

Cape Breton's MAGAZINE



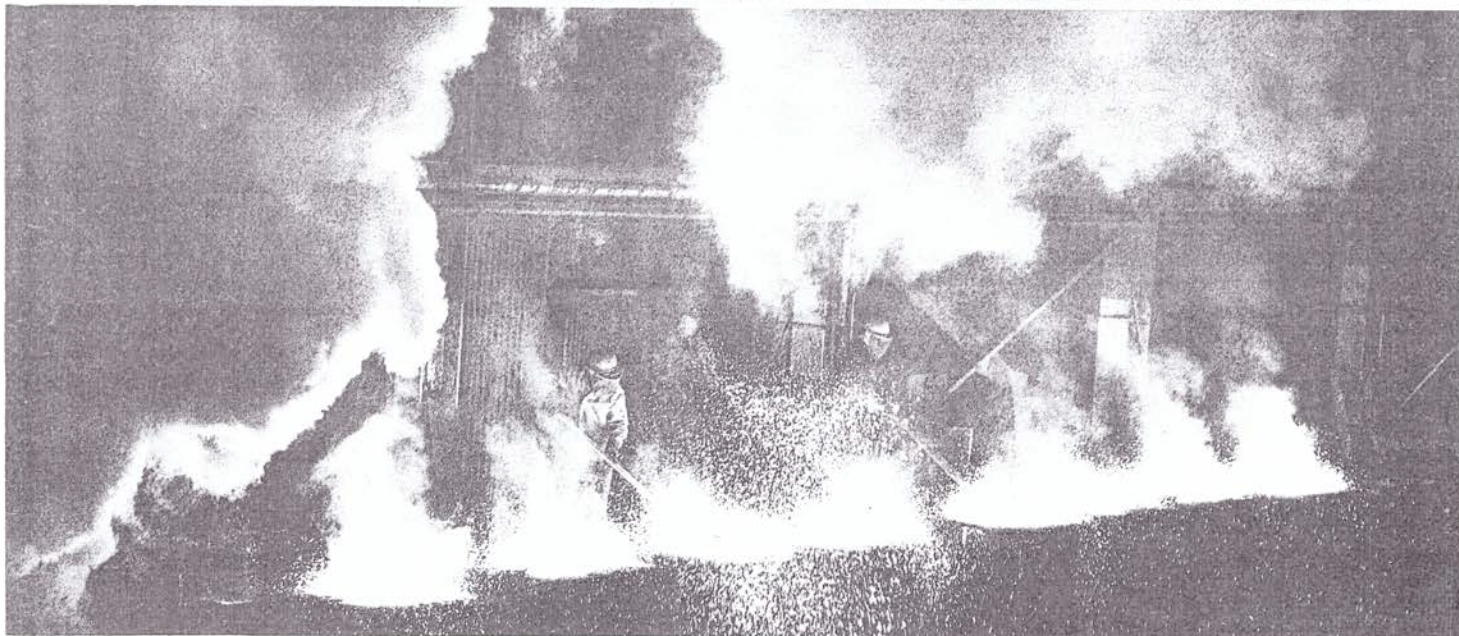
From Conversations with Steelworkers
Rita MacNeil of Big Pond
The Separatist Movement in Cape Breton
An Acadian Tale: "Le Chien Noir"
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Gaelic Precenting on the North Shore

In This Issue
a Free Soundsheet Record
of Rita MacNeil
Singing "Old Man"
and Gaelic Precenting
from the North Shore

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of Cape Breton Island

From Conversations with Steelworkers



How Mike Oleschuk Got his Farm

Mike Oleschuk, steelworker: I was born in Austria. Then after the war, it became occupied and called the Ukraine. And then in 1918-19 the Polish occupied it. And with the Polish passport I came to Canada. But my nationality is Ukrainian.

I came to Canada in 1929--May 31st--I landed in Quebec. I came there to be on a farm. See, in the old country I had two sisters, and we had there only 12 acres of land. And I didn't want to work like a slave. I could see what would happen. I'd get married and my father would split up the piece of land--a piece for one sister, a piece for another sister, piece of land for me--and after, I'll have nothing to give my children. In the old country, some people ended up working for landlords all their lives. That's all they had. But I did not want to work like a slave. And that's what made me decide to sell my land and pay my fare and come away to Canada.

