

Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)

Oral History Interview

Interviewee: John Mitchell

Interviewers: Joan Schiebelbein and Ron Patterson

Date: 28 October 2005

Location: Luscar, Cadomin and Mountain Park, AB

Index:

- Former mining communities of Luscar, Cadomin and Mountain Park
- Alberta Coal Branch and closing of the mines
- Dangers of coal mining – gas, cave-ins and explosions

Luscar

This is a picture down the valley here. It's known as Moonshine. The house on top of the hill was my home. Because of the stills up the creek, it was appropriately named. This is just a part of Moonshine. You can't see it all. The ridge here on the top of the picture is the one that's right behind us. Over on the right here, this is known as Lookout Ridge.

That was First Ridge, or Lookout Ridge, because the original lookout was on top of that, not the way they put it in that book that they wrote about the history of the coal branch.

My home is right on top. The school used to be there until it burnt down. It had a cement basement. My dad, being an enterprising fellow, asked if he could build there. We were one of the few houses in town that had a cement basement, other than the official houses.

I came to Luscar in 1927, and that house was built in the early '30s after my other brothers were born. The next house down to the right of it was my Uncle Jim's house.

This is a shot taken from the old viewpoint, a little further down the hill. We're higher up right now. It looks down the valley. Once again there's my home here. I knew all the

people who lived in here. This was taken in winter. This is a shot down the valley, showing Moonshine again. In the '40s that would've been taken, because my younger brother had that picture. During the war years.

Q: How high up is Luscar?

They say 1000 to 1200 at the peak.

Q: How long did the mine operate?

From 1921 to 1956, then it was burnt down. They made a film with the Doukhobors here. What they didn't take was bulldozed.

Q: Where did all the people go?

Wherever they could. I went to Merco for three years, and then from there went to Hinton. This next one is something that I keep. This is part of the school picture. The school was just straight across. One of the next pictures will show where the school was. This was the school picture of junior and senior high school. It was a three-room school for all the kids. This is the other side of the picture. This is the Luscar Indian crest for the hockey team. This is not the original crest. The original crest was a little different. This was after the war. We went back to the Luscar Indians, and this is the crest that the boys wore then. This little town in '35, '36 were the senior champions, for Alberta and BC. They got to Saskatchewan and I think the Prince Albert 's beat them out because half of them were in bed with the flu and sick. Even though Edmonton doesn't say it, the Luscar Indians beat the Edmonton Superiors at one time. These are pictures of Luscar taken back in the early days. This would be perhaps in 1921 when it started. You can see the buildings are going up, the hotel. This is the outdoor skating rink. That was just up here across from where the plant is now, up the wye as we called it. Vernie Hughes, who

wrote that book My Life In Alberta Coal Branch, this was his home here. That was the rink there. This was the original Catholic church. From here right straight across the valley. This is the cleaner as it was being built, just down here below where the things are now. There's the cleaner there, and this is myself working in what was known as the timer track. We loaded timber to send down the mine. That was 1939, so I'd be just before 18. Seventeen. Danny was the horse. You had to work on different jobs. I started in '39 and left in '41, and I was gone four years in the armed forces. I landed in Normandy D-Day, 6th of June '44. This picture was taken in 1927 when I first came. I take that to school. The kids can't figure out who was there. But there was only one person in the fall who was silly enough to wear shorts, having come from Scotland. I'm sitting in the middle of the picture. That's me there.

Q: Did you come right from Scotland to Luscar?

Ya, right to Luscar. I was six years old when I came or just shortly after I got here. The girl that gave me this a little while ago, she's in the back, and that's her sister who's ashes are buried down there in the cross at the bottom of the hill. That was my first friend's sister. Lynn Small was my friend, and her sister was Mary. Her married name was Mary Reid. Her ashes are there. That's where she wanted to be. This is home. And there's another lady there, Mrs. Jason Thomas. Gladys Bailing, her ashes are there beside her. There's two of them there.

Q: Did they die here in Luscar?

No, when they left here Mary was in Edmonton and then moved to BC with her husband Jack Hughes.

Q: Was it a close community?

