

# The Miner's Financier: Women in the Cape Breton Coal Towns, 1917

"Man's work is from sun to sun, but woman's work is never done." Sitting at her kitchen table in Glace Bay and repeating this old saying, Margaret MacDonald was underlining one of the most obvious and most neglected social divisions in the coal mining community.<sup>1</sup> The distinction between men's work and women's work has been a particularly deep one in single industry resource towns.<sup>2</sup> In the Cape Breton coal towns there was no tradition of women working in or around the pits, as there was in some of the British coalfields, and older miners were able to recall a variety of superstitions about the dangers associated with women entering the mines.<sup>3</sup>

In a single industry town like Glace Bay there were other opportunities for women to earn wages—as domestic servants, teachers, clerks, nurses, office workers and telephone operators, and in 1930 women in these occupations made up more than ten per cent of the work force in Glace Bay.<sup>4</sup> But the most common form of women's work, however, was household labour: women worked in the home, isolated in their workplace and dependent on the income of male wage-earners. As a miner's wife wrote in 1921, "A house is a woman's work-shop and she is there night and day the whole year through."<sup>5</sup> From this position the miner's wife had a special concern with the coal miners' standard of living, a fact readily appreciated by labour leaders like J.B. McLachlan, who was apt to describe the

miner's wife as "the greatest financier in the world."<sup>6</sup>

The following documents offer some insight into the "economic side of housekeeping." Following the establishment of the Amalgamated Mine Workers of Nova Scotia in 1917, the union called for a minimum wage of \$3.50 a day for all underground workers. As part of the union's campaign, McLachlan launched a "Wage Earner's Contest." Under the heading "Wives, Mothers, Sisters and Sweethearts of Men, Attention," the women of the coal towns were invited to explain how they would maintain a family of two adults and five children on a daily wage of \$3.50. Letters arriving at the union offices set forth detailed family budgets and offered a variety of comments on the financial affairs of the coal miner's household. Several of these letters appeared in the columns of the *Canadian Labor Leader*, and the two examples included here allow us to listen briefly to the seldom-heard voice of the coal miner's wife.<sup>7</sup>

"I must admit it is a difficult problem to solve," wrote Mrs. Thomas Milkkesen, a New Waterford miner's wife. Her weekly food budget came to \$19.01. Based on 300 days of work at \$3.50 a day, she anticipated an income of \$20.20 a week. "What a surprise," she concluded, "His weekly income won't cover the food bill and house rent alone, let alone all the rest of life's

necessities. There is two ways out of it. Eat less or earn more." Her budget was one of the highest submitted. One of the lowest came from a miner's wife in Birch Grove who signed herself "Mrs. M.M.A." Her food bill was only \$11.34 a week, and in order to show a final balance of \$78.64 for the year, she estimated 313 days of work in the year. "I think the statement I have given," she wrote, "will show that only by the greatest economy and some privation can a family of seven live at the present time on \$3.50 per day, and that is without taking into consideration lost time or sickness which would incur greater expense."

The fixed weekly charges checked off the miner's pay-sheet were common to most mining families: doctor, hospital, church, taxes, union and other funds or societies. Coal prices were low as the miners enjoyed a privileged rate for house coal. By urban standards rents were low, but the standard of comfort, warmth and repair of the company-owned frame houses was often a subject of complaint. The wear and tear on a miner's work clothes was a heavy expense. The dangers of sickness and accident led some women to include a substantial expenditure on insurance policies. In the food budgets staples such as potatoes, flour, sugar and rolled oats were prominent.

The budget prepared by Mrs. Milkkesen included 21 lbs. of fresh meat of several types and some fish, but Mrs. M.M.A. included only 6 lbs. of meat and 10 lbs. of dry cod. Both women felt they were skimping on household needs. Mrs. M.M.A. added a list of items omitted from her budget: salt, pepper, ginger, yeast cakes, molasses, lard, onions, kettles, pans, dishes, blinds, curtains, bedclothes. "Of course," she added, "I cannot think of wall paper, paint or door rugs, neither can my man think of smoking or using tobacco in any form." In other budgets the provision of food, clothing and shelter also dominated the accounts. Several women included chewing tobacco for the husband and school supplies for the children as necessary spending, but pointed out that they were omitting other

items: cigars, drink, car-fare, nickelodeons, picnics, races, newspapers, books, stamps, candy, presents, the cost of visitors, entertainment or a musical instrument.