Okay. I came to Canada. I brought all my money, \$1200. That time that was quite a lot of money. I didn't know one word of English. And those agents get you, you don't know--took me to where there were bushes and bushes everywhere. I got a home--stead and nobody there. I was by myself. Lots of Ukrainians came to that area, but everybody was around, living far away from one another. I found a farm--80 acres cleared land, a house was built up with



logs. It was nice, three rooms--\$3000. I was satisfied. I gave down \$1000. Now I've got to work and pay it up--\$2000, that's the mortgage. All those neighbours there

NOTE: The processes, finished products, working conditions and the steel plant itself have changed continuously over the past eighty years. The photos used in this article are intended to give an idea of the work of steelmaking in Cape Breton. They are not in the correct order in the steelmaking process, and they are drawn from all periods, from the earliest days to more recent years.

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said, Don't worry. They said, In a couple more years there you'll be cleared up. Don't worry.... But my grain stays there. I can't sell it. What's the good? Mortgage combined with interest, interest. I went working for 50 cents a day, cleaning up their land, other people's land--what's the 50 cents a day? How am I going to make the payments?

Well, I started looking around every place there to find a better job--no job. And I had a brother-in-law living here in Sydney. And before I left the old country, he was sending money to his wife in the old country. She bought land, built a nice home. He was in Sydney. He worked in the steel plant. I wrote him a letter. I said, "Look, I would like to come to Sydney." He wrote, "Don't come, because there's nothing here." He said, "I'm working only one shift in a month, one furnace going--that's all. Only one furnace." I don't want to believe it. Because how did that happen there in two years--so quick? Well, I said, there's something fishy. He doesn't want me there. I decided to go. I met a fellow--a Ukrainian guy, but he was born in Ontario and he talked Ukrainian and he had good English. That's good for me, you know, anything I'd want to know, I could find out in my language. He was my buddy.

Well, we became hobos right through to Sydney on the train. Sometimes the police chased me out but, well, you catch another one. That's the way I landed in Sydney. One morning, the boxcar landed in the yard there in Sydney. We woke up to the stink from the steel plant. We got up, opened the door--I looked and, by jeez, there's lots of stacks. I said, oh, we'll get a job here. A big factory. Oh by gosh.

Well, we get up, go and wash ourselves with the stinky water there by the brook, and we go to Number One Gate. Nobody stopped us. We landed in the bar mill. By gosh, I could see lots of butts there, cigarette butts. We saw nobody there, so we picked up those butts, made a smoke. Then we walked. Didn't see anybody. We came back and I go back to the gate and I asked the fellows there, "Where's the Whitney Pier?" And they told me where to go.

Well, we came to the Pier. I asked where's my brother-in-law, anybody know? Well, they sent me to another fellow with the same name. I found him and I see that's not my brother-in-law. But he called me into the house, gave us something to eat. And he gave us each a package of tobacco. And he told me to go to Edel Hirsh on Ling-an Road, that all the foreigners deal there. Ukraine, Polish, Hungarian, Italian deal there. It's a grocery store. He speaks Ukraine, Polish, all kind of languages--he's an old country Jew. So, "Yeah," he said, "he deals here in my store. He lives on Henry Street."

I go there and a lady hollers up, there's somebody to see him. Right away I'm recognized. We shake hands and everything. He asks me questions: how I landed, how did everything go there. Sat down and talked. I told him all the history. He asked me about his wife and children in the old country and how are things there. "Well," he said, "Mike, there's nothing here in Sydney." He's saved a few dollars, and he had to pay the board for me. I saw, by gosh, I've got to go looking for something. A fella had a farm at Blackett's Lake; he wanted someone to clear up the land. Well, I went there with my buddy, the Canadian-born fellow I came with to Sydney.

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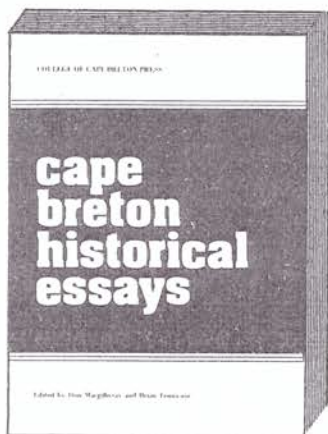
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"Yeah, I could take you both." We've got a job. I don't ask him how much he pays because I am glad to have someplace to sleep and something to eat. Well, he paid us 25 cents a day, and board. And we slept in the barn. That was summer. That was okay. And I was a good worker. And every Saturday he goes with the eggs and everything to town--and every Saturday he bought me tobacco, half a pound--but none for my buddy. I think that's because he'd go away and his wife would watch what I do. And when I work, I work. If I want to smoke, that's the only time I stop.

