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## Nicknaming Patterns and Traditions among Cape Breton Coal Miners

SINCE THE BEGINNING OF European settlement on Cape Breton Island, coal has played an important role in the island's economy and history. Several studies have examined the industry's sporadic development from the coastal mining of the 18th century in a pre-industrial society to the adaptation to an industrial society in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and a post-industrial society at the end of the 20th century.<sup>1</sup> In addition to its important economic role, the coal industry has also influenced the social history and culture of the mining communities. As David Frank has pointed out, "The formation of the mining community in Cape Breton involved a complex pattern of persistence, accommodation and innovation. In responding to the industrial conditions the coal miners drew upon the various social and cultural resources at their disposal". One of these cultural resources is the oral tradition, which "was inherently innovative and implicitly democratic, and thus was able to respond

- 1 Richard Brown, *The Coal Fields and Coal Trade of the Island of Cape Breton* (London, 1871); Hugh Millward, "Mine Locations and the Sequence of Coal Exploitation on the Sydney Coalfield, 1720-1980", in Kenneth Donovan, ed., *Cape Breton at 200: Historical Essays in Honour of the Island's Bicentennial 1785-1985* (Sydney, 1985), pp. 183-202; J.S. Martell, "Early Coal Mining in Nova Scotia", in Don Macgillivray and Brian Tennyson, eds., *Cape Breton Historical Essays* (Sydney, 1981), pp. 41-53; Stephen J. Hornsby, *Nineteenth-Century Cape Breton: A Historical Geography* (Montreal and Kingston, 1992); Ian McKay, "The Crisis of Dependent Development: Class Conflict in the Nova Scotia Coalfields, 1872-1876", in Gregory S. Kealey, ed., *Class, Gender, and Region: Essays in Canadian Historical Sociology* (St. John's, 1988), pp. 9-48; Del Muise, "The Making of an Industrial Community: Cape Breton Coal Towns 1867-1900", in Macgillivray and Tennyson, *Cape Breton Historical Essays*, pp. 76-94; Don Macgillivray, "Military Aid to the Civil Power: The Cape Breton Experience in the 1920s", in *ibid.*, pp. 95-109; and David Frank, "The Cape Breton Coal Industry and the Rise and Fall of the British Empire Steel Corporation", in *ibid.*, pp. 110-29. Don Macgillivray analyzes the "public" image of Cape Breton miners in "Glace Bay: Images and Impressions", in Benjamin H.D. Buchloh and Robert Wilkie, eds., *Mining Photographs and Other Pictures 1948-1968: A Selection from the Negative Archives of Shedden Studio, Glace Bay, Cape Breton* (Halifax and Sydney, 1983), pp. 170-91. The issue of the public perception of coal miners is also taken up by Douglas F. Campbell in *Banking on Coal: Perspectives on a Cape Breton Community within an International Context* (Sydney, 1997), pp. 91 ff. Campbell also presents a useful study of the coal industry on Cape Breton's west coast, examining the influence of politics and religion; Daniel Samson presents a different analysis of the same region, emphasizing the role of the rural work force, in "Dependency and Rural Industry: Inverness, Nova Scotia, 1899-1910", in Samson, ed., *Contested Countryside: Rural Workers and Modern Society in Atlantic Canada, 1800-1950* (Fredericton, 1994), pp. 105-49.

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more immediately to the miners' concerns and to offer a rudimentary critique of the 'dominant' culture".<sup>2</sup> While the oral tradition was not the only influence on the social life of Cape Breton coal miners, it played a crucial role in their lives and is central to understanding their social history.

One aspect of this oral tradition is the widespread use of nicknames on Cape Breton Island and its vigorous life within the island's mining community.<sup>3</sup> As a part of oral tradition, these nicknames are a storehouse of a culture's identity and values that are often different from the corporate perspective. After a brief explanation of the methodology used in gathering these names, this study classifies the nicknames used by the coal miners and then considers some of the naming traditions and functions that emerge from this survey.

The analysis of oral culture is difficult because of the transient nature of the oral tradition. Nicknames from the previous century become lost to living memory, and even some 20th-century names fade with time and may survive in more than one version.<sup>4</sup> Because of this inherent difficulty, we have used two methods of collecting nicknames, resulting in two distinct databases. The first group consists of 358 19th-century names from the surviving ledgers of the General Mining Association (GMA). Although we examined account books from 1832 to 1893, the ones from Bridgeport and Sydney Mines were the most productive sources of nicknames.<sup>5</sup> These records present a monthly account of the charges made to miners for expenses such as rent, coal, powder, food items (e.g. oil, flour, tea, sugar, molasses) and sundries. In both the formal ledger and informal waste books the miners' legal names are given and then often followed by nicknames.<sup>6</sup> Although the use of nicknames in company

2 David Frank, "Tradition and Culture in the Cape Breton Mining Community in the Early Twentieth Century", in Donovan, ed., *Cape Breton at 200*, p. 216.