Very close, very close. You should try and get a hold of Vernie's book. Debai might have some. Charlie might have some left in Cadomin. Vernie died a couple years ago, but it describes all that. Coming back, so many of us want to be buried in Mountain Park, because that's where you can be buried now. My son knows that's where we're going, my wife and I. There's the Catholic church and there's the hotel; staff house, and then there was these houses here. There's that... that would be in the '50s, because the house was built after I came back. There's that bridge right there. This is where they were, right in there.

Q: What was this picture taken?

Quite early, because the cleaner is not there or anything else. It was built in the early '30s as well. It'd be in the early '30s or late '20s. These bunkhouses are here. When the school burnt down we went to school in the bunkhouses down here, and some went to school in the hall. They had the miners houses, and they had the hotel. And you had what they called the cookhouse, where they fed all the single men from the hotel. Then you had the beer parlor and the store and the butcher shop, post office. And then across farther up, there was a restaurant that a Chinese couple ran.

Q: Did the company provide the houses?

No, you built your own houses. There were some company houses, mostly the official houses on the hospital land. We had a grocery store. And then we had the covered arena and the hall for dances and concerts. We were very fortunate that we had a number of Welsh people, and of course the Welshmen have got great voices. Concerts and dances all the time. We'd dance till two o'clock in the morning. Active social life. But the big

thing was hockey. Like I said, Luscar Indians were one of the finest hockey clubs in Alberta. Cadomin was baseball and Mountain Park soccer.

Q: Did the social activities take place at a union hall?

No, it was a community hall. This picture here, we'll go across to where that used to be, but that was the bridge that was built on the original road by the fellows in relief camp. That's how this road between Cadomin and Luscar was built, the guys in the relief camp. It was built by wheelbarrows and pick and shovel in the middle '30s. This was the original road. Went down the valley and climbed up the hill and came out just as far as you can see. This was known as the big grade. In the winter it was wonderful. There was a bit of a spring. You used to take a big run at it and you'd get to about here, and you couldn't get around that corner so you had to back down again. The powerhouse and that was all run on coal. It had the hot ashes. Bill Small, who was the brother of the lady down here, he would back in with a big truck and put a chunk of log across the back of the box and fix his chains and go down there and scream up the hill and down spreading those hot ashes.

Q: Was it a large mine?

Yes, it was a fairly big mine. I forget how many. There had to be a couple hundred guys down there at the time. I don't know what they have now for sure. Somewhere up around between here and Cheviot, more than likely 250 men. I'm not sure. This shows the school, the new Catholic church, some of the houses there. The next picture shows the briquette plant, and you're looking down the other side. Here you have the hospital and the doctor's house. Then down to the official houses and the hall at the end.

Q: What kind of coal was mined here?

Steam coal. BC Electric was one of the biggest customers. And this is taken from just below this area looking back up. The briquette plant would be just down below here a little ways. You can see the boxcars and stuff.

Q: What did your father do?

Coal mining - from 1927, and he left before I got back. Mom had to go to Vancouver because she was so sick. She passed away in Vancouver. His eyes were going from the dust. His eyelids were starting to droop. He went there. These are more pictures taken in the area here, some of them from up farther and looking down the valley. That's where the briquettes went up the cooling chain. The briquettes were always hot, and that was the cooling chain. They loaded them down below there. Here we have the hotel up here. The tipple was up a little farther. You had this tunnel going along. The coal came out from just this side of where that big round thing is, that blue building, and came across the tracks and down, and then went into the tipple there. Here you have your tipple and that area. This is looking back to where the washhouse was. Then there was a big pool of water down there, and that's our sailboat. These are some of the other pictures taken from this area looking down the valley. That's the only place I worked to start with. These are pictures taken when ? and I lived when we got married, looking across at Mount Luscar. These are pictures that my brother had more than what I did. This house is now in Hinton. They moved it on a truck. This is all the same thing in the snow, looking across the valley. These things here, the fellow that came up, they have to go around and see if there's any historical buildings. Those are the shacks that us kids built back up around the corner here. This one was up around farther. The Hagbrad Bros were cutting timber up there for props. This is my friend, the boy's father, that just came out when he was out in