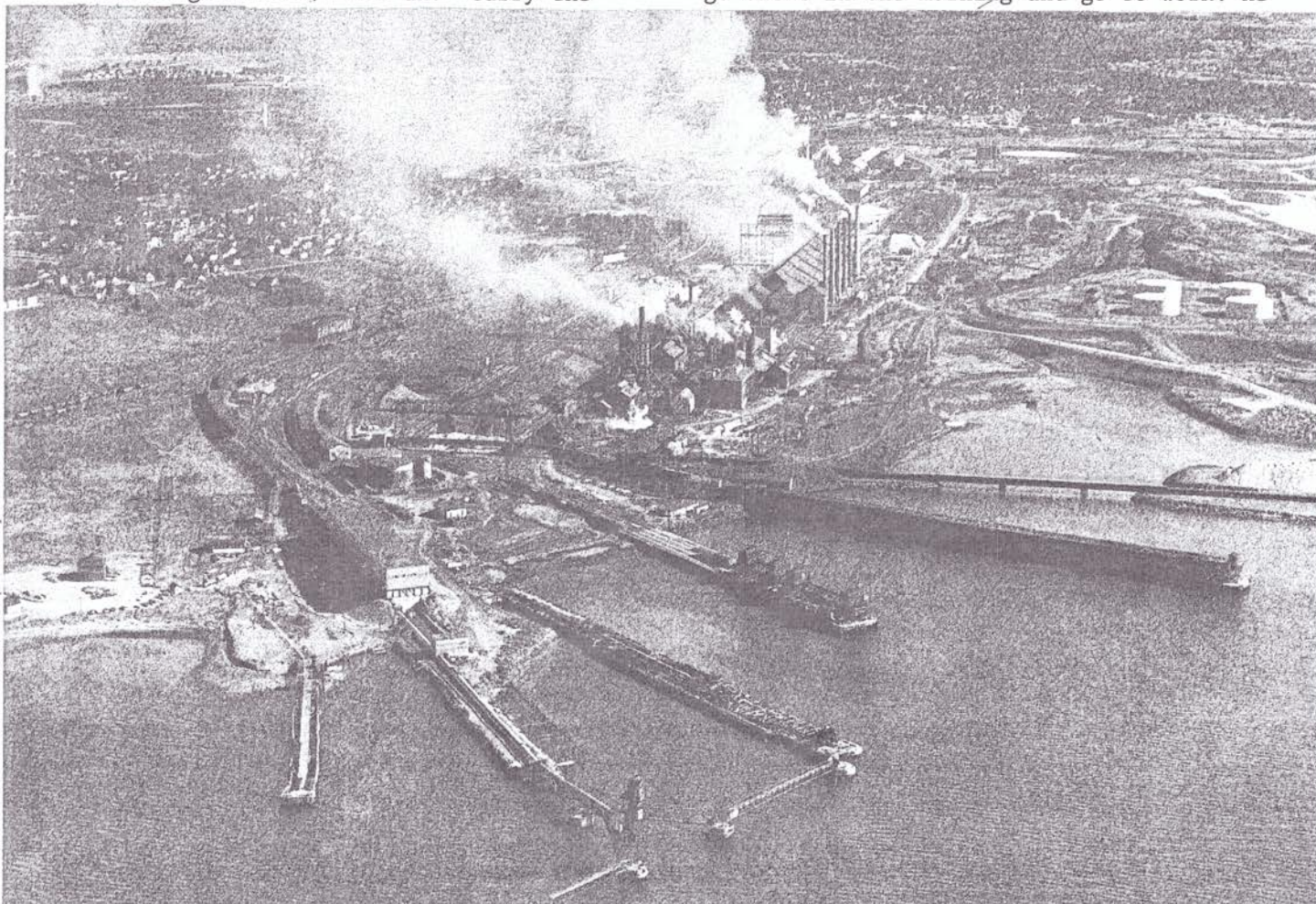
We worked there for pretty near four months. 25 cents a day. And it was in September, a hot day, and my buddy sat down by a tree and took a snooze. And the farmer's wife watched. He came home in the evening and his wife told him--says Mike is working, and that fellow sat down and was asleep. He told my buddy to go. "If you want to stay, Mike, you can stay. And I'll give you 50 cents a day." I worked one more week. Then one day my buddy walked out to Blakett's Lake, eight miles. He said, "Mike, a boat came to load pulp. I put your name there. Thirty dollars a month and board." I had just got 50 cents a day. By gosh, now I had a dollar a day. I'll be a millionaire. And we went there and we loaded pulp. We worked there 3 months before it froze and we quit. Well, I made 90 dollars. I was a rich man.