3 Helen Creighton, "Cape Breton Nicknames and Tales", in Horace P. Beck, ed., *Folklore in Action: Essays for Discussion in Honor of MacEdward Leach* (Philadelphia, 1962), pp. 71-6; William Davey, "Informal Names for Places in Cape Breton: Nicknames, Local Usage, and a Brief Comparison with Personal Nicknames", *Onomastica Canadiana*, 72 (1990), pp. 69-81; William Davey and Richard MacKinnon, "The Use of Nicknames in Cape Breton", in Carol Corbin and Judith Rolls, eds., *The Centre of the World at the Edge of a Continent* (Sydney, 1996), pp. 197-212; Charles W. Dunn, *Highland Settler: A Portrait of the Scottish Gael in Nova Scotia* ([1953], corrected edition, Toronto 1968), republished as *Highland Settler: A Portrait of the Scottish Gael in Cape Breton and Eastern Nova Scotia* (Wreck Cove, 1991); Michael Dwyer, "Cape Breton Nicknames", in Stuart McCawley, ed., *A Book of Songs and 'Come-All-Ye' of Cape Breton and Newfoundland*, 3rd ed. (Glace Bay, 1966), pp. 109-13; David Frank, "A Note on Cape Breton Nicknames", *Journal of the Atlantic Provinces Linguistic Association*, 10 (1988), pp. 54-63; David MacDonald, "Nova Scotia's Wacky Nicknames", *Reader's Digest* (October 1980), pp. 13-14; Richard MacKinnon, "Humorous Nicknames in New Waterford, Cape Breton Island", paper presented to the Folklore Studies Association of Canada, Moncton, 1990; Stuart McCawley, "Cape Breton Tales", *Sydney Post Record*, 13 October 1936.

4 Davey and MacKinnon, "Use of Nicknames", p. 199.

5 The following records are in the Beaton Institute of Cape Breton Studies at the University College of Cape Breton, Sydney: General Mining Association Company Store Ledger, Bridgeport, 1889-93, MG14, 19, E.2(f); General Mining Association, Waste Books, Sydney Mines: Goods Sold to Employees, 1879-80, MG14, 19, C1(l); General Mining Association, Waste Books, Sydney Mines: Goods Sold to Employees, 1893, MG14, 19, C1(m); General Mining Association, Company Store Books, Langan, Account Book 1832, MG14, 19, C1(l). Many of the GMA records held by the Beaton Institute do not use nicknames at all.

6 "Ledgers" are formal records whereas a "waste book" is a "rough account-book in which entries are made of all transactions as they occur, to be copied formally afterwards": Leslie Brown, *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1993).

records has been mentioned by others,<sup>7</sup> the names themselves have not been closely considered.

The second database consists of 246 20th-century names, gathered primarily from interviews with five miners and one retired physician who treated miners during his career. Our methodology here is one commonly employed in folklore studies, the use of tape-recorded interviews with knowledgeable individuals.<sup>8</sup> This fieldwork accounts for the bulk of the 20th-century names, but it has been supplemented with material from the published studies that refer to nicknames of Cape Breton miners.

The combined collection, 604 instances, records the nicknames of miners working on the east side of the island in the industrial area, with only a small portion belonging to company officials and to miners on the west side of the island. Because of the nature of oral transmission, both sources have their limitations, the archival materials because of the limited records that have survived and the fieldwork because of the limitations of human memory. As fragmentary as the records are, they provide insights into the miners' lives and their social history.

The classification in Table One presents the five most frequently used types of names and accounts for 73 per cent of the total names.

Table One  
Five Most Frequent Origins of Nicknames

| Type of Nickname   | Total Number | Per cent of Nicknames |
|--------------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| Place Names        | 124          | 20.5                  |
| Unknown Origin     | 117          | 19.4                  |
| Occupational Names | 88           | 14.6                  |
| Physical Quality   | 69           | 11.4                  |
| Patronymics        | 44           | 7.3                   |
| Total              | 442          | 73.2                  |

The largest category of these nicknames originates from place names, and the 19th-century examples dominate this category (34 per cent of the 19th-century nicknames).

7 Frank, "Cape Breton Nicknames", p. 58.

8 Numerous guides produced by practitioners offer advice to first-time and more experienced interviewers concerning how to prepare for, conduct and process the materials gathered in tape-recorded interviews. We have followed the guidelines set out by Ives and others in conducting this study of miners and their nicknames: See Edward D. Ives, *The Tape-Recorded Interview: A Manual for Fieldworkers in Folklore and Oral History*, 2nd ed. (Knoxville, 1995); Kenneth Goldstein, *A Guide for Fieldworkers in Folklore* (Hatboro, 1964); Bruce Jackson, *Fieldwork* (Urbana, 1987). In preparing this study we are particularly grateful to those who agreed to be interviewed (Sandy Clyburn, Alex White, Tommy Baldwin, Joe Ellsworth, Mick Kearney and Dr. William Nicholson) and to those who provided us with nicknames and contacts (Raylene Nicholson, Brian O'Leary, Bill Wiseman, Kevin Kearney, Redmond Curtis, Frank McKenzie and Hubert Chiasson). We are also indebted to the staff of the Beaton Institute (especially Kate Currie and Lois Ross) and to the *Acadiensis* reviewers for their helpful suggestions.

These usually designate the miner's place of residence such as *Lloyds [Cove]*, *[North] Bar*, *R[ound] Island* and *Lingan*. A few of these nicknames, such as *Whycocomagh* and *G[rand] Mira*, indicate the place of origin of the miner. The 20th-century examples use this method of genesis far less often (2 per cent of the 20th-century nicknames). Examples include *Sandy Cape North*, *Front Lake* and *John Caledonia*.

