

An interview with Men of the Deeps in China

The "Men of the Deeps" is a group of singers made up of men who, at sometime during their lives, have worked in the coal mines of Cape Breton. Formed in 1966-7, the group took part in Canada's centennial year celebrations. They sang about the mines and the men who worked in them and through these songs they have spread understanding and appreciation of the history and culture of Cape Breton and its people.

In 1975, after a performance at the Arts Centre in Ottawa, they were invited, by representatives from the embassy of the People's Republic, to visit China. The trip was scheduled for November that year, but had to be postponed because, although all expenses inside China were paid for them, the group had to find money for the journey there. The Canadian government gave no help and it was only their own efforts, together with assistance from individuals and organizations, that they were able to make the trip in July 1976.

The **Men of the Deeps** spent three weeks in the People's Republic China, performing and making friends with the people. Most of their trip was spent in the north-east where many of China's coal mines and heavy industries are located. They visited communes, coal mines, factories, schools and hospitals and sang "O Canada" on the Great Wall of China. Everywhere they went they roused enthusiasm and at the end one of them could say "We are a group of working people who have done more to stimulate friendship toward Canada than any one since that great proletarian doctor, Norman Bethune."

During a recent visit to Halifax two members of the group, Bill Copeland and Alex Bezanson, talked to members of the Canada-China Friendship Association, and the following pages are a transcript of their experiences and impressions of China as they related them to us.

CCFA: I'd like to ask you what your expectations were before you went to China.

Alex: As far as I was concerned I had an open mind. I had very little idea what the Chinese people were like. But all the Chinese people around Glace Bay, where I've lived all my life, were very friendly people so I figured there was nothing special to worry about.

Bill: To tell you the truth to me it was kinda

the mine, and in the factories and the schools and every place. We even sang on the Great Wall of China.

Alex: That wall goes thousands of miles across the provinces. It's not too steep to walk, but after a while you get pretty tired.

Bill: Only eleven of us made it but we sang 'O Canada' and 'I love Tien an Mein'. We also went to the International Club in Peking. We were on the stage and entertained all the diplomats and their wives and afterwards we danced with them and drank with them if we wanted to.

Alex: And we sang to the people in the streets as well. What happened was that we decided to go out for a walk one evening and we looked behind us and there was thousands of people following us. After a while one of the interpreters said to us, "Why don't you stop and sing a couple of numbers?" So we decided to do that. We came to a fairly open spot that was well lighted. When we started to sing more people stopped to listen. The crowd got so big that the buses could not get through. It looked like traffic was backed up for miles. After that we were not allowed to sing outside like that again. There's no denying it, the people were well pleased with us.

Bill: When we finished our performance they would clap and clap and you had to clap back, even the performers would have to clap with the audience. And we got entertained in return.

CCFA: Who entertained you?

Alex: We never expected to see it, but every place we visited, in the schools and factories they all had their own groups for singing and that.

Bill: We went to one place in Peking and could hear the tremendous singing and the music and it was bothering me and I wanted to hear it. The next thing we went upstairs to a main class room and there were about 35 or 40 people, men women, and a line of accordion players across the room and they started to sing this revolutionary song and you could have heard them 50 miles away. Talk about the volume and beautiful voices. I've never heard anything like it.

Alex: The musical instruments they have you

interpreter would keep us informed. They were very good in that respect.

Bill: There's one thing I find about the students there and the people, they go out with such confidence when they step onto the stage. Even the kids in school that step up there, they're so confident in what they do. They don't hesitate, don't lose a word. And not only that, it's the motion of their hands and the way they stand. A little girl would come out and announce what they would do. She would stand there and give it right out.

CCFA: When you found all these people in China singing and playing did it make you wonder whether there was as many people in Canada who could do these things?

Alex: No, we're very backward in that respect. Down our way they're only starting to play music in the schools. So you can't expect to find that number of people showing that much talent. No, they are ahead of us in that respect; and its the same thing with the museums. Now we have our Miner's Museum in Glace Bay and it has a few displays and that. But at this museum we went to in China, there was a good sized room with a model of



the whole city including the collieries under glass and they could light up one section, or light up the whole thing, and it was all mechanized.

Bill: We brought back some momentos for our Museum. They presented us with a painting of Chairman Mao with Dr. Norman Bethune who died of blood poisoning working in China during the Revolution. And they gave us a great big block of coal and that was taken back to the Miner's Museum.

CCFA: Did you find that you got a special welcome because you were from Canada, the home country of Dr. Bethune?

Bill &

Alex: Yes.

Alex: Norman Bethune is one of the best known men in China.