After that, relief was open to us. And we had to go to City Hall and "carry the

bag." We had to go from Whitney Pier to Sydney and register for the relief, and we had to go there every Wednesday, go pick up our groceries. Give you the codfish, turnips, 2 loaves of bread--a dollar's worth. That was relief at that time. This was not only Ukrainians. English people were doing this, too. Didn't make any difference what you were--it's the 'thirties and nobody's working.

In 1933 I got married to a Canadian-born girl, and jobs started to pick up, the steel plant started to pick up a little bit. Open hearth got four furnaces and blast furnace got one furnace--and I tried to get a job. My wife was working with Mrs. Melnick in the store, and Mrs. Melnick told her there's going to be an opening at the coal bank, a job dumping coal. "Only thing," my wife told me, "you've got to give the foreman a bottle of rum." And I said, "Where would I get the money to buy the bottle?" And I had to give him the bottle to get the job. And you had to be lucky. You had to have, beside the rum, that Mrs. Melnick knows him. If she didn't know him, I wouldn't get the job even if I had the rum.

My wife went to Mrs. Melnick, and Mrs. Melnick bought a bottle of rum and gave it to her. And I took the rum and got a job. Only thing, to actually work, it has to be a stormy day--because the boss had lots of friends. He gave the work first to his friends. There was no such a thing as you go there in the morning and go to work. He



says, "Okay, go pick up the shovel there--you, you, you, you, you, go pick up." I've got to stay back. If he takes me, okay. If he doesn't take me, I'll have to go back home. (Even though now you have a job?) Yeah, I have a job. I gave him the rum and he gave me a job. But each day I've got to go there. If he wants me to work that day, he picks me. If he doesn't want me, he doesn't pick me. (And do you get paid if you don't get picked?) No. (And that's the job you have.) That's the job I have. And if the weather is bad, some of the fellows don't come out. Lots of times, I prayed that they'd have bad weather so I could get a shift.

(And what was the job you were lucky enough to get?) A loaded train comes out on the bank of coal, and you've got to take the coal off. The last cars, maybe the last 10 cars, you had it easy--you open the door and the coal falls down the bank by itself. They could be dumped. But if you're by the engine, you've got to shovel every piece of coal, because you're far away from the edge of the bank. (And which cars did you get?) I'd have the cars by the engine. I had to shovel the coal out of the car and over the bank, every time.

Hard work. And dirty work. And those times, for us there was no such a thing as a bathtub, sink--you had to bring a bucket inside to wash yourself--and coal is dirty. You had to clean up. Only the work clothes that I used, I put aside, and in the morning I'd put them on--so I'd get dirty again, before I'd go. If I worked or didn't work--when I came back, I'd be dirty and

have to wash again. I'd be dirty anyhow. And lots of times I had to come back without working. I'd only get to work in the worse weather--snowing, blowing, rain--that's the day I'd get a job. (And your pay?) 28 cents an hour. That was good money, that time. I made \$2.80 a day. And if I'd work a whole day there, I'd come home and get something to eat and wash myself, and you could say there was music, there was dancing--I didn't care. I was beat. And I was young. I was young and I was beat.

(How much would you shovel in a shift?) Oh, the small cars, two men could shovel 10 cars in a day--that's 15 tons in a car. That's in a shift when an engine was always there, you could shovel up to 10 cars, that's 10 trips. Some days it would be 8 trips, 5 trips. But if you had two engines going, you could get 10 cars, you were supposed to be working 10 hours, but sometimes it would get dark and you'd only get 8 hours. (So even into the 'thirties, you were working those long days.) Oh yeah. And some days you'd work 24 hours--when you changed your shift (going from night shift to day shift or day shift to night...) you stayed 24 hours in the steel plant. They'd give you an hour to go home, take your lunch, and go back. Only you never worked on the coal bank at nighttime.