The second largest category is classified as unknown. In the 19th-century records, the company clerk often used initial letters as a kind of shorthand, writing *LP*, *LF* and *RA*, after the person's name. These are probably references to place names, but we have not verified this assumption. The origins of an equally large group of 20th-century nicknames are also unknown as the informants knew the name but not the origin. As well as some acronyms, this category includes several examples of nicknames that seem to depend more on the sound than sense, such as *Scuish*, *Sprick*, *Cinnabar*, *Scoody*, *Nobby* and *Nuko*. Other nicknames suggest stories waiting to be told, such as *One Stone*, *Shit in the Sock*, *Archie the Heaven*, *Jimmy Eye*, *Cinder Eye*, *Johnny Hooker*, *Quock* and the *Skin the Door MacNeils*.

Occupational nicknames are the third largest group. Again the 19th-century examples are most numerous here (20 per cent of 19th-century nicknames in contrast to 7 per cent of 20th-century nicknames), but both the 19th-century and 20th-century names follow a similar pattern. The nicknames originating from tasks or trades in the mine are the most frequent. The 19th-century records list *Bottomer* (for a person who works at the bottom of the shaft), *Mason*, *Carpenter*, *Collier*, *Coal Hauler* and *Sawyer*. The 20th-century examples have *Horse Shit Dan* (who looked after the pit ponies underground), *Jim the Bottomer* and *Alex Cage* (who operated the elevator in the shaft). Other miners obtained their nicknames from occupations originating from work activities outside of the mine. In the 19th century, *Servant*, *Saddler* and *Farmer* appear, and in the 20th century there are *Soldier Alec* and *Alec the Gunner* (both of whom served in the army) and *John Donut* (who sold donuts at one time).

The fourth category contains the nicknames that refer to some physical feature. The 19th-century examples are comparatively unimaginative, with *Big*, *Little*, *Black* and *Old* being most frequent and *Grey Beard*, *Stump* and *Blue* providing variety. The 20th-century nicknames also contain some examples of *Big* and *Little*, but the use of metaphor reflects the lively wit of the nicknamers. *Tree* is the name of a tall man, and the *Bull Oxes* are big people, as are *Rannie* and *Jimmy Moose*. Those with distinctive physical characteristics are also named metaphorically: *Buffalo Head* for a miner with a large head, *Pig Eyes* for a man with small, close-set eyes and *John Ginger* for a red-headed miner. This category includes 6 per cent of the 19th-century nicknames and 19 per cent of the 20th-century nicknames.

The fifth category consists of examples of patronymics. Usually they consist of two given names such as *Rory Hector* or *Alexander James*. Occasionally, however, the parent's nickname is included, such as *Tommy Big Jim*, thereby indicating Tom, the son of Big Jim. Occasionally, a surname appears as the second element of the patronym: *Philip McIntire Gillis* and *Neil McKinnon McKenzie*. These two examples probably resulted from a second marriage or an adoption.

This collection of 19th- and 20th-century nicknames allows us to make a few observations on their continuity and predominant patterns. Coming from the GMA records, the 19th-century nicknames emphasize those originating from place names and occupations. These names in part served the pragmatic needs of identifying the miners who were in debt to the company. In this sense they are utilitarian and

probably do not reflect the breadth of nicknames used by the miners themselves.<sup>9</sup> By contrast, the 20th-century nicknames have fewer examples deriving from place names and occupations. Physical attributes, character traits, and habits are among the top five types of nicknames in the 20th-century examples. The categories with fewer nicknames than the top five groups indicate the range of subjects and inventiveness of the nicknames. These subjects include references to food (*Tea, Crackers, Pudding, Cookie, Sugar Cookie, Pumpkin, Bubble Gum* and *Baloney*) and the use of animal names (*Moose, Eel Dog, Bear, Wolf, Fox, Snake, Monkey, Cut Worm, Cat, Tom Cat, Black Duck, Piggy, Crow, Bull Dog, Dingo, Rat, Rooster, Wood Pecker, Goat, Dingo, Cockroach* and *Worm*). Two of the smaller groups derive from popular culture (*Kid Burns*, named after a famous boxer; *Scully* after a television character; *Hawk* after Hawkeye in James Fenimore Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans*; and *Bambi* and *Bull Winkle* after cartoon characters) and events (*Fire Bug, Burnt Rory, Poo Poo, Shavey, Halo* and *Pick Handle Tony*). Thus, the main categories are similar, but the distribution of the nicknames differs in the two centuries, and the range of the names is broader in the 20th century than in the 19th-century examples.

The domain of these mining nicknames is broader than that indicated by other studies of mining nicknames.<sup>10</sup> Most have originated outside of the mine, and the great majority of the nicknames are used both within and outside of the workplace. Two miners interviewed emphasized that the lines of communication in the mining communities are rapid and effective. One informant recalled a childhood story of his mother winning a sum of money at bingo and his father being told about it early the next morning by one of his fellow workers.<sup>11</sup> As a result of the close-knit character of the community, nicknames obtained outside of the workplace are often carried into the mine, and names originating in the mine are carried out. For example, a miner was called *Simon Trapper Hill* at work because he trapped animals in the hilly area behind his home in his spare time. Another miner who habitually wanted to quit early is known both at work and in the community as *Tie Up*. As the classification indicated, the single largest group for the 19th-century nicknames are the place names, all of which originate outside of the workplace.

