



African Heritage Month 2026: Maurice Ruddick

When the deepest coal mine in North America "bumped", an unlikely hero emerged. Maurice Ruddick was an African Nova Scotian man whose music and leadership saved the lives of his fellow miners.

Mr. Maurice Ruddick (1912-1988) was born in Joggins to a coal mining family descendant from Black Loyalists. Upon moving to Springhill, he became known as The Singing Miner.

The Springhill No. 2 coal mine had a "bump" (similar to an earthquake) on October 23 1958, killing 75 men. Seven men (Garnet Clarke, Frank Hunter, Doug Jewkes, Herb Pepperdine, Percy Rector, Maurice Ruddick, and Currie Smith) were trapped together around 3km deep in the mine for 8 ½ days. On a normal workday and occasionally while trapped, Ruddick led hymns and rhythms like "The Old Rugged Cross" to keep others' spirits up. When he was rescued, he famously said "Give me a glass of water and I'll sing you a song."



A memorial plaque beside the Miners Memorial Library in Springhill, Municipality of Cumberland, NS.

Being trapped for eight and a half days took its toll on all of them in different ways. Ruddick said, "I cried in the darkness, but I made sure that nobody else heard me. It might



have broken their resolve to live." Other miners' mothers and wives said that "if it wasn't for Maurice, they'd all have been dead." Ruddick also spent a lot of time nursing Mr. Percy Rector, who was dying with the weight of the earth on his trapped arm. All the men in the group tried to help Rector, but they could not free or remove his arm. Rector held on until the fifth day, when he died of his injuries.

Draegermen (specially trained and equipped rescuers), bare-faced rescuers¹, and Dr. Arnold Burden dug out and treated the trapped miners. In previous disasters, some of these rescuers died from exposure to toxic gases. The Miners Code meant helping your fellow miner at all costs. They worked tirelessly, inching forward through the earth, creating a tunnel, passing buckets of coal back to the man behind them.

Aftermath and Segregation in Georgia



A painting of Maurice Ruddick by Stephanie Keilhack, article author and Municipality of Cumberland staff member. The moon represents his wife Norma, each bright star is one of his 13 children, and the pin on his lapel ensures that he is never without the sunshine after eight and a half days of darkness.

¹ Such as Hilton McNutt, Cecil Colwell, Percy McCormick, Jim Booth, and Floyd Gilroy. The author apologizes for the names missed.



Because the bump was a media sensation, the office of the Governor of Georgia invited the surviving men and their families to enjoy a free vacation (while the governor was on vacation himself). When he returned and found out that Ruddick was black, he insisted that the family be segregated (separated from the white families). Some of the other miners in his group were quoted saying that they would refuse the trip, but Ruddick agreed to the Governor's terms to avoid disappointing the men. He knew how much they all needed a vacation, and given a miner's salary, many would never have been able to travel otherwise.

Running into Revere at the post office, staff asked him what it was like to be segregated on the family trip to Georgia. "No different than here! Our street was called n---- - alley". Social, attitudinal racism would have (and still must) hit close to the heart. Indeed, *Last Man Out* by Melissa Fay Greene points out that although there were not enough people to segregate in rural Nova Scotia, major cities and towns across the country had segregated schools and Black people were not allowed to try on clothes in shops.