In reading these documents it is important to remember that they are not intended to be actual accounts of household spending. Many miners earned considerably more than the proposed minimum wage: in 1917 the average for contract miners was \$4.63. Few miners had more than 300 days of work in the year, and after 1920 the number of working days at the mines fell off sharply. Households with smaller families or more than one wage-earner no doubt enjoyed greater economic security than others. Some parts of the household economy did not enter the budget, for the miner's wife might keep a garden, poultry or a cow, or earn some income by repairing clothes or making mats and quilts.

The main significance of these letters as historical documents is that they were all written on a note of optimism. The women of the coal towns listed their requirements hopefully, all but certain their standard of living must improve in the coming years. This was not to be the case, for the coal industry was soon engulfed by an economic crisis which forced the coal miners to fight wage reductions and to battle for the preservation of their union. One of the most prominent features of the industrial conflict of the 1920's was the remarkable solidarity of the coal mining community, and from these documents it is clear that the women of the coal towns keenly appreciated the economic issues at stake in the conflict.

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#### NOTES

1. For a description of the life of a coal miner's wife, see "With Margaret MacDonald of Glace Bay," *Cape Breton's Magazine*, No. 25 (June 1980), pp. 1-8.

2. For a fine study exploring women's work in a northern Manitoba resource town, see Meg Luxton's *More Than A Labour of Love: Three Generations of Women's Work in the Home* (Toronto, 1980).
3. In 1976 Pius McNeil of Reserve Mines and Bobby Anderson of Sydney Mines recalled that when they first went to work in the mines, the older miners believed that if a woman went down the mine, there was bound to be a man hurt in an accident, hit by a box on the run or crushed by a fall of stone. Also, it was considered bad luck for a miner to meet a woman on his way to the pit in the morning. By the 1920's, however, it had become fashionable for women visitors to tour the mines. As Miss Canada, Winnifred Blair of Saint John went down the Dominion Coal Company's No. 2 colliery and two men "gladly handed Miss Canada their machine to do some coal cutting"; *Sydney Post*, 6 June 1923. However, when a group of five young women were employed on a picking belt at the surface of one colliery in the 1940's, the development was reported with some skepticism: "To the knowledge of most old-timers this is the first time that women have been employed at manual labour around the mines and it goes to prove anything can happen these days"; undated clipping, David MacDonald Scrapbook, No. 7, p. 295. Beaton Institute of Cape Breton Studies. On the history of women workers in the British coal industry, see Angela V. John, *By the Sweat of Their Brow: Women Workers at Victorian Coal Mines* (London, 1980).
4. *Census of Canada, 1931*, Table 37.
5. *Maritime Labor Herald*, 17 December 1921. A visiting social worker commented in 1922 on the extraordinary isolation of women in the coal towns: "It may be true that the men also are narrowed down to an unenviable existence even with a rising wage but at least they have [a] measure of social intercourse which is denied the women. They meet going to and from work, they meet in their work and in their union lodges and perhaps in half a dozen ways connected with their work, not to mention ball games, where the women in the same families if they attend to their business live in comparative isolation and run a pretty good risk of acquiring fagged out nerves and bodies within the circle of home duties with perhaps only a neighborly quarrel now and then to enliven things"; *Sydney Post*, 15 September 1922.
6. *Sydney Post*, 21 January 1922.
7. The letters appeared in the *Canadian Labor Leader*, 15, 29 December 1917. Additional letters appeared in the issues of 12, 19 January 1918, and an announcement by the union executive pronounced the contest a success: "these letters prove that but very few are overpaid, and receiving more money in their pay envelopes than can be used to advantage."