In addition to the names that are used both above and below the surface, another smaller group might be termed "pit names", as they originate and remain in the mine.<sup>12</sup> Several informants acknowledged that some vulgar names are used

9 Despite this more limited usage, these names qualify as nicknames as they are additional names, *eke names*, and serve one of the primary functions discussed below, that is to identify miners with similar names. See David Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 152: "The word *nickname* is first recorded in the 15th century: 'an eke name' (Old English *eke*, 'also') was an extra or additional name used to express such attitudes as familiarity, affection, and ridicule. Nicknames are usually applied to people, but places and things have them too".

10 James K. Skipper, Jr., "Nicknames, Coal Miners, and Group Solidarity", *Names*, 34, 2 (1986), pp. 134-45; Mark L. Wardell, Charles Vaught and David L. Smith, "Underground Coal Mining and the Labor Process: Safety at the Coal Face", in Clifton D. Bryant, Donald J. Shoemaker, James K. Skipper, Jr. and William E. Snizek, eds., *The Rural Work Force: Non-Agricultural Occupations in America* (South Hadley, Mass., 1985), pp. 43-58.

11 Macgillivray, "Glance Bay", p. 176, stresses the homogeneous nature of the miners in the Glance Bay and New Waterford areas at the end of the 19th century.

12 In a study of nicknaming practices among school children, Rom Harré notes that some nicknames – which he calls privileged names – have restricted use and are a sign of status: "For children in the inner core, multiple nicknames – some of which are secret and some, though publicly known, reserved



exclusively in the pit, but for the most part they were unwilling to give details. Two examples of these pit names are *Baloney Joe* who was known for the size of his genitals, and *Hairy Hole* who apparently had hair in every imaginable place. This variation on the main tradition parallels the practices discussed by James Skipper, Jr. in his study of the nicknames of 39 miners (33 males and 6 females) from six mines in West Virginia and southwest Virginia. "Only miners know the nicknames", he notes, and the miners "do not use them outside the mines".<sup>13</sup> Referring to coal miners in the United States, another study also found restrictions on the domains of usage, although the authors are not specific about the proportion of names: "New miners also acquire nicknames, which reflect something about their personal biographies, usually after they join a [work] unit. Some nicknames are extremely colorful and not necessarily suitable for routine use outside the mine".<sup>14</sup> Mahadev Apte points out a similar restriction among longshoremen: "Although well-established joking relationships exist, what is permitted in one social situation is not allowed in another".<sup>15</sup>

Another important naming tradition has to do with the power of naming: that is, who has the power to bestow these nicknames? In this collection, the majority of the names originate from the miners themselves, but some come from the company officials and clerks in the company stores. This statement must be qualified because only rarely can the namer be identified with certainty. Logically, all nicknames must begin with an individual who "puts the nickname onto" a person, but as the names become part of the public domain of oral transmission, the namer becomes anonymous. Whether the nickname survives or not does not depend so much on the namer as it does on how aptly or wittily the nickname comments on the person or social situation. Occasionally, the person bearing the name or the one assigning the name will know its origin with certainty, but this is the exception rather than the rule.<sup>16</sup> Stuart McCawley records one of the rare examples where a company official, in this instance a paymaster, bestowed a nickname as a form of revenge. When the paymaster ordered Sandy MacDonald to remove his hat, Sandy ignored the order, explaining defiantly, "'Her is not a hat', said Sandy. 'Her's a cap; and Mister Smarty, the head that took her in here can took her out' . . . And to get even he put Sandy on the payroll as 'Sandy Took Her MacDonald'".<sup>17</sup>

A minority of the names from the GMA accounts, especially those in the "Company Story Ledger, Bridgeport 1889-1893", seem to have originated from the company store clerks. As seen above in the classification, place names and occupations are frequent among the 19th-century nicknames, and the store clerks may very well have assigned these names for their own convenience to identify men more

for use by a few – mark high status". See Rom Harré, "What's in a Nickname?" *Psychology Today*, 31 (January 1980), p. 81. This pattern seems to parallel the pit names that only the miners use.

13 Skipper, "Nicknames, Coal Miners", p. 143.

14 Wardell et al., "Underground Coal Mining", p. 49.

15 Mahadev Apte, *Humor and Laughter: An Anthropological Approach* (Ithaca, 1985), p. 54.

16 For example, one of the miners interviewed was called the *Road Runner* but did not know who gave him this name.

17 McCawley, *A Book of Songs and 'Come-All-Ye'*, p. 23; and see Frank, "Cape Breton Nicknames", p. 59.

clearly. This would seem to be particularly true of the acronyms such as *BH* and *BL*.<sup>18</sup> It would be inaccurate, however, to dismiss all the names from the GMA accounts as a private code known only to the clerk. These records preserve patronymics, a standard type of Cape Breton nickname, as well as descriptive names such as *Lazi*, *Old* and *Grey Beard*.

