any of these "characters" still exist on Bell Island, or if the legends have died completely in the last twenty years

since the close-down of the Wabana mines.

I have given here just a few suggestions for further study.

It is my sincere hope that other students of folklore will do as Widdowson suggests and continue "planting trees for posterity."<sup>8</sup>

## Notes for Chapter VI

<sup>1</sup> Narvaez 18 says, "A group's entire corpus of esoteric-exoteric, multiform expressions of persecution-antagonism are its protest lore."

<sup>2</sup> MUNFLA, Tapes, 86-081/C8399, C8400, C8403, C8405, C8411.

<sup>3</sup> Richard MacKinnon, "Company Housing in Wabana, Bell Island, Newfoundland," Material History Bulletin 14 (1982): 67-72.

<sup>4</sup> For a look at two Wabana mining songs, see Neary, "Wabana You're a Corker" 54-61.

<sup>5</sup> MUNFLA, Tapes, 86-081/8402, C8417.

<sup>6</sup> The "woman in white," "white ladies," and the "woman in black" have been reported in other mining communities, some of them bearing striking similarities to Wabana's Woman in White. Cf. Bancroft 328; Fish, "European Background" 165-66; Hand, "Folklore from Utah's Silver Mining Camps" 148-49; Korson, Coal Dust 202-03; and Hyatt nos. 15736-38 which list beliefs concerning the Woman in White as the angel of death.

<sup>7</sup> J. D. A. Widdowson, If You Don't Be Good, Social and Economic Studies 21 (St. John's: Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1977) 238-39 says, "such figures are often called 'dressups,' and in a sense they preserve the mumming tradition and its attendant threat patterns throughout the year." His research has also found that in Newfoundland the Woman in White is unique to Bell Island.

<sup>8</sup> Widdowson, "Oral History" 56.

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