## LETTER NO. 2

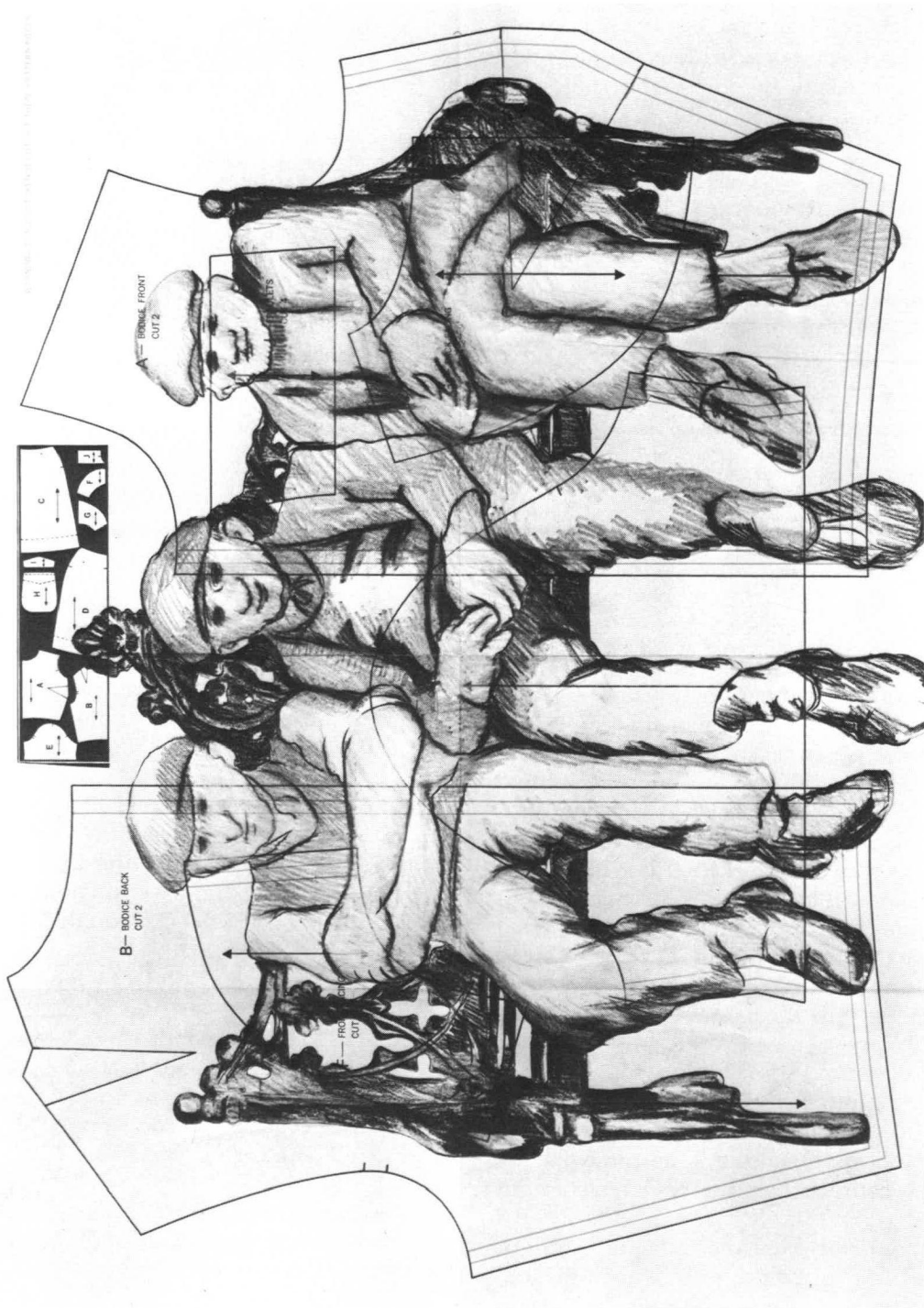
TO: J.B. MacLachlan  
Grand Secretary A.M.W.,  
Glace Bay.