Another important tradition of these nicknames is the predominantly male and patrilineal pattern.<sup>19</sup> Charles Dunn notes that among Gaelic speakers in the Scottish Highlands, the father's given name is handed down to other members of the family. He comments that this tradition has been transferred to both English and Gaelic speakers on Cape Breton Island. Thus, *Neil Jim* is the Neil who is the son of Jim, and *Mary Neil Jim* is Neil's daughter.<sup>20</sup> Seven per cent of the total mining nicknames follow this pattern, and they usually have two given names, the first identifying the individual, the second the father's given name.<sup>21</sup> This tradition is, of course, not limited to miners' nicknames and is widely used on the island.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to this patrilineal tradition, occasionally some miners bear nicknames derived from their mothers. The 19th-century records have eight miners with *Widow* given as an additional name. Here again this tradition parallels the broader usage outside of the mining community<sup>23</sup> and in parts of Scotland. Commenting on the naming practices of Gaelic speakers in three communities in East Sutherland, Nancy Dorian notes that children may receive genealogical names from either parent or from both in the event that the child receives multiple nicknames.<sup>24</sup>

The response to these names is the final tradition discussed. The reaction to the nicknames varies according to the name itself and the context in which the name is used. For example, a generation ago a miner with a large family was called *Rat Desveaux*. While this might at first glance be considered pejorative, according to one informant the family did not consider it as insulting because it referred to the miner's habit of working extra shifts to support his family. It is interpreted in the same way that people currently use the term "rink rat" to refer to someone who haunts a local hockey rink. Skipper's survey of miners in West Virginia also indicates that context is important to one's response to a nickname. He reports that "72.7 per cent of the nicknames have definite negative connotations", but "Over half, 54.5%, of the miners

18 C.M. Millward, *A Biography of the English Language* (Fort Worth, 1996), p. 336. Acronyms are a productive source for names in the 20th century, but were not so common in the late 19th century.

19 Commenting on the labour patterns in the United States, Wardell et al., "Underground Coal Mining", p. 56, note: "In 1978, approximately 1.2% of all underground miners were female (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1979)". At the time of writing in 1999, only one woman was currently working underground in Cape Breton, as a nurse.

20 Dunn, *Highland Settler*, pp. 136-8.

21 As Nancy Dorian notes, the use of two names is the most frequent pattern found among Gaelic speakers in three communities in East Sutherland, although occasionally longer names are used: Nancy C. Dorian, "A Substitute Name System in the Scottish Highlands", *American Anthropologist*, 72 (1970), pp. 306-9.

22 See for example Frank, "Cape Breton Nicknames", p. 55 and Davey and MacKinnon, "The Use of Nicknames", pp. 199-200.

23 Davey and MacKinnon, *ibid*.

24 Dorian, "A Substitute Name System", pp. 306-9.



professed to liking their nicknames, 15.2% disliked them, and 30.3% were neutral about them”.<sup>25</sup> Although this study has not surveyed miners about their attitudes towards their names, the majority of names appear to be neutral or positive. The classification of the names supports this assumption, as at least 42.4 per cent of names are neutral or positive because they originate from place names (20.5 per cent), occupations (14.6 per cent) and patronymics (7.3 per cent).

In other instances, many nicknames are neutral because people use them without knowledge of their origin or their meaning. In conversation with one informant, the example of the *Skin the Door MacNeils* was mentioned several times as a typical nickname used for a mining family. When asked for the origin or meaning, the informant had no idea. Another informant explained that his brother-in-law had the nickname *Nood* (rhyming with hood), and despite a life-long association with the man, the informant did not know the name’s origin or meaning. This observation is not a criticism of our informants. Several of these nicknames have become so familiar that they lose their meaning, thereby becoming semantically opaque, like so many other names and words in the English language.<sup>26</sup> The names Smith, Tucker and Cooper are well known, but with the exception of those interested in onomastics, few people think twice of the occupations from which they derive. Such semantically opaque words are part of the nature of the language, and it is not surprising that this feature of language also contributes to the neutrality of many of these miners’ nicknames.<sup>27</sup>

While the reaction to most names is at least neutral or mildly positive, some individuals react to their names extremely positively or negatively. Some value their name because it celebrates a quality prized in the community. In an area where physical strength is valued, 13 miners are called *Big*, and three miners who boxed are known as *Boom Boom*, *Champ* and *Bear*. A well-liked miner had the name *Terrific Don MacIsaac*. On the opposite extreme, some miners hate their nicknames. One miner, dubbed *Cockroach* because he seemed to bend over all the time at work, objected to his name so much that he complained to the mine committee to stop others from using it. This made matters worse and the teasing persisted. One day when he was called Cockroach, he became so provoked that he knocked a fellow miner unconscious with a sprag, a short piece of hardwood. This reaction was also ill-fated, as he struck the wrong man. The offensive nicknames used by Cape Breton miners may refer to physical qualities as illustrated in the above example or personal

25 Skipper, “Nicknames, Coal Miners”, p. 142.

26 Dorian comments on a similar situation in communities where English speakers use the Gaelic by-names or nicknames: “Any by-name with a Gaelic element is automatically a ‘nonsense’ by-name where they [English speakers] are concerned, since it is semantically empty for them”: Dorian, “A Substitute Name System”, p. 315.

