

[Page 47 - A Social Worker Visits Cape Breton, 1925](#)

ISSUE : [Issue 38](#)

Published by Ronald Caplan on 1985/1/1

A Social Worker Visits Cape Breton, 1925 CONTINUED FROM PAGE 25 flows into the front street or back yard ditch. When the rain comes, and it comes often near the sea, the ditch overflows, and the yellow-and-brown- mud road becomes impassably swollen, the empty lots around the mines, churches and school, where the children play, become miniature lakes. It is well-nigh summer before the rainfalls dry up. For these accommodations the miner pays from \$7.00 to \$10.00 per month, with extra for water, coal and electricity, to the company. There are two hospitals in Glace Bay with room only for one hundred and fifty patients. This accommodation for a community of fourteen thousand! And the splendid doctors, and the over-taxed nurses, with their sadly limited equipment, struggle bravely with the multitudes of pit accidents, with the births and illnesses galore. There is no public health work of any organized nature done. Each hospital has a visiting nurse, who is sadly snowed under. As a result the condition of the children's teeth, eyes, throats and bodily growth, is shocking. The neglect of the general health of the men, women and babes goes without saying, and baby mortality is exceedingly high. A recent report on Tuberculosis in Canada shows that Nova Scotia ranks second highest in the extent of this scourge among its people. There are four public schools; from fifty to sixty children are allotted to each teacher. Two of the schools have no central heating system. There are no school yards, and the children play in the empty lots around the mines, churches and stores. Of late some playthings, like swings, etc., have been brought in by some volunteers, and a small playground organized. There are a goodly number of fine churches, representing the Catholic and Protestant denominations. Connected with these are social and recreation halls, built and run by parish funds. Glace Bay has many merchants, who, in the course of years, have managed to reap fine harvests, to judge from their homes and living standards. The Dominion Coal Company, or now B.E.S. Co., has stationed in each mine section their general store, where the miners' families deal--but at prevailing Glace Bay prices, which are not free-town prices. At these stores, as at all local stores, credit is allowed. But this is no ordinary unprotected credit! This debt is collected weekly and inexorably from the envelope before it reaches the miner's pocket. Here noteworthy mention must be made of the British-Canadian Co-operative Society, which operates a fine well-stocked store there, but to which only too few miners belong. The obvious reason is that few miners can scrape together sufficient money to buy a practical number of shares, and most of the time they are too deeply in debt at the company stores. The above is a skeleton outline of the physical surroundings, the community organization and the material and cultural environment of the workers, the prime actors in the creation of Cape Breton's coal wealth. And yet, if the workers would have steady work, every week, every year, the huge mass of them would go on managing to buy cheap, undernourishing food, cheap shoddy clothing, and making the best of their sullen-looking houses. They have never



known and remain innocent of the pleasures which holidays, outing trips, good theatre, good music, libraries, and healthy social life can give. But the opportunity even to earn their crude camp existence is denied them. For, in the face of increased production and wealth, earnings for sheer life are denied them; or else work for a few days a week or month is dangled in front of them with a wage cut! There are many theories extant on the "Law of Wages." Whatever theories may tell us, the facts are that somehow in the economic tangle, wages are paid just about or far below the costs of life-upkeep, the most obvious reason is that r> ,rw T%