

Catherine Charlton

Ms. Crooks

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“Coal Is in My Blood”: Public and Private Representations of Community Identity in Springhill,
Nova Scotia

Introduction

There’s a hard luck mining town in Nova Scotia, whose glory is sad with fame,
It’s been hit by explosions, fires and bumps, everyone’s heard of Springhill’s name. . . .

—Maurice Ruddick¹

At 8:06 p.m. on Thursday, October 23, 1958, the small coal-mining town of Springhill, Nova Scotia, convulsed. Buildings shook, telephones went dead, and seventy-three miles away seismographs at Dalhousie University registered the movement as a small earthquake (Lerner 24). For the people of Springhill, there was little doubt as to the cause of this bump. Within minutes, a crowd of anxious townspeople had formed at the pit of Springhill’s No. 2 Mine, the deepest working mine in North America (Burden and Safer 133). Fifteen grueling days later, the last body of the mine’s seventy-five victims was recovered (Greene 244). The next day, on November 7, the Dominion Steel and Coal Corporation announced the permanent closure of the No. 2 Mine, effectively ending Springhill’s eighty-eight years as a coal-mining town (Lerner 177). I will argue that the community identity of the coal-mining town of Springhill can be divided into two distinct sections: pre-1960 and post-1960.² Representations of Springhill from its inception to 1960 were driven by outward forces—namely, the press and popular culture—and projected onto the town. Following 1960, Springhill’s identity was privately and actively

fashioned by townspeople themselves and projected outward. I will examine these portrayals of Springhill and argue that they molded Springhill's identity as one of working-class heroism, knit together by a shared heritage of disaster and suffering.

Settled in 1790, Springhill was a small town, with a population that peaked at 7,170 in the early 1940s (Brown 73). In 1870, the Springhill Mining Company was formed, and Springhill became a mining town (Lerner 2). By 1958, Springhill was firmly established as a town with one primary industry: coal. One thousand men were employed by the No. 2, and Springhill's economy relied absolutely on miners' output (Beach and Lucas 7-8). The small town was tight-knit, and mining was a family affair; many men were second- or third-generation miners. Springhill was no stranger to tragedy. The town suffered three major mine disasters during its history: an 1891 explosion and underground fire, which killed 125 men and boys; a 1956 explosion, which claimed 39 more victims; and the 1958 bump, which killed 75 miners. These disasters were in addition to individual accidents that resulted in a total of 429 casualties; indeed, there were only three years in the mines' history in which they claimed no victims (Greene 310). A chronicle of local deaths compiled by Springhiller Joseph Moss is a testament to the mines' danger. In the record spanning fifty-eight years, there are few pages that do not bear the explanatory phrases "killed in mine," "killed in explosion," or simply "BUMP" (Moss).

Public Representations of Springhill to 1960

In the town of Springhill, you don't sleep easy.

Often the earth will tremble and roll.

When the earth is restless, miners die;

Bone and blood is the price of coal. . . .

—Peggy Seeger and Ewan MacColl, "The Ballad of Springhill"

On October 24, the day following the disaster, the front page of the *Chronicle-Herald* screamed in bold font: “Miners Trapped: Worst Bump in History Rocks Springhill.” Coverage of Springhill’s tragedy held the newspaper’s front page for no fewer than eight days and prompted three extra editions of the paper (see fig. 1). Readers followed the news avidly as they were fed heartbreaking pictures of miners’ wives at the pithead and sobering causality lists. Reporters and journalists descended on Springhill in droves, some from as far away as Paris and London (Greene 82). The Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC) had a technological breakthrough when they discovered that it was possible to broadcast scenes live from the pithead. For the first time in history, live footage of a significant event was being broadcast worldwide, a completely novel experience for viewers (83). After a week of steadily decreasing hope of finding survivors, when the jubilant headline came—“12 Miners Alive”—followed three days later by the headline “Seven More Alive,” regular television programs were interrupted for live broadcasts of the news.



Fig. 1. One of the most widely disseminated images of rescued miners from the 1958 bump, published on October 24 (Burnie).

It was not only the press that contributed to public perception of the Springhill disaster. Commemorative acts and awards also influenced public opinion. Prince Philip made a highly publicized visit to Springhill, where he visited the recuperating miners in the hospital (Lerner 162). Shortly after the first group of trapped miners was rescued, *The Ed Sullivan Show*, America's most popular network program, invited the miners and their wives to appear on air to "commemorate the heroism of the individual" (Burden and Safer 169). *The Toronto Star* named Maurice Ruddick, one of the miners trapped underground, "Canada's 1958 Citizen of the Year" for his bravery in the mine (Greene 278). The rescuers who searched for the trapped miners were presented with the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission gold medal and later were awarded the Royal Humane Association Gold Medal, which was Canada's greatest honor for bravery in life-saving work (Burden and Safer 171-72). In addition, the disaster was commemorated through story and song, most notably Peggy Seeger and Ewan MacColl's "The Ballad of Springhill," the lyrics of which open this section of my paper.

