Canadian Mining Towns: a Photo-montage

Varpu Lindstrom-Best

The many rich mineral discoveries made in Canada during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century began an unprecedented mining boom and signaled the need for thousands of miners. Immigrants were recruited to solve the problem of labour shortage and to fill the new, dangerous and backbreaking jobs. Finns were one of the first groups of miners in Canada and hence had a significant impact in both the development of the new mining communities and the organization of the miners.

The communities reflected the sense of isolation and vulnerability that many of the newly arrived immigrants were experiencing. At the same time, the immigrants were cementing a uniformity of purpose and a sense of solidarity in the face of shared danger. Women, although disbarred from employment in the mines, were active participants in promoting the sense of community and the need for determined action.

The following photographs are selected to illustrate the primitive conditions, the dangers of mining and the human response to fight for a better life by improving both the working conditions and the social life of the mining towns.
In hope of instant riches thousands of immigrants rushed to Yukon between 1897-1904. Among the very first people to cross the treacherous mountains were many Finnish men and women who staked their claims. Few were lucky, most retreated south penniless.
Northern Ontario hardrock mines depended on cheap immigrant labour.

Copper Cliff, Ontario, 1893.
Surface mining.

North Mine, Copper Cliff, Ontario, 1898.
Men spent their entire shifts underground in the deep tunnels of gold and silver mines.

South Porcupine, Ontario, 1928,
The dangerous work forged a common bond between miners from many nationalities.

South Porcupine, Ontario, 1928.
Many a young man was crushed to death in the coalmines of British Columbia. Their families in the old country received only photographs of their sons' last journey. Extension, B.C.
Entire communities mourned the deaths of victims of large mining disasters. Mass funerals served to radicalize the miners and their families. Funeral of eight Finns and one East Ballician who died in the Hollinger Mine Disaster. Timmins, Ontario 1928.

In unorganized mining communities, leisure time was too often spent by drinking and playing cards.

Alberta, n.d.
To add meaning to their lives and strength through solidarity Finnish immigrants organized socialist political, cultural and social organizations. Finnish community in the tiny mining town of Cobalt, Ontario celebrate the Finnish Socialist Organization of Canada’s summer picnic, 1916.
Finnish miners in Sudbury were well known for their love of cross-country ski competitions.

Sudbury, Ontario, 1927.
Finnish coalminers in North Wellington, British Columbia organized a temperance society and a brass band. 1898.