the bush. I put that beside it because it Because that's where he first was when he came to work for Hagbrad Bros. This picture shows the plant, the garage, the briquette plant, the cleaner. It was an air cleaner, not water. You can imagine the dust. The building was there and most of the town was down the valley. It kept the women busy dusting things. These are pictures taken of Number 2 mine, back up in the valley this side of Bear Hill. My dad and his partner, Eddy de la ? started that mine in '41. It went on fire. When Cardinal River moved back in they wanted to take the coal. They moved it out like that. That shows the shovel, you can see the shovel bucket down here. He's just lifting that burning coal out and loading it on the trucks. It's back over behind that dump is where they used to be. It's all laid out back in that area. It's warm, so it's always warm and there's no snow, and we have green grass all year round for the sheep and elk and deer. They moved it down to a trip that was finished, and it's still burning down underneath. That's when I was here, and I've been retired 20 years. If it's in the old seam, it'll only burn 6 inches a year. This is what they say. This one, when I first started I took that picture back up in there on A Pit when they were doing a blast. And this is the site of our first home in Luscar, which was down the valley. This is the site of the house where I grew up. You can see that bare spot on the ridge up there. This is what happens when you get a big rainstorm. That was on what they call B2 Pit just around the corner here. We got a big rainstorm and it came down so fast we didn't get the shovel out. The boys were taking a pump out on the boat.

Q: Was his a good place to work?

Oh yes, it was a good mine to work in, especially after I came back. And this just shows some more of the pumping. This is the way it was going to look, until they were stopped

from moving to Cheviot. This part never would've been dug out. This is what it looked like. It would've been much nicer. There's another picture of it. This is the dedication by Mr. Frank Loveson, who's chairman of the IGAs in Alberta. He was born in Mountain Park, and he grew up there. In fact we just celebrated his 50th year in the business. He started when we were in Hinton. We made a dedication on the map, which we'll see when we go through Cadomin. This was his speech. I have that from Frank. This is the coal branchers' song, when we have a reunion. 'These are my mountains and we have come home.' That's the ball club. That was a way back. That's Ian Scott, DA Gillis, Bob Kennedy, Bobby Mitchell (no relation) Davy Paul, Claudie Marko, Miko Juvenazo, Dugo Layman, so I know most of them. And the hanger there. This is just a thing that came out of a book that was written by Joyce Bartoff. I can't think of her maiden name. They wrote a little book about it. This tells you what happened. A clipping from the Edmonton Journal reads as follows. It tells you about, they made a movie here about the Doukhobors, Radical Sons of Freedom. Producer director Larry Mantisky has chosen this burning to illustrate his naked flame. This is a picture of curling. In Luscar we had an indoor curling rink. At one of the reunions my wife, Mike Brackle, his brother Bobby, and the teachers - this is my wife's grade 1 teacher at Mount Park - they got together one last time. This is about Mary Mitchell Green. Her funeral in Edmonton, the First Presbyterian Church, which I was at. Pierre Trudeau was at the funeral. Sir Harold Mitchell. And just things out of the Edmonton Journal. My wife's mother, my mother-in-law, was a great one for doing this. We'd have a whole bunch of stuff. That was when we first started. This is 'Luscar joins the ghost towns.' Coal branch club formed. I was going to say, you guys want a lot of information. If you get in touch with the coal branch club

in Edmonton, we're all people from the coal branch – Luscar, Mount Park... Very active. We have a Christmas party and they have things in Edmonton. This was the invitation from Cardinal River Coals for staff and retired staff when we used to go to the Christmas party.

Q: What was it like living here in Luscar?

You're isolated. The only way in and out was by train. There was no road going out. In fact, until the middle '30s, the only way you went to Cadomin to a hockey game in the winter, you went down with a sleigh and cutter. This is when John Greg came back during the war. I think it was '42 that he came back, June 28th, I'm not sure. He came back in the old haunts. He lived in Florida, and he was 101. He's the one that discovered the coal in this area. John Greg. He was an American. Greg Mountain, Mary Greg Lake... This is Father Louis. He was the most wonderful man. He was a Catholic priest of course. But it didn't matter whether you black, white or what, or whatever religion, he was there when you needed help. Everybody thought the world of him. This is when he died, and the poem that was written about him. This is my wife's grandfather when he passed away at Mountain Park. During the war, the coal branch per capita put as much high up for the war bonds, for the saving during the war. They burnt an effigy of Hitler. This is a funeral procession in 1943 - this was in the Star Weekly - at Mountain Park going across to the graveyard for a miner that had been killed. This was during the Spanish flu he was up there. He tramped 33 miles to bring help to residents down in some logging camp or something. There we are, snow blankets the coal branch, 55 inches in Mountain Park, 24th of May 1944. I wasn't here. I was overseas at the time. My wife, everything washed out. The railway, the roads, there was no trains for a week. I guess the storekeepers were