Though I focus mostly on the 1958 bump in this essay, the bump was not atypical of Springhill's preceding mine disasters. The disasters of 1891 and 1956 had received significant coverage in newspapers, and the 1956 explosion was especially fresh in the public's mind. This publicity had a profound effect on the press-driven identity of Springhill. I argue that the collective image of the small town in the public conception was that of heroism, both the physical heroism of rescue workers and the heroism of the townspeople who faced continued tragedy and adversity.

Thirty-nine minutes after the bump shook Springhill, the first group of bare-faced rescue workers descended into the mine (Lerner 26). These men wore no masks to protect themselves against the mine's dangerous gases and were volunteer off-shift miners. Later, their masked

comrades, the draegermen, would enter the mine in protective gear, but at first, speed was of the essence. Reporter Leonard Lerner describes the eventual appearance of the draegermen: “[T]he crowd waiting at the pithead moved back respectfully as a line of Draegermen, Nova Scotia’s famed rescue crews, silently marched by in single file. No one tried to talk to them as they disappeared, one by one, into the mine entrance. Draegerman was a synonym for courage in Nova Scotia” (32). Newspapers reinforced this image of the heroic miner and rescuer by splashing dozens of pictures of rescue workers across their pages (fig. 2). A widely published telegram from Prime Minister John Diefenbaker stated, “All Canada pay tribute to those who go down in mines” (“Death’s Toll”). Even more so than the draegermen, however, the bare-faced miners were extolled. These “fellows without masks” were lauded as courageous and worthy of the highest praise for their choice to spend “shift after shift seeking life in the death-filled colliery” (“Fellows”).



Fig. 2. Draegermen involved in rescue work following the bump (“Did Springhill Miners”).

It was not just the rescuers who were portrayed as heroic. Miners themselves—and their friends and relatives—received the same praise. Lerner described miners in romanticized terms as “the strange, hardened men who looked death in the eye every working day” (2). Miners were likened to soldiers and were portrayed as working-class heroes (“Springhill [These Are Green Hills]”). They were lauded as responding heroically to their duty of providing for their families by their work in such a dangerous profession. The townspeople were portrayed in the same manner, and newspapers showed images of stalwart wives who waited for days at the mine’s pithead. Reporter Jack McAndrew summed up the prevailing public viewpoint while broadcasting live for the CBC when he stated that “the people of Springhill are a special breed” (qtd. in Greene 83). Ralph Gilroy, Springhill’s mayor, echoed this sentiment when he proudly declared that “you cannot imagine the spirit of the people of Springhill” (“Relatives”). To the public, the rescuers and townspeople of Springhill were hardy and heroic in the face of continued adversity.

Private Representation of Springhill, 1960 Onward

There are pictures on the walls

There are stories to be told

Where these green hills run

Over dark seams of coal. . . .

—Brian Vardigans, “Springhill (These Are Green Hills Now)”

I have examined the manner in which the public, predominantly the press, represented Springhill through various mediums during its years as a one-industry mining town. I now turn to Springhill’s privately driven representation of identity. Though the main mines closed in 1958, Springhillers to this day have actively embraced their heritage through the preservation of memory. When the cabin that held miners’ lamps was doomed to be destroyed from lack of use,

Sadie Allen, a Springhill widow, gathered other miners' widows together and protested. As a result of her influence, the area was named a heritage site (Greene 295). Additionally, the fifty yards where miners last walked into the mine have become well-known as the "Last Walk" (309). Monuments that commemorate the three mine disasters hold places of honor within the town (fig. 3), and even the elementary school is named Springhill Memorial (310). Company housing still stands in Springhill, and in 2003 the first "Miner's Memorial Day" was held, with the laying of wreaths and speeches (Summerby-Murray 55). The motivation for this type of commemoration is personal. The townspeople desire that the sacrifices of their family members be remembered. This is especially evident in an anonymous quotation from one resident of Springhill. The Springhiller explained that "some people say that the 1891, 1956, and 1958 disasters were the great disasters. But for me, this was the great disaster [pointing to one man's name on a memorial]. That is my father" (qtd. in Brown 74). These types of privately driven memorials honor personal memory.