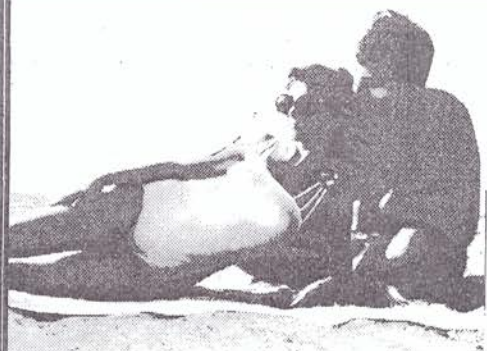
(That sounds like a rough job.) People do it. I did it. (Was this the kind of job you'd only give to people from the old country?) Oh no, no such a thing there. Canadian-born people too. They were fair on that. Only generally, the foreign peo-

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Men working in cooled-down Open
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ples had to buy the job, like I told you. (A bottle of rum to get the job.) Well, if you wanted to work steady in Sydney, you had to give the boss a bottle every week. He forgets that first bottle. There even was an agent in the open hearth and the mixer, he collected two dollars from each one there and gave it to the boss, so those fellows could stay on the job. The bosses had the power that time. No union. What place could you go? The foremen controlled the whole thing. If you're in good with the foreman, okay, you could be working. In 1933, my father-in-law was working in the big plant. And he told the foreman to take me there in the spring, take me to make brick. So I got that job.

You have a tank there and a chute and molds, and you have to beat mud, and beat it good so you don't have a rock--so that it will be solid and smooth. You work with another man who picks up the bricks and puts them onto a car to go to the kiln. After the fellows there took them out, the bricks went to the open hearth and the blast furnaces and other places they used it in the plant. (Was it easier than working on the coal bank?) Didn't make any difference at the steel plant what you did--it was a hard job. Making brick, you've got to work like a son-of-a-gun--4" by 9", you've got to make 2000 bricks, and slab brick, 9" by 10", you've got to make about 1200 to 1400 for each car. You made 4, 5, 6 cars a day--there was no contract on that. And they paid you by the hour. Stripper had 28 cents an hour, and mold man working at the beater there, he had 30 cents an hour.

(You must have been tired all the time.) I was young. You get a little bit of rest, and you forget. And no such a thing as a union. You talk about union, and you're out. (So you didn't talk about unions?) Well, I talked. But you've got to know to

whom you talk. You watch for the progressive people who know what is what. If you figure there is danger, you don't talk about those things. I was two years, and all summers I made the brick. And in the wintertime we'd go there in the general yard. I worked with the bricklayers. I carried the brick with the wheelbarrow. (What were bricks used for?) Used it for the furnace, used it for what the gas goes through, it's called the checkers. Gas goes through the checkers to the furnace to melt the steel, coming from the gas producers. The clay bricks from Scotland and other countries, they go in the checkers. The bricks that I made here in Sydney, they went to line the furnaces--in the roof and the sides of the furnace. I helped line the furnace.

And if the furnace is hot--that's a hard job there again. If the furnace has got to go through a repair, put the new brick there, you've got to go in there with bars and break the old brick out. Then you go into the furnace and you line it. (Did they turn the furnace off, let it cool down before you go in?) Oh, no, no. Not too cool. Sometimes hot, by jeez. But the boss said go, and there was no union that time--if he told you to go, you put a wet bag over your head and go in there. The wet bag is so you don't burn yourself. Your shoes--you're working two shifts there, you don't have shoes. You climb into the furnace. You can't stay in too long. The heat chokes you. You go in for as long as you can stand. Pick up the bricks and throw them away outside. Pick up the bricks and throw them away--pick up as much as you can there. After they see you choking and your back steaming where you put the wet bag over your head--you get out and another fellow's got to go. (Terrible job.) I know that. And no union to protect you. The boss said, you go in. And you'd have to come early to get a shift--

And because I supported the Seamen's Union and my wife made sandwiches for the picket line and everything--some even said, Go burn Mike Oleschuk's house. The committee stopped them, said if I wanted to support them, it was my idea.