27 Skipper concludes that even negative names can lose their sting: “Over time the negative implication of the nickname loses its meaning and the nickname becomes more a symbol of acceptance and group membership”: Skipper, “Nicknames, Coal Miners”, p. 144. In Cape Breton, pejorative nicknames are also ameliorated by the shortening of the nickname. A miner who habitually sat on a pickle barrel in the company store was dubbed *Pickle Arse MacLean*; one informant explained that at work MacLean would often be addressed as *Pickles* or *Pickle*, rather than the full name. Dorian, “A Substitute Name System”, p. 309, points out that among the Gaelic speakers in East Sutherland, the derisive by-names

characteristics (such as the *Governor* for a man with a domineering personality). Occasionally some derisive names also originate from an event, as in the example of *Fire Bug*, given to a man who was involved in a mining accident.

While other traditions are part of these nicknaming practices, these four – wide domain, the power of naming, predominantly male and patrilineal application, and a neutral or positive attitude to the names – are central to the use of the mining nicknames. These traditions and the large number of the nicknames suggest that the names must have some useful social function among the miners at work and in the community.

In both the 19th and 20th centuries, one of most important functions is the identification of those who have identical names.<sup>28</sup> The Scottish immigrants coming to Cape Breton would often give a relative's name to a child as a sign of respect. As Alexander Laidlaw mentions in an interview with Helen Creighton, in some instances the same name would be given to two children in the same family.<sup>29</sup> This preference for certain names resulted in a small pool of first names in an already small pool of surnames representing the clans of the Scottish Highlands and the Western Isles. An overview of the waste books from Sydney Mines (1832-93) gives an historical perspective on this pattern. In the first half of the century, a greater variety of surnames appear than in the second half, and consequently few nicknames are recorded in the earlier records.<sup>30</sup> By the second half of the century, surnames such as M(a)cDonald, M(a)cNeil, M(a)cLean, Morrison and Gillis abound, and the nicknames are needed to distinguish the individuals with similar names. For example, in our collection of nicknames there are 37 John M(a)cDonalds. Table Two lists some of the frequently repeated names.

Table Two  
Frequently Used Names

| Given Name        | Number | Surname     | Number |
|-------------------|--------|-------------|--------|
| John              | 119    | M(a)cDonald | 103    |
| Alexander         | 40     | M(a)cNeil   | 36     |
| James             | 30     | M(a)cLean   | 5      |
|                   |        | M(a)cKinnon | 33     |
| Per cent of Names | 31     |             | 34     |

or nicknames "are always based on some personal attribute of the individual in question".

28 Theodore J. Holland, Jr., "The Many Faces of Nicknames", *Names*, 38, 4 (1990), pp. 256-8, provides a summary of studies that indicate that nicknames are useful in identifying individuals or groups in various cultures and languages: Portuguese, Amish, Icelandic, Irish, Mexican, Spanish, Arabic, Scottish Gaelic, etc. Also see the thorough work of Edwin D. Lawson, "Nicknames: An Annotated Bibliography", *Names*, 38, 4 (1990), pp. 323-63.

29 Creighton, "Cape Breton Nicknames", p. 72; and see Davey and MacKinnon, "The Use of Nicknames", p. 209.

30 The GMA brought experienced miners from Britain in the early years of development: Martell, "Early Coal Mining", p. 52. The early GMA ledgers show a greater variety of names than do those in the 1880s.

In addition, some of the names with a low frequency in the 19th-century records required an additional name to distinguish two or more miners with the same name. The entries for Alexander Beaton in the 1879 waste book illustrate this situation. In the first two months, Beaton's name has no additional designation, but in May another Alexander Beaton appears. Thereafter, the bookkeeper records one as Alexander Beaton *Railroad* and the other as Alexander Beaton *Collier*. A similar pattern is found among the names collected from the 20th century. As one informant stated, at least ten families of MacDonalds and MacNeils live in the industrial area of Cape Breton, and the nicknames clearly distinguish and identify the families. Thus, the *Bore Hole MacDonalds*, whose father used to bore holes to hold explosives, are distinguished from *Blue McDonalds*.<sup>31</sup>

Building group solidarity is another important function.<sup>32</sup> In his research on coal miners in West Virginia, Skipper notes that "the nicknames are symbols of the integration and solidarity of the work group. The coal miners wear them like a badge of membership".<sup>33</sup> Several of our informants commented on this role. One retired miner recalled that when he first started in the pit, he worked with a man whom others repeatedly addressed as *Pumpkin*. When he, as a new miner, used this nickname, Pumpkin rebuked him, saying that only friends could use this name. This reaction implies that one must be initiated as a full member of the group before being allowed to use some nicknames.

The ambiguity and the tendency of some names to be misleading also support the function of solidarity. One must be an initiated member to understand that the miner identified as *Balls* comes from Balls Creek, that the man called *Leeches* comes from Leitches Creek and that *Curly Angus* is actually bald. A widely known nickname, the *Big Pay MacDonalds*, ironically comments on the small pay resulting after the company store, or "pluck-me store", had taken all the deductions or "off taxes" from the miner's pay.

One of the most interesting and, at the same time, possibly the most neglected function of these mining nicknames is that of humour.<sup>34</sup> These humorous nicknames have three related functions in the mining community, which are also applicable to

31 Frank, "Cape Breton Nicknames", p. 58. As Frank notes, the *Blue McDonalds*' name probably derives from the blue-coloured scars: "When a miner received a cut in the pit, it was the custom to rub some slack coal on the wound to stop the blood. The sulphur in the coal had an antiseptic effect, but when the wound healed a blue scar remained".

