

# NO MORE PICKIN' COAL

by

Valerie Hope MacDonald  
née Ruddick

Born in a town that never knew my name,  
Left for the city to make my fortune and fame.

## CHORUS:

Those big city lights keep calling me;  
No more pickin' coal,  
No more pickin' coal.

Mamma, Mamma, please stop that cryin';  
There'll soon be lots of bread, and chicken frying.

## CHORUS:

Those big city lights keep calling me;  
No more pickin' coal,  
No more pickin' coal.

Brothers and sisters, I'll be back;  
No more pickin' coal, across that track.

## CHORUS:

Those big city lights keep calling me;  
No more pickin' coal,  
No more pickin' coal.

Papa, Papa, don't worry no more;  
You won't have to work at the company store.

## CHORUS:

Those big city lights keep calling me;  
No more pickin' coal,  
No more pickin' coal.

## CHORUS:

B7 E B7

NO MORE PICK- IN' COAL

E

VERSE:

Born in a town That ne- ver knew my name,

A7

CHORUS:

Left for the ci- ty to make my for- tune and fame. Yes. those

B7

big ci- ty lights keep call- in' me:~

## NO MORE PICKIN' COAL

This song springs from bitter memories of a Nova Scotia childhood in poverty.

Valerie Hope MacDonald's father was Maurice Ruddick, a miner at Springhill, Nova Scotia, and one of the men who was trapped underground during the massive cave-in of the mines there. According to New Brunswick writer Gerry Taylor (in an unpublished manuscript), he was one of two men who kept his companions' spirits up with songs and prayers despite a broken leg and other injuries. The other man, Caleb Rushton, was immortalized in Ewan MacColl's song "The Springhill Mine Disaster", was accorded the nickname "The Singing Miner of Springhill", was trotted out by the media on anniversaries of the calamity, and got a job with the unemployment office when the mines closed down. Maurice Ruddick, on the other hand, after a brief burst of celebrity, was ignored by the media, and "hasn't had a day's work since he blinked at the world's cameras after the Miracle of Springhill". Mr. Taylor speculates that the fact that Maurice Ruddick is black, while Caleb Rushton is white, was not unconnected with the difference in their treatment.

For whatever reason, the Ruddick family became poor, as no new work was forthcoming, unemployment eventually ran out, and family allowance and the Springhill Disaster Relief Fund were inadequate (\$88 per month plus \$35 per week to support a family of 15!). The family had to resort to numerous stratagems of the sort common in hard times everywhere when peoples' major concern is to stay alive. One of these was gathering loose coal chunks from along the railway tracks and around the pitheads of the abandoned mines, a practice which inspired the song.

From here, Gerry Taylor's manuscript (written in 1988) takes up the tale:

"Today Maurice Ruddick is a sick man, his mind seriously impaired. When I first met him in the late '70s, however, he was as dapper as a movie matinee idol – a Gilbert Roland look-alike. He was a cheerful man with a razor-sharp wit and an incredible repertoire of songs. Time and circumstance have not been kind to him, although he always deemed himself a fortunate man.

"His stories of those eight days in absolute darkness,

with nothing to eat or drink, and virtually no hope of rescue because of the miles of earth that could be caved in above, brought tears to most eyes. The now-defunct Saint John Folk Club featured him at one of their monthly concerts, and it was an evening to be remembered; he brought tears to many traditionalist eyes, too, by dispelling the myth that miners sang traditional mining songs underground in Nova Scotia:

" 'Usually we sang the popular songs from the turn of the century or the war years, cowboy songs . . . sometimes even a Hank Williams tune or something like that.

" 'Our theme song of the '50s was Hank Snow's "I'm Movin' On", if you can believe it. We'd sing the chorus every time we'd finish a pocket and move on to a new location.' "

"Maurice played guitar, and for a time after the closing of the mines performed with some of his children, a troupe he called the 'Harmony Babes', at universities, church halls and auditoriums all over the Maritimes, in order to eke out a meager existence. After his unemployment benefits ran out, along with government promises to bring in new industry, he picked loose coal along the tracks and at the pitheads to keep his family from freezing.

"That, of course, is another story, told in the accompanying song, written by his daughter. I only hope that the name 'Maurice Ruddick' will somehow be restored to its place in public consciousness before he goes to that reward to which miners of indomitable courage, I sincerely believe, no matter what their colour, eventually go.

"One thing is sure, despite the barb of the poet's pen and its unknowing – I hope – discriminatory slight. Those eight days of entrapment in that pocket of earth, even with a broken leg, must have been one of the few times of true equality for Maurice. In absolute darkness, what does a person's colour matter?"

–J.L.