

CANADA'S HERITAGE/

Singing miner saved the day

BY MARSHA BOULTON

Canada's "singing miner" Maurice Ruddick sang Happy Birthday and hymns for eight-and-a-half days to keep the hopes of his fellow miners alive when they were trapped nearly four kilometres underground in the Springhill Mining Disaster.

Ruddick was one of the few black miners employed at the Springhill mine on Oct. 23, 1958. He and 173 other coal miners were just starting their 8 to 11 p.m. shift at the Cumberland Pit Shaft Number 2 when a small "bump" occurred.

Although the earth may not seem to move beneath our feet, it is constantly shifting. Nowhere is this more apparent than in a mine, where pressure builds up in gaseous pockets and is released in ground-shifts called "bumps."

An hour after the first bump, a second followed. This one shook the surface of the town and created a heart-chilling rumble. It proved to be the most severe bump in North American mining history. Underground, 73 were killed instantly by a massive cave-in.

Rescue teams mobilized to find survivors. Within 24 hours, more than half of the surviving miners made it to the surface. While anx-

ious family members crowded at the pithead, the fabled team of draegermen who were specially-trained to assist in such disasters, found themselves hampered by communication breakdowns and ventilation problems.

It seemed to be a miracle when, six days later, a voice was heard through the ventilator pipe that stretched more than 8,000 metres below the surface. Twelve more miners were saved.

Eight other miners would wait two-and-a-half more days in a metre-high pocket before being discovered in what Maurice Ruddick described as a "dungeon." For one of them, Percy Rector, help would be too late.

As the men waited, wondered and prayed, Ruddick sang. Although the 46-year-old father of 12 had suffered a broken leg, the trauma of crawling over fallen bodies to marginal haven, and the stun of toxic gas, he persisted in rallying his comrades' spirits with jokes and tunes.

"I cried quietly in the darkness but I made sure nobody else heard me. It might have broken the resolve to live," Ruddick admitted in the aftermath.

When the seven men divided their last sandwich and drank the last of their water on Nov. 1, they

also celebrated the birthday of miner Garnet Clarke with a resounding chorus of Happy Birthday, led by Ruddick. To survive, they chewed moist bark from the pit-wall props, sucked coal and even drank their own urine.

When the draegermen finally reached them on Nov. 5, one of the astonished rescuers reported that he found Ruddick sitting on a stone-tack, singing at the top of his lungs.

"Give me a drink of water and I'll sing you a song," he said in greeting, and the long ordeal came to an end.

Ruddick modestly underplayed his inspirational role but others felt differently.

"If it wasn't for Maurice, they'd have all been dead," the mother of one of the miners told Ruddick's wife. After the disaster, the Springhill mine was closed forever.

The rescue made international headlines and Canada's "singing miner" experienced the spotlight briefly in public tributes. The governor of Georgia, Marvin Griffin, was so taken with the story that he invited the 19 Springhill survivors to recuperate on an all-expense-paid holiday at a swank resort. The gracious invitation changed dramatically when the governor discovered Ruddick was black. The American

south was strictly segregated in those days and Ruddick's invitation only stood if he agreed to be segregated.

Initially, Ruddick refused the governor's terms. When it became apparent that his fellow miners planned to refuse to go without him, he accepted the segregated invitation — suggesting to them: "We'll all have our holiday, then we'll be together again." In Georgia he stayed at one of the few hotels that accepted blacks, while the others stayed at a vacation resort for millionaires. He could not attend functions in their honor but the men he shared that darkened Springhill tomb with were proud to join a "segregated" celebration for Ruddick.

By popular consensus, Ruddick was named 1958's Canadian Citizen of the Year. When he presented the award to Ruddick, Ontario premier Leslie Frost described him as "an inspiration to all ... a man with the divine attribute of common sense." With the grace of a hero, Ruddick accept the honor "for every miner in town."

Marsha Boulton is the author of Just a Minute! Glimpses of Our Great Canadian Heritage, and Letters From the Country, both published by Little, Brown and Co.

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