32 Dorian, "A Substitute Name System", p. 313; Peter G. Mewett, "Exiles, Nicknames, Social Identities and the Production of Local Consciousness in a Lewis Crofting Community", in Anthony P. Cohen, ed., *Belonging: Identity and Social Organization in British Rural Cultures* (Manchester, 1982), pp. 234-6; Frank, "Cape Breton Nicknames", p. 61; Charles Vaught and David L. Smith, "Incorporation and Mechanical Solidarity in an Underground Coal Mine", *Sociology of Work and Occupations*, 7, 2 (1980), pp. 168-9; Wardell et al., "Underground Coal Mining", pp. 48-9.

33 Skipper, "Nicknames, Coal Miners", p. 143. Vaught and Smith, "Incorporation and Mechanical Solidarity", p. 169, come to a similar conclusion: "Mine-specific names . . . are names the miners bestow on the new man in the process of being "reborn" (Weiss, 1967) and symbolize his ties to the group and the mine". Holland, "The Many Faces of Nicknames", pp. 258-9, notes several other studies where nicknames support solidarity in contexts other than mining.

34 Compare Dorian, "A Substitute Name System", pp. 314-5 and MacKinnon, "Humorous Nicknames in New Waterford".

nicknames in general and especially to nicknames used by those in dangerous occupations.

First, these humorous nicknames function as a safety valve or coping mechanism for the tension of working in a dangerous work environment. Anton C. Zijderveld makes a similar argument about the role of humour and laughter as he cites a study by Rose L. Coser who found that the standard jokes and laughter of hospital patients were a means of coping with the anxiety about being in a hospital and being ill.<sup>35</sup> Apte notes that in dangerous occupations, such as working on the docks, vulgarity and humour are more prevalent than in less dangerous occupations.<sup>36</sup> In our study, all the miners interviewed commented on the constant need to be vigilant and to be aware of the danger of their workplace. One miner who began his career in the 1950s explained that it was rare to have a week in which no miner was seriously injured or killed. Again, each of the retired miners interviewed commented on one or more close calls, and all had friends who had been killed or seriously injured at work.

As one response to the stress of the job, initiation practices, jokes and pranks within the mine are a common occurrence and a means of reducing stress. Similar practices have been reported among coal miners in the United States: "Horseplay, according to some miners, is a way to take their minds off the dangerous aspects of work".<sup>37</sup> It is this broader context into which the humorous nicknames fit. They serve as a means of releasing the tension of working in a dangerous environment. Humour may even be used as a means of coping with an injury. A miner with one arm shorter than the other was called *Alex the Clock*.<sup>38</sup> Other nicknames use metaphor to create humour. *Tree* is the name for a tall miner, while a short one is *Stump*. A miner with a reputation for working and moving quickly is named *Road Runner*, and another two with unusual eyes are called *Pig Eyes* and *Gum Eyes*. Occasionally, the names become humorous because of the changes during successive generations. A miner known for his religious devotion is called the *Pope*, his son is the *Little Pope*, and the grandson is *Poop*. Knowledge of the sequence of these name changes increases the humour and delight. Some of these nicknames are mildly derisive, but their use both within and outside of the workplace reduces stress.

Humorous nicknames may also function as a protest against those in positions of power, such as the company officials, managers and overmen (mining foremen). These nicknames make derisive comments and express highly condensed criticism.<sup>39</sup> They function much like the jokes in political satire, which Zijderveld suggests "urge us to laugh at the powerful figures of the political scene, showing them in totally

35 Anton C. Zijderveld, "Jokes and their Relation to Social Reality", *Social Research*, 35 (1968), p. 307.

36 Apte, *Humour and Laughter*, p. 158.

37 Wardell et al., "Underground Coal Mining", p. 49. Vaught and Smith, "Incorporation and Mechanical Solidarity", pp. 170-80, give a detailed description and analysis of the pranks and initiation practices, arguing that the joking behaviour contributes to group solidarity among American coal miners.

38 MacDonald, "Nicknames", p. 14.

39 Harré, "What's in a Nickname?", p. 79, finds a similar function among school children: "One clear function of nicknames is to make powerlessness tolerable by *sotto voce* insult". He also comments on the conditions that provoke the nicknames: "Nicknaming flourishes in schools, armies, prisons, and other institutions with official hierarchies. . . . The more closed an institution, the more nicknaming is elaborated". Especially in the first half of the 20th century, the Cape Breton coal companies were "closed" and had rigid hierarchies.

different, not so powerful dimensions”.<sup>40</sup> During the bitter strikes of the early 1920s in Cape Breton, Roy Wolvin, president of the British Empire Steel Corporation, was widely known as *Roy the Wolf* or simply *Wolf*.<sup>41</sup> More recently, two mining officials with abrasive personalities were known as *Bill the Brat* and *Archie the Snake*. One overman, reputed to be unintelligent or “stunned”, was named after a winch-like machine used to pull heavy objects. The machine is called a *tugger*, and he is known as *Tugger Head*.

