

Social Studies 8

Chapter 7: The Interwar Years - Reading Assignment

Read the following article and answer all of the questions on loose leaf. Completed answers will be passed in complete with a cover page. Each question is valued at 5 marks.

NAME: _____

CLASS: _____

Industrial Disease and the St. Lawrence Mines

Major economic transformations, such as that which took place in St. Lawrence, always carry with them certain costs. One way of life is often eradicated or substantially altered by another, and crises of various kinds arise as people try to cope with rapid change in their economic, social and cultural worlds.

In St. Lawrence, for example, mining meant a fundamental change in how people worked and lived as families. Whereas previously families often worked together in collective enterprises such as inshore fishing or farming, now men and women took on very different roles in the family economy. Indeed, it could be said that the sharp distinction between "work" and "home" arose and was reinforced by industrialization. Also, people accustomed to working according to the dictates of the seasons or the weather, with some measure of control over the hours and rate of work, now had to get used to working on strict schedules and under direct supervision.

An industry such as mining is also highly stratified, and divisions of skill and wages are more stark than in, for example, an inshore fishing economy. Until a lot more research is done, it is difficult to measure or even to describe how such changes impacted on families, workers, and the community as a whole.



St. Lawrence Miners, ca. 1961.

Courtesy of the Town of St. Lawrence, NF.

The clearest and most devastating price the people of St. Lawrence, Lawn, Little St. Lawrence, and the surrounding area paid for the apparent prosperity of the mining years, however, was widespread industrial disease and numerous deaths. While the record shows that as early as 1936, miners were concerned that the large amounts of dust generated by drilling and other activities was affecting their health, it was decades before anything was done. Ironically, the move from open-trench mining to underground in the late thirties, while it brought some protection from the cold and other elements, exposed the miners to a lot more dust. The St. Lawrence mines are notoriously wet, and flooding is a

constant problem. Luckily, the groundwater that the miners cursed for making them wet and cold also suppressed the dust in some areas.



Testing Air Quality, ca. 1960.

Two miners taking an air sample in the underground mine.
Courtesy of the Town of St. Lawrence, NF.

For those exposed to the dust for prolonged periods, however, there was no escaping the consequences. The "dry-drills" which the miners used until the 1940s (as opposed to the more modern type where a steady stream of water is supplied to the drill bit) produced a great deal of dust from which miners had little or no protection. Over time, this "silica dust" accumulates on the lungs and other bronchial areas, and scar tissue builds up. As the process goes on, breathing becomes more difficult, and lung capacity decreases, until the victim in effect suffocates from a condition known as "silicosis".

While the first case of silicosis was officially confirmed in the late fifties, many had suspected the problem long before that. In 1941, for example, the St. Lawrence Mine Workers' Protective Union (registered in 1937) asked a government tribunal appointed to settle a strike, to arrange medical examinations to be conducted on the miners. During the fifties, a St. Lawrence resident named Rennie Slaney began keeping a written account of the ages and work histories of those growing ill and dying, and he urged various company and government bodies to take action. Various levels of government wrangled over administrative responsibility. Many miners, suspected of having tuberculosis, were treated for that disease but died shortly after. Nothing was done until it was far too late for those already dead or destined to get sick and die from prolonged exposure.

Three St. Lawrence Miners, ca. 1965.

(r-l) Clyde Lake, Rennie Slaney, ? Turpin. All three men were sent to Ottawa to be tested for diseases possibly caused by mining in St. Lawrence. All three later died of industrial diseases.
Courtesy of the Town of St. Lawrence, NF.



New technologies in drilling and other methods, and a new awareness on the part of the workers and especially the union, did a great deal to eliminate many of the problems associated with dust. In the early sixties, however, the presence of a new and even more deadly enemy was confirmed. It was discovered that miners and ex-miners suffered from an abnormally high incidence of cancer, a condition which

could not be explained by exposure to ordinary silica dust. A team of federally-appointed experts then confirmed the presence of high levels of radon gas in many underground areas. The gas was apparently released during mining operations, and tended to build up in non-ventilated areas. Efforts were then undertaken to adequately ventilate the mines, to remove the threats of dust and radon gas, and regular air monitoring was introduced. Again, however, for many it was too late.



Boys Sorting Ore, ca. 1960.

A group of young boys sorting ore at the Black Duck Mine.
Courtesy of the Town of St. Lawrence, NF.

The lack of medical facilities and accurate record-keeping in the period before the fifties, in addition to the questions raised by the presence of other diseases, such as tuberculosis, make it difficult to say exactly how many miners died from working in the St. Lawrence mines. Taking the official and unofficial estimates together, however, the figure is somewhere between two and three hundred. While their numbers have diminished, ex-miners continue to grow ill and die today.

Protest March, ca. 1970.

An organized protest march for the benefit of sick miners, widows and dependents. Notice the cancer symbol carried by the man.
Courtesy of the Town of St. Lawrence, NF.



In 1969, a Royal Commission appointed to investigate and make recommendations on the St. Lawrence situation released its report. The report documented the history of industrial disease in the area, and made some key recommendations concerning safety and compensation. Among them was a call for regular air monitoring, conducted by team of medical, company, and union representatives, to be carried out every 24 hours. Seeking workers' compensation and widows' benefits has been a long and sometimes frustrating experience for many, and the money received does little to make up for the loss of so many husbands, fathers, sons and brothers. The people of St. Lawrence learned the hard that the apparent prosperity that comes with industrialization can bring with it a heavy price. The town's two overly large cemeteries bear witness to that fact.

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Questions:

1. The article states that industrialization, or the process of changing to a manufacturing society, changed the way the people of St. Lawrence worked and lived. Show this is true using two examples from the article.
2. When did the miners of St. Lawrence first suspect something was wrong with the conditions they were working in? Was the move to underground mining any improvement on the conditions? Explain.
3. What is “silica dust”? What effect does it have on the miners of St. Lawrence?
4. Who was Rennie Slaney and how did he try to get the government and company to pay attention to the problem the miners were having? What was the result?
5. When the miners were more aware of the dangers of dust, what new problem was discovered? What caused it? How was it dealt with?
6. In your opinion, did the government and mining company act quickly enough in addressing the problems of the St. Lawrence Mine? What evidence from the article supports your view? How does mining safety practices of the past compare to those of today?