Bill: We're Canadian workers, Canadian coal miners, working class and therefore we're on a pedestal as far as they are concerned.

Bill: Every place we went there were these big posters saying "A Warm Welcome to the Singing Coal Miners of Canada".

CCFA: Tell us something about how these visits to the mines and the factories were organized. What happened when you went to visit a colliery for instance?

Alex: First there was this briefing period. We all sat around a table and they told us how bad the conditions were before the Revolution and the changes that were made and the production they gained and how production went ahead again after '66.

Bill: After the briefing we asked questions and they asked questions. It was good you know, but we got tired of so many of them. Everywhere we went we had two or three or four in one day.

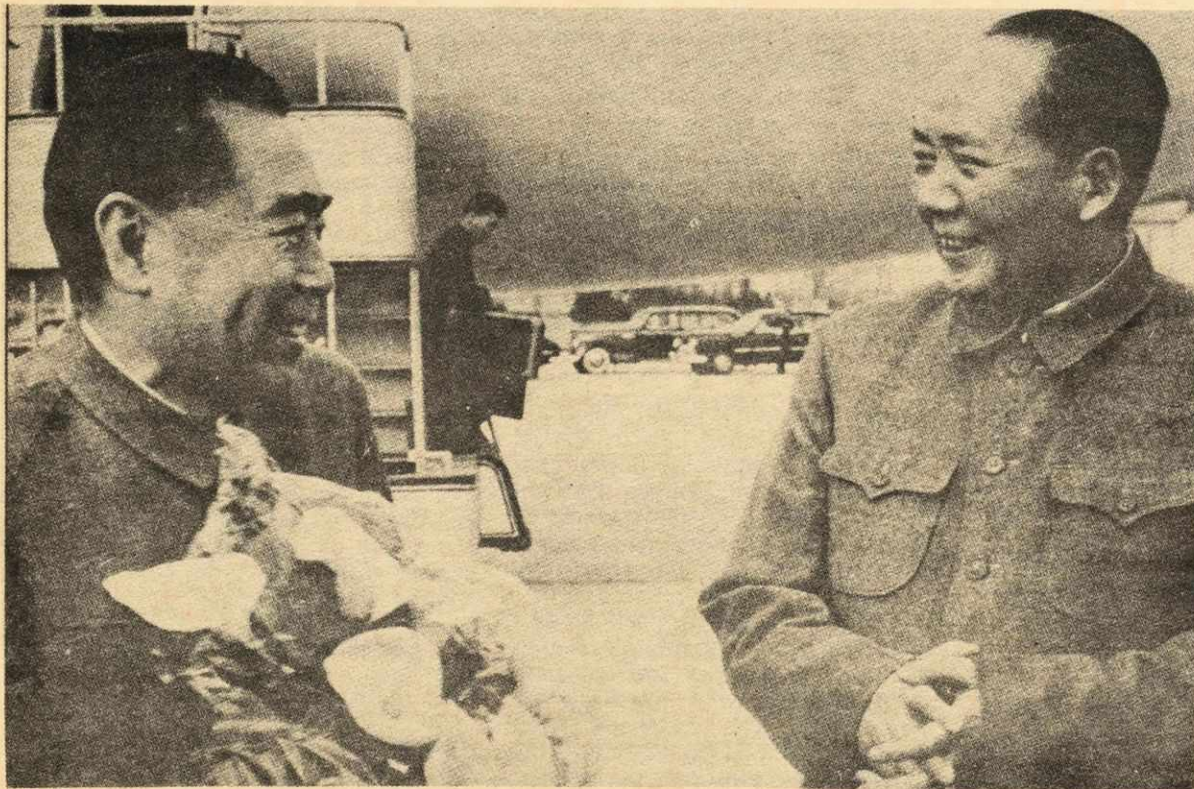
CCFA: What kind of questions did they ask you?

Bill: They asked us how we did things in this country. What gas detection systems we used, what machinery we used.

CCFA: What about the general working conditions in the mines. Did the people seem over-worked?

Alex: I don't think so. They're taking things there pretty cool.

Bill: They didn't seem to be working hard, but



vague. I didn't know what to expect.

CCFA: I understand you were invited by the Chinese government to make a cultural exchange.

Bill: In fact we are the only Canadian group that we know of in the last few years that entertained the Chinese people, and we sang just about everywhere. We sang in the mines and once in the cages as we were going into

know are very strange to us, and at first we were kinda taken with that high pitched sound the younger girls had when they sang, way up and very high. But one girl we saw, she sang in a lot of operas and she was one of the most beautiful singers I ever heard. And the piano player in the same programme, there was a lot of talent there. In the operas you could understand what was going on, because the