happy. All the stuff they couldn't sell, they got rid of. She worked in the store at the time, so she knew what it was. These are just some certificates. My foreman's certificate and my miner's certificate. At that time, I don't know whether I was number 8 then. These are just some things with Cardinal River Coals. Here's my first aid certificate, 1939. Blasting certificate. That's my father-in-law, 1925. Back here we have his other one. This is the one I was going to show you. Did you read it? Well you should read that. That tells you about our grizzly bears. This is something that was given to me a long time ago. It's something I get when I go to the school grade 12, I tell them there's something you should learn when you go to school. It's the six most important words: 'I admit I made a mistake.' Five, 'you did a good job.' Fourth, 'what is your opinion?' Third most important, 'if you please.' The two most important words are 'thank you.' The one most important word 'we' and the least most important word is 'I.' So if you go with that, you shouldn't have any trouble.

Cadomin

This map is titled 'Alberta Coal Branch' and dated August 1st, 1999. It shows all the towns and everything. The mines are the crosses. In the album there's the speech that Mr. Frank Lawson gave when we dedicated this. That's what's up there. It was quite a deal. There were lots of misty eyes the day that they dedicated that. The first one was close to 2000 people showed up... This is home. You can go through from here to Nordeg. Just keep going out of Mountain Park and down the divide and down through Gray Flats and ? Boys Camp, and it'll bring you out at Nordeg.

Q: When did the mines of the coal branch shut down?

Mountain Park shut down in 1950, Cadomin in '52, Luscar in '56, and the other branch, Merco, Sterco, had shut down... Merco was the last one to shut down 1959. So in ten years the coal branch was finished.

Q: Why did the mines close?

Diesel conversion. The first diesel engine that came to Luscar broke down, and all the kids were laughing about it. It broke down right under the tippie where they used to load coal in.

Q: Where did the people who stayed end up working?

They work here at Inland Cement. This is where you get all the limestone for your buildings in Edmonton. These people came out here and they complained about how we're desecrating the area. So we all thought, gee, maybe we should tell them we go in there and tear all our houses apart, and tell them to rebuild our mountain that they took apart.

This was the main entry, going down the shaft here. The east side over on that side you can see the water coming out of the old place. I think that's where it went in. This is where they had the bad accident just before it shut down. The mine went in and they were driving up. Underground you drive a place up and then you spread out for the pillar.

There was an old strip pit up there. There had been a dam built around it. It broke, and the water went in, and it broke through the surface and washed all these guys down. Five or six of them they lost at that time, just before it was closed. Cadomin shut down in '52, so that would maybe be first part of '52, or '51. I think so. In fact in that book of Vernie's I think there was 70 or 72 people killed between the three mines from 1912 to '56 in this area, Cadomin and Luscar.

Q: How were a lot of them killed?

Gas and cave-ins and explosions. That one at Luscar was an explosion, when they killed the seven guys. Quite a few killed by gas. Gas is, you can't smell it. You take two or three whiffs and that's it. I'd be gone, The horses were smarter than the drivers that were on them. They knew exactly when to step off when the time was to come. We used a lot of horses underground. The one was killed in the explosion. They were very gaseous, very gaseous mines. It runs like water and it's cold. When you worked on the face driving the thing, you had to brace the face. Then you dug at the side and put your timber up. It was slabbed along the sides and on the roof. It just ran like water. They just used the round timbers. It was 6 inches, 8 inches on the small end. Then they brought in BC fir for the entries, the big heavy fir for the entries. Then there was planks and sheet iron for the chutes, and bradish was that cloth that went up. The air went up the manhole and down the chute and through to the crosscut to the next ?, because this bradish cloth was quite good for that. You had the entry, then you went up a little ways to what they called the counter. The air went along this counter. It was sort of an escape. Then you went up the pitch.