In addition to criticizing company officials as a form of protest, these humorous nicknames also criticize other miners, thereby serving as a form of social control or negative sanction.<sup>42</sup> The largest group in this sub-category refers to those who for various reasons do not pull their own weight at work. Despite the powerful ventilation fans and attempts to exchange the air in the mine, the air quality is often poor and can cause problems for some workers. One man who would often pass out in the pit when given a difficult task became known as *Fainting Lily*. Another miner who habitually falls asleep at work is called *Noodle Neck*, humorously suggesting that the drooping of his head when he falls asleep is caused by a weak neck. A pair of miners who would try to quit early or to slow down the work in the mine are called *Knock Off* and *Tie Up*. The families are subsequently known as the *Knock Offs* and the *Tie Ups*. Although legitimate injuries are commonplace within the mine, one miner would work for nine months of the year and then mysteriously develop back trouble to go on compensation for the remaining three months. He received the name *Jimmy Oh-My-Back*.

Some of these derisive names also criticize workers for various character traits or for oddities of speech or anatomy. Even the 19th-century records, which are predominantly neutral in their tone, do have some derisive nicknames, such as *Lazi* John McKeigan and *Shy* Michael McNeil. Three miners had *Mad* as a nickname: *Mad Archie McDonald*, *Mad Donald McDonald* and *Mad Neil McKinnon*. In the 20th century, a miner who frequently received 30 days in the local jail because of his various misdemeanours is called *Thirty Days*. His son, *Jimmy Thirty Days*, has reluctantly inherited the name.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, many sons of miners left school to work in the pit in order to help support their families. Despite this lack of formal education, those who bestow names take a delight in turning non-standard English and repeated expressions into a nickname. One 19th-century Sydney Mines worker was identified as *Stood Hot*, and similarly a Glace Bay miner once commented that his stove at home was so hot he couldn’t “stood the heat”. He and his family became the *Stood the Heat MacNeils*. Another man received the name *Commanda* because of the way he pronounced *commander*. A new miner mistakenly called mining timbers *poles*, and he and his family received the name the *Poles*. On one occasion, an overman repeatedly told the men to take the *kink* out of the coal face, and he and his family are now known as the *Kinks*. Finally, another miner once explained that he was caught for speeding

40 Zijderveld, “Jokes and their Relation”, p. 288.

41 Dawn Fraser, *Echoes From Labor’s War: Industrial Cape Breton in the 1920s* (Toronto, 1976), pp. 48-60; Frank, “Cape Breton Nicknames”, p. 60.

42 Holland, “The Many Faces of Nicknames”, pp. 260-1, reviews several articles that discuss social

because the police officer hid “hind the sign”. He became known as *Hind the Sign Cook*.

As this evidence demonstrates, the coal industry on Cape Breton Island has influenced the naming patterns and has fostered a prolific number of the nicknames among coal miners. This collection of nicknames from GMA records and more recent sources allows an overview of the types of names used, the naming traditions and their application. The nicknames from the 19th and 20th centuries clearly differ in emphasis, but there is a continuity in the types of names used. Whereas place names, occupations and patronymics are among the five most common types of 19th-century nicknames, the most frequently used in the 20th century are those generated from physical qualities, character traits and habits. The range of these nicknames is broad, mixing traditional epithets such as *Old* and *Big* with a variety of names from such things as the animal kingdom, food and events.

In addition to the standard types of names discussed in this and other studies on mining nicknames (such as place names, occupations, physical and personal qualities, and habits), the 20th-century examples in this collection are drawn from a variety of sources. Expressions are the source for the *Poles*, the *Stood the Heat MacNeils* and the *Hind the Sign Cooks*. Semantic association allows names to be adapted; thus, a female descendant of *Rat Desveaux*, mentioned above, was recently renamed *Mouse* by her friends. The nicknames are also drawn from and memorialize famous events. An incident in which a miner injured his foot with a tin of biscuits during the 1925 raid on one of the company stores resulted in the name *Biscuit Foot McKinnon*.<sup>43</sup> Many of the nicknames combine humour, aptness and a witty turn of phrase to create entertaining examples of naming that give insight into the lives of the miners and their adaptation to their work and community.

The naming traditions and the functions of these nicknames are interconnected. For example, the Cape Breton tradition of creating nicknames both at work and in the community allows these names to identify individuals and families in a broader domain than reported in other studies of mining nicknames.<sup>44</sup> Thus, the naming tradition influences the function of these names. Similarly, the nicknames help to develop solidarity, and since the mining work force is male, the solidarity is augmented by the patrilineal naming tradition among the miners. Some of the humorous nicknames are no doubt pejorative and offensive to those who bear them, but at the same time these humorous nicknames have several useful functions. They relieve some of the stress associated with a dangerous occupation and provide a relatively safe channel for expressing criticism of company officials, and at times they also express criticism of miners who fail to work effectively. The variety of nicknames and their varied sources reveal a lively and creative use of language, thus confirming the flexibility of the oral tradition as a cultural resource.

control and negative sanctions as a function of nicknames used in various cultures and occupations.

43 John Mellor, *The Company Store: James Bryson McLachlan and the Cape Breton Coal Miners, 1900-1925* (Toronto, 1983), p. 306.

44 Skipper, “Nicknames, Coal Miners”; Wardell et al., “Underground Coal Mining”.