Dear Sir: In response to your appeal to women in the Canadian Labor Leader of Dec. 1st as to have them explain how they can feed, clothe, and educate a family of five children besides themselves and their husbands with the sum of \$3.50

per day for family. I must admit it is a difficult problem to solve. Following will show what a housekeeper's meat and grocery order amounts to providing the necessary eatables for her husband (a miner) herself and five children in one week.—

35 lbs. flour @ \$3.56 pr. 1/4 bbl. . . . .	\$2.50
1 bushel potatoes, at . . . . .	1.10
1/2 bushel turnips at \$1.00 . . . . .	.50
10 lbs. cabbage at 5 cts . . . . .	.50
7 lbs. ham at 38 cts . . . . .	2.66
4 lbs. stew at 22 cts . . . . .	.88
4 lbs. roast at 24 cts . . . . .	.96
3 lbs. steak at 30 cts . . . . .	.90
Fish, fresh or salted . . . . .	.50
3 lbs. pork at 30 cts . . . . .	.90
3 lbs. beans at 15 cts . . . . .	.45
1 doz eggs at 50 cts . . . . .	.50
5 lbs. rolled oats at 7 cts . . . . .	.35
2-3 lbs. tea at 45 cts . . . . .	.30
7 quarts milk at 12 cts. . . . .	.84
10 lbs. sugar at 11 cts . . . . .	1.10
Fresh or dried fruit . . . . .	.50
Tobacco . . . . .	.75
3 lbs. butter at 48 cts . . . . .	1.44
2 lbs. lard at 32 cts . . . . .	.64
Baking Powder and Yeast . . . . .	.20
Toilet and laundry soap . . . . .	.24
House Rent . . . . .	2.00
Coal . . . . .	.75
Doctor . . . . .	.20
Hospital . . . . .	.10
A.M.W. . . . .	.12
	<hr/>
	\$22.43

All these items added together shows the very modest sum of \$22.43 and no person with a sense of justice can say that the allowance in any instance is too great. Well then if a man works 300 days in a year, based on the rate of \$3.50 a day, he will have a yearly income of \$1050.00. If we divide that sum into 52 weekly shares, we find that he has got \$20.20 per week. What a surprise, his weekly income



*BENCH WARMING*, Sarah Gersovitz, drawing—  
coloured pencil 53cm x 72cm, 1979

won't cover the food bill and the house rent alone, let alone all the rest of life's necessities. There is two ways out of it. Eat less or earn more. In order that a family of seven may live in comfort following annual bill must be added to the weekly bill described above.

10 pairs of children's shoes at \$3.50	\$35.00
6 pairs of men's pit shoes at \$2.75	16.50
1 pair of men's Sunday shoes	7.00
2 pairs ladies' boots or shoes	10.00
Renewal of men's and wife's clothing \$5.00	50.00
Upkeep of five children's clothing	100.00
5 children's insurance policies 10 cts a week	26.00
Man's Life Ins. Pol. of \$1000	50.00
Church and Taxes	20.00
Upkeep of Furniture	20.00
Renewal of bed clothing	<u>15.00</u>
	<b>\$349.50</b>

Again, I ask, are not every one of these items necessities of life, and has not any honest workingman a right to demand each and every one of these necessities in exchange for 300days of labor? In adding it up we find that this annual bill plus 52 weekly bills of \$22.43 each, amounts to \$1515.86. Subtracting from that \$1050.00 we find that the man who works 300 days in a year at \$3.50 per day still lacks \$464.86 per year to support his family with reasonable comfort. What must the man do to get that money? Is he able to work 432 shifts in a year? If he is, and he gets the chance, he can raise the money by what you may call true slavery.

But very seldom will you find such chances and such ability exhibited, and looked at from a Union standpoint shouldn't be aimed at by anybody, because each and every man has a right to demand a comfortable living in return for his labor without working time and a half straight along. Looking at the proposed wage scale and

comparing it with costs of life's necessities I find that the demands in many instances are rather low and in none too high.

Yours fraternally,

Mrs. Thos. Milkkesen  
New Waterford, C.B.

LETTER NO. 7

Birch Grove, N.S.  
Dec. 17, 1917

To the Editor of the Canadian Labor Leader.

Dear Sir:

Having read Mr. McLachlan's letter in your paper asking the women of this county to write and explain how they could keep a family of seven on \$3.50 per day, I decided I would answer and give a detailed account of at least the most important items of expenditure in a working man's home, that is the necessities of life.

