

[Page 47 - The Steel Boom Comes to Sydney, 1899](#)

ISSUE : [Issue 39](#)

Published by Ronald Caplan on 1985/6/1

capacity. The weaker, financially or otherwise, had to go in submission to the law of survival of the fittest--a law equally operative in business as in the struggle for animal existence. This is the weeding out process.... The general situation must not be regarded as positively bad.... Nothing better could have been expected... the 'boom' in Sydney has not ended.... When the steel works ultimately come to realize their plans with regard to output, there will be larger, steadier and safer business done in that town... nothing discouraging about the prevailing conditions.... A little more weeding out,... But when that is done Sydney will settle down to enjoy a future of undoubted prosperity." Both the lack and high cost of adequate housing in Sydney pointed to crowded, unsanitary conditions. By mid-1900: "Sickness of one kind or another is very prevalent at present in Sydney.... People should be on their guard, especially against typhoid fever." And again: "There is reason to believe that unless radical steps are soon taken, Sydney will have on its hands some very serious problems." The newspapers wanted laws enforced and a careful system of scavenging (garbage pickup) implemented. But the problems were still there in mid-1901: "It is the duty of any town to see that individuals are not allowed to put up shacks where human beings will have to live day after day paying enormous rent, and at the same time leaving their lives foreshortened...." Dr. Johnson reported to the Board of Health that he expected typhoid at least as bad as the previous year: "In the pier and coke oven districts the boarding houses were overcrowded, beds were being constantly slept in, and night workmen turning in as soon as the day workers got up. Typhoid patients must surely die if left in crowded boarding houses." The Daily Record pointed out that "if the story" went abroad that men did not get proper attention for typhoid, "Sydney would become a very undesirable place for the best class of artisans." Mr. Bryan, representing the steel company, came to the meeting to let the town know that if they did nothing regarding the foreseen epidemic, the company hospital would not accept its cases, as it had the previous year. The company was about to open a new hospital, chiefly for its own employees. The town accepted two shacks from the company as a place to care for typhoid. They still had to find a way of dealing with contagious diseases like smallpox and diphtheria. Dr. MacIntyre commented on the inadequate means the town had of cleaning out back yards and privies, and recommended the town hire a man and a number of horses and carts for this work of scavenging. Put simply, garbage was thrown into the streets, the pipes from most houses ran into the streets, and much of the available drinking water was contaminated. Sufficient water, if not its purity, was a concern from the very beginning, being an element in the town's encouragement to the steel plant. The company built its own dam to assure a supply. Speaking of the town's water, a report to Town Council in 1900 said, "When these pipes were laid they were no doubt adequate, but with the increasing population and consequently increased draft of water, they must very soon prove too small, if not already, if an effective fire service is to be maintained." This was October 20, 1900. The town continued to grow beyond the



capacity of the town fathers to meet its needs. It was difficult for them to find labour, competing as they were with work at the steel plant. They advertised for months for 100 labourers to dig needed sewer lines. When a contingent of 30 Russian Jews applied for the trenching job they were turned down as "undesirable, and as far as possible... Cape Breton labour should be engaged." The next summer was dry, but the city engineer said, "There is not the slightest danger of a water famine.... Under our arrangements with the steel company we can have our reservoirs refilled whenever it falls below a certain level." By October 10, 1901: "Sydney has been supplied altogether by the steel company.... Under the contract, we pay 30¢ per 1000 gallons." They were trying to both repair the town's dam and clear its reservoir, "but the town is embarrassed for want of men and horses. We have advertised for men and horses and cannot get a third of what is wanted to hurry the work to completion."

CONTINUED ON PAGE 49 Mike [Tape MacDougall's for Fr. Hector Cassette Tape Offer "Mike MacDougall's Tape for Fr. Hector" is an hour-long good quality cassette, produced by Ingonish fiddler Mike MacDougall and his long-time guitar accompanist Tim Donovan. It is available only by mail from CAPE BRETON'S MAGAZINE. You may also wish to order Issue 38, which includes comments on each of the tunes on the tape, and transcriptions based on 9 of these tunes. Issue 38 costs \$1.75. CASSETTE TAPE \$5.50 plus handling (50¢ in Canada, \$1.00 foreign) Subscribe 4 ISSUES IN CANADA \$8.00 4 ISSUES (FOREIGN) \$9.00 Send cheque or money order to Cape Breton's MAGAZINE, P.O. Box 100, Sydney, N.S. B0J 1H0 Edited & Published by Ronald Caplan JUNE 1985 CAPE BRETON'S MAGAZINE received a Parks Canada Award of Merit for its "contribution to heritage preservation and awareness." April 25, 1985