Interview with Dean Ruddick

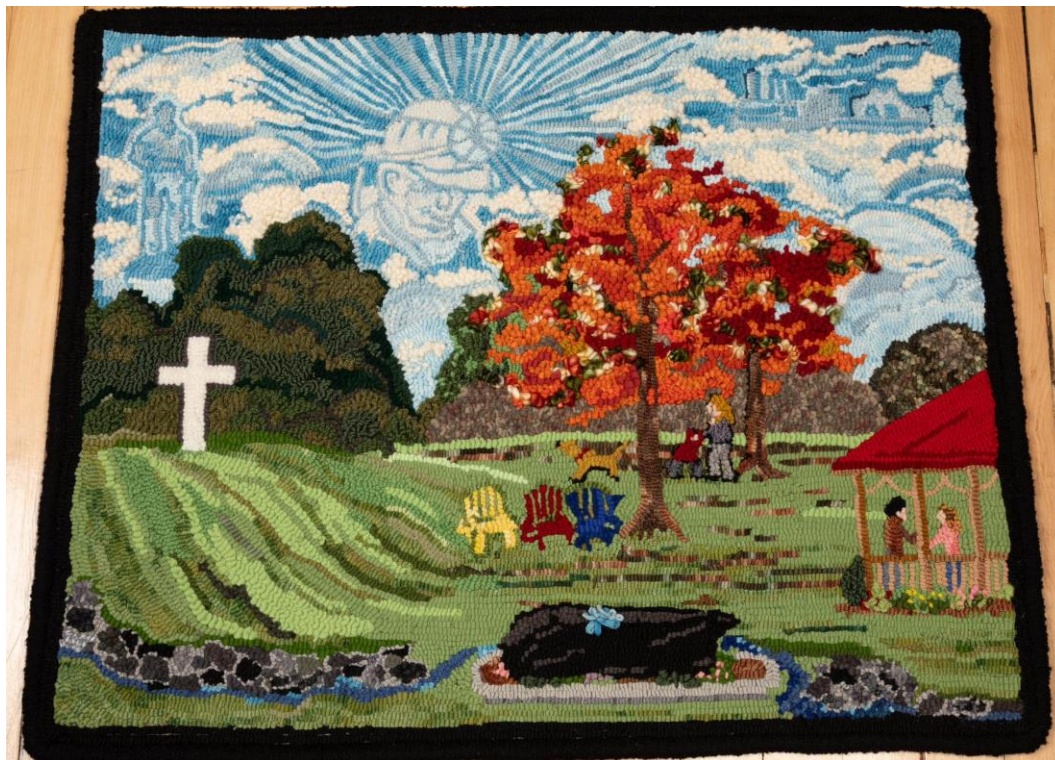


An interview with Dean Ruddick in his home, January 2026.



Two employees from the Municipality of Cumberland interviewed Dean Ruddick, Mr. and Mrs. Ruddick's second oldest son. Dean recalls his childhood warmly. He experienced racist name-calling and got in some fights, but his overall message was one of forgiveness and gratitude to his community for treating him and his family well. Staff also had informal conversations with other sons and daughters of Mr. and Mrs. Ruddick. Katreena (9 days old at the time of the bump) was left with a great fondness for her family and would love to relive those days if she could. A video of this interview is available on the "Equity and Diversity" page of the Municipality of Cumberland's website and social media.

Impact on the Arts



Barb Murray, Springhill Miners Memorial Rug. Shared with permission.

Maurice Ruddick had the deepest impact on his family and fellow miners, but his story inspired artists in Cumberland and far beyond. Artists, musicians, authors, playwrights, and filmmakers have captured Springhill's unique history and character.

Music

Ruddick's great-granddaughter Salima MacDonald wrote "Two Miles Down" in his honour.

Springhill Miners Disaster: The Dubliners. This is one of many covers of the song Ballad of Springhill by Peggy Seeger. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DEb9s0CR784>



No More Pickin' Coal: Valerie MacDonald (one of Mr. & Mrs. Ruddick's daughters)

<https://disastersongs.ca/no-more-pickin-coal/>

Ruddick wrote a poem in his hospital bed, which Virginia musician Bill Clifton turned into a bluegrass song.

<https://bluegrasstoday.com/on-this-day-22-springhill-disaster/>

Theatre

Beneath Springhill is a one-man show by playwright and performer Beau Dixon, directed by Linda Kash. <https://www.neptunetheatre.com/theatre-school/tourco/secret-digital-tour-links>

Bump is a play by Richard Merrill and directed by Michael Chiasson. It came to the Ships Company Theatre in Parrsboro in 2008. <https://www.saltwire.com/atlantic-canada/ships-co-mines-spirit-of-springhill-33710>

Documentary TV

Disasters of the Century | Season 3 | Episode 33 | Springhill Mining Disaster | Ian Michael Coulson <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CC-rhSTckh0>

Podcasts

“The Deepest Mine Disaster in North America”: Scary Interesting Podcast.

“Terror in the Dark: The Springhill Mine Disasters” Canadian History Ehx. This episode was well-researched and mentions several miners' stories, but mostly Ruddick's.

Fibre Arts

Barb Murray, Miners Memorial Rug, which was included in a book called “Hooking Skies: The Sky's the Limit!” inspired by the song “These Are Green Hills Now” written by Brian Vardigans. <https://disastersongs.ca/springhill/>

Books (Thanks Cumberland Public Libraries for stocking these books!)

Miracle At Springhill: Lerner, Leonard.

Last Man Out: Melissa Fay Greene. This book was emotional, vivid, and extremely well-researched. Greene captures the mine with all five of your senses involved, describing every detail, making you feel like you're reading a novel, when in fact it is non-fiction. It was incredibly informative, recommended for those who want to deeply understand what happened in the mine (and what life was like afterward).

Blood on the Coal: Ken Cuthbertson



Spirit of Springhill: Cheryl McKay. This book includes stories from the families of draegermen. It also corrects common rumours, such as Ruddick having a broken leg. His wife Norma confirms that he did not.

Written by Stephanie Keilhack, Community Engagement Coordinator, Municipality of Cumberland County.

No part of this article or its images were generated or edited with AI. The author claims all mistakes as her own.

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