Well, Jack Moraff, the Jew, he was my good friend. He didn't work at the plant but he was a good progressive man, and he knew me well. He came the next day. He said, "Mike, you have small children. By jeez, if you get kicked out of that plant, what are you going to do?" I said I didn't know. He said, "You saw what happened to Forlett--he had to go to the old country. He got blacklisted and he can't get citizen papers and he can't get a damned thing--this'll be happening to you." He said, "Quit that. Let the Canadian people do it. You're a foreigner." I said, "Jack, I can't do it. It's too late for me." I said, "What the hell am I going to do?" He said, "Buy a piece of land and go there and farm there. If you get a kick in the ass, at least you can make a living." "How can I buy a piece of land?" "Don't worry. You're my good friend, and if you'd like to go on the farm--I'll buy it." And that's the way I landed on the farm. He took the mortgage. The farm cost \$10,000 and I paid \$10,000.



I paid only for the bank administration, 2 dollars a year for 18 years--so I paid 36 dollars interest for \$10,000. You could say that was a good friend? He didn't make anything. An old country Jew. I'd come home from the plant and work the farm. We had cows--10 cows at that time--and horses, pigs, chickens, garden--everything there. I'm coming on 74. I fought, and I'm still fighting. And you could say the Seamen's Union and Jack Moraff finally put me there on the farm.

CONVERSATIONS CONTINUE PAGE 9

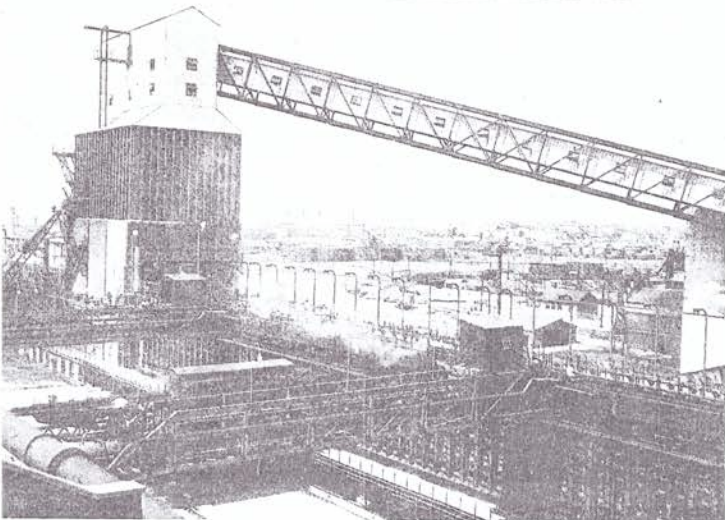
While these Conversations with Steelworkers are not intended to present a detailed picture of the steelmaking process, it might be helpful to have a very basic understanding of how steel is made. The sketch on page 9 gives a rough overview of some of the processes and products in the flowline of making steel. The first step is the coke ovens. In future issues we expect to offer a more detailed look at other departments in the steel plant.



Regarding the Coke Ovens

J.T. Collier, Manager of Coke Ovens, ret.: Of course, the coke plant is only the very beginning of the steel process. That makes coke which is used as a fuel, also chemically to smelt iron ore into iron in the blast furnace. From there the hot iron is taken to the open hearth and made into steel. Coke has nothing to do with that.

Today coal for coke comes from selected mines--but when I went there first, it was all Cape Breton coal. Cape Breton coal makes a very poor coke. It's very very high volatile and it runs about 35 or 36% volatile, and the reaction is so violent that it makes a very friable coke that will not support the burden in the blast furnace--you want good burden so you can get a draft through all the time--it breaks down and causes plugging. So for that reason, now, we selectively blend coals, blending coals that are less volatile with the high volatile coals locally, and end up with a composite that's probably around 29% volatile. By volatile, I mean the gaseous stuff that's actually driven off during the coking process. (You don't want the coke to catch fire then?) Well, the coke is made in a sealed chamber. It can't catch fire. There's no air in there. A coke oven is a literal name--coal is baked in an oven. Behind those doors are brick chambers that are hermetically sealed, are under pressure, and are heated from without, just like an oven. You bake coal just like you bake bread--you don't burn it, you bake it, to get coke. You can get by-products from the gas. But your primary purpose in the coke plant is to make a fuel for the blast furnace. That's your



Seen from the pusher side, a view of the coke ovens, including part of the 114 Koppers Ovens.