The following list is based on actual knowledge as to quantity and where prices are not steady an average is taken, admitting that a man could work every day. Sundays and holidays excepted, 313 days at \$3.50 per day equals \$1071.00.

EXPENDITURE

Rent at \$7.00 per month	\$84.00
Coal, two loads per month at .75 per load	18.00
Hauling coal .50 per load	12.00
Flour 9 bbls. per year at 13.50 per bbl.	121.50
Potatoes, 60 bus. at 1.50	75.00
Fresh meat, 6 lb. per week at .23 per lb.	71.76

Dried cod, 10 lbs. per week at .12 per lb.	52.40
Rolled Oats, 300 lb. at 7¢ per lb.	21.00
Butter 5 lb. per week at 45¢	117.00
Tea, 1 lb. per week at 55¢	27.50
Milk, 1 qt per day at 12¢	43.80
Sugar 5 lb. per week at 11¢	28.60
Kerosene Oil, 2 gal per week at 25¢	6.00
Soap, 80 bars at 7¢	<u>5.60</u>
Total in this line	<u>694.16</u>
Amount carried forward	694.16

Man's wearing apparel for year

4 pr. working shoes at 2.50	10.00
4 pr. working socks at 50¢	2.00
2 suits working under clothes at \$3.00	6.00
2 working shirts at \$1.25	2.50
4 pr. overalls at \$1.25	5.00
1 suit clothes \$30.00	\$30.00
1 Overcoat or Raincoat	15.00
1 Hat	3.00
1 Dress Shirt	1.50
2 Collars	.40
1 Necktie	.50
2 Suits underclothes	6.00
3 pr. socks at 50¢	1.50
1 pr. dress shoes	6.50
1 pr. rubbers	<u>1.40</u>
	<u>\$785.46</u>

Woman's clothing for year

1 suit	26.00
1 coat	15.00
4 House dresses at \$1.50 each	6.00
1 Hat	4.00
3 pr. Shoes at 3.50	10.50
4 pr. stockings at .50 per pr.	2.00
2 Suits underclothing	6.00
2 pr. rubbers	2.00
1 pr. gloves	.90

Children's Clothes

2 suits each for five children at an average price of \$4.00	40.00
10 pr. of shoes average price of 2.00	20.00
2 suits of underclothing each at an average price of \$1.50	15.00
4 pr. of stocking each at 50¢	10.00
1 coat for each at an average price of \$4.00	<u>20.00</u>
	956.86

Off Tax

Doctor 20¢ per week	10.40
Hospital 20¢ per week	5.20
Patriotic Fund 25¢ per mo.	3.00
Church \$1.00 per mo.	12.00
Taxes	<u>5.00</u>
	\$992.36

\$1071.00 - 992.36 equals \$78.64

Just think of it. After buying almost enough to eat for the family, fuel enough to keep them warm, rent paid for a house to live in and enough clothes bought at least to fulfil the law, I have a surplus of \$78.64 out of which I can buy such luxuries as salt, pepper, ginger, yeast cakes, molasses, lard, onions, etc. also stove linings, household utensils, kettles, pans, dishes, and house furnishings, such as window blinds, curtains, bed clothes, etc. Of course I cannot think of wall paper, paint or door rugs, neither can my man think of smoking or using tobacco in any form. As to money for car fare or nickels, why that would be "unpatriotic" for a working man or his family to think of spending money in theatres or bus fare. Besides "Mrs. Hanna" would not approve of it, such pleasures are only for rich people and "class politicians." My husband must also shave himself, cut the children's hair and amuse the baby while I do up his shirt for Sunday to save a few dimes so that he can get his hair cut once a month.

I am sorry that I have not time to give a more detailed account of the numerous small articles that are necessary to run a house even when the strictest economy is used. But I think the statement I have given will show that only by the greatest economy and some privation can a family of seven live at the present time on \$3.50 per day and that is without taking into consideration lost time or sickness which would incur greater expense.

Yours truly,  
Mrs. M.M.A.



**"Boscawen Manor, Lunenburg" by Carol Olson, Blue Rocks Studio Gallery  
Blue Rocks, Nova Scotia**