Fig. 3. Two survivors of Springhill mine disasters standing next to commemorative monuments. The monument on the left pays tribute to those lost in the 1958 bump and reads: “Erected to the memory of seventy five men who lost their lives in No. 2 Mine bump Oct. 23, 1958.” The monument on the right honors the men and boys killed in the 1891 explosion (Leonardi).

It was clear even in the immediate aftermath of the bump that Springhill would have to find a new industry. The closure of the mines in 1958 left almost nine hundred men jobless (Burden and Safer 171). By 1970, the population of the town had dropped by over a quarter of its size in the 1950s, with a population of just over five thousand (Brown 67). In the 1970s, the mines were officially sealed, and only the first two hundred feet were left open. This space was quickly made accessible to the public, which gave visitors the opportunity to tour the mine and even bring home some Springhill coal (Burden and Safer 174). Today, Tourism Nova Scotia invites visitors to come and experience Springhill’s “remarkable industrial heritage” (“Tour a Mine”). Tourists can dine at themed restaurants such as the Colliery Café or the Lamp Cabin Dining Room and Lounge,³ and they may wander through the community while following signage adorned with coal-mining symbols (Summerby-Murray 55). If so inclined, those with an interest in history or genealogy can buy from the library or drugstore a list of the names of the miners killed in Springhill’s mines (Greene 310). Thus, the active embracing of mining heritage should be seen as stemming from both personal desire to remember and local desire to cultivate an effective tourism industry. Springhill has successfully extended its ill-fated mining industry with an industry built on remembering the mines.

If the overall effect of public representations of Springhill was to shape a collective identity based on heroism, the effect of Springhill’s privately cultivated representation was built on heritage. Caleb Ruston, a trapped miner, believed that “mining brings out a closeness you

don't see in other places" (qtd. in McKay 20). In a small town where everybody knew everybody, and fathers, sons, and brothers worked side by side underground, people were close. Today, many Springhillers are descendants of miners. Shared memory is a way of keeping their heritage alive, and Springhillers tend to take great pride in their families' mining history (McKay 8). This is evident in the response to a question a reporter posed to a rescued miner following the 1956 explosion. When asked if he would return underground, the miner replied, "What else could I do? Coal is in my blood just like you can see it on the lines of my face. Sure I'll go back" (qtd. in Brown 47). Though Springhill's main mines have been closed for over half a century, coal is still very much "in the blood" of Springhill.

Conclusion

I'll sing you a song of the bravest of men,
 Of those who remained to go digging again
 To bring the coal up from ten thousand feet deep,
 And the others who stayed there forever to sleep.

—Bill Clifton, "Springhill Disaster"

At 8:06 p.m. on Tuesday, October 23, 2018, the small community of Springhill, Nova Scotia, stood together in silence. The townspeople were gathered at a local church for a memorial hymn-sing to commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of the 1958 bump. After this moment of silence, the townspeople read aloud the names of the victims (Hayes). This memorial emphasizes the heritage-based nature of private remembrance that is especially evident in Springhill after 1960. This stands both in contrast to and in harmony with the public identification of Springhill as a heroic mining town. Though the mines have long since closed, Springhill's identity is still that of a coal-mining town, and this identity is forged on the

remembrance of heroism and heritage. Many of these memories are kept alive through the medium of song. Amid the hymns on the night of the twenty-third, three daughters of Maurice Rook, Canada's 1958 "Citizen of the Year," stood and sang a song together (Hayes). This song was based on a poem Ruddick wrote about the mines after his rescue, the first lines of which open this paper. The spirit of heroism, heritage, and remembrance that has characterized Springhill since the first mine opened in 1871 was clear in the song's melody:

Oh, be thankful you fellows brought back from the dead,
 And pray for your friends who have gone on ahead.
 And you boys up in heaven as you look on down,
 Don't forget to remember Springhill mining town
 And that dark, black hole in the ground! (qtd. in "Springhill Disaster")

Notes

1. This is a poem written by the miner Maurice Ruddick after his rescue from the No. 2 Mine. It inspired Bill Clifton's song "The Springhill Mine Disaster" ("Springhill Disaster").
2. I choose 1960 as my point of division in Springhill's history because it is the last year following the closure of the mines in which several important documents were published. In 1960, the reporter Leonard Lerner wrote a book to memorialize the disaster, *Miracle at Springhill*. An influential study called *Individual and Group Behaviour in a Coal Mine Disaster* was published by researchers from Dalhousie University and Acadia University (Beach and Lucas). Most well-known of all, the folksingers Peggy Seeger and Ewan MacColl wrote and recorded the enduring song "The Ballad of Springhill" ("Ballad of Springhill").

3. The Lamp Cabin Dining Room and Lounge was destroyed in a fire on Friday, August 3, 2018.

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