Q: Were Luscar, Cadomin and Mountain Park similar in size?

Oh, Cadomin was the biggest. They had everything here. They had the liquor store and all that stuff. The bank was in Cadomin. It was central. When you came down here to play hockey when you were a kid, in the summertime you're going to see when's the freight train coming? Won't be for an hour or two. So play baseball, so you jumped on a flatcar and you had a couple flags, ? all the way down and the rest of the way you pushed it across. He hooked up and took you home. In the wintertime you came down on sleighs

with cutters. From Mountain Park to Luscar you came, the train stayed overnight in Mountain Park. Hockey was the big thing. We really enjoyed it. They were so close, the mines. The time Cadomin had an explosion, the miners, you could see them heading for the washhouse to get their clothes to be here to help. The same when they had the explosion there, the miners were there from the other town. We're very close. Mind you when you played hockey, it was different.

Q: Did the same company run the mines in each of the communities?

Different companies. Mountain Park and Luscar were the same company, but other ones were different companies.

Q: And the company didn't stop miners from leaving to help out when there was an accident at another mine?

Everybody went. It didn't matter where you were. You were all coalminers.

No, the company didn't stop it. The guys would be at home and they were gone looking to get their clothes and get a lamp and be gone. Just quit and went. A lot of them in those early pictures in Mountain Park came down to Luscar to work. And some at Luscar went to Mountain Park, to Cadomin, or another branch. They were all United Mine Workers, and worked together. They were very close. Like I say, we were isolated, and that was it.

We should move up the hill. We've got one more to go.

Mountain Park

This is a picture of the town of Mountain Park. My wife was born here, and my father-in-law came here in the winter of 1910/11 to work for Frank Seabow cutting mine props for the mine that was going to start. She lived just across the valley there where you can see those two spruce trees on that little flat. That's where she lived when I started coming

here after the war. We were married just over there on the hill at the United Church in this area here. Up in here, that's where the churches were and that's where we were married. The house is right across the valley, right on that little flat below those two spruce trees straight across the valley there. That's where she was. The church, I think this is the United Church here. There was the Catholic Church, the United Church. These were the official houses, the manager and the pit bosses and chief engineer. Somewhere in here they were, and more of them back here. This was the store and hotel.

Q: What was the size of Mountain Park?

Be about the same as Luscar. There were more houses up this way and a few more down to that side that are not in the picture. In 1912 or '13 they shipped the first coal out of here. The road between Luscar, Cadomin and Mountain Park were built by the fellows in the relief camp. In the dirty '30s there was no work, and the government set up camps and they fed them and clothed them and gave them a few cents for tobacco. But these roads were all built by the boys on the relief camps, with picks and shovels. The train came in three times a week: Monday, Wednesday and Friday, and out Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. They stayed here overnight. The passengers stayed here overnight, and then went back down Cadomin, up to Luscar, and back down and then to Edson, where you changed and got on the transcontinental to go to Vancouver. The railway rates were quite cheap at that time. My wife remembers as a girl she came across the station, there was a sign up to Vancouver for \$14. My uncle's out in Vancouver. My father-in-law worked here. He was here before the town pretty well. All the houses were painted the same color. They had the theatre here, the library, the Chinese café, and what they called the drugstore, which was more where you got ice cream and stuff like that. They all had that,

everything. Skating rink was down on the flat down here. It caved in in that big snowfall in '44. Too bad my wife wasn't here because, as I say, she grew up here and knew a lot more. But down here was the station. There was a nice little building there that you could go in and write stuff down. People come up and that's it, they just get rid of everything. Mt. Cheviot behind there, the Three Sisters, and Mt. Tripoli at the end of the range. That's where they're mining now, just below Cheviot there. This is the graveyard behind us. Last August it was dedicated to the veterans of the 1st and 2nd World Wars and Korean War. The run up Mt. Harris started back before '36. Quite a ways back, started in '35. They started across the valley and they ran to the top of Mt. Harris right here. Whoever got up there and back down won. There was this prize.

Q: Have people been buried in this graveyard since Mountain Park closed?

There've been lots since then. People just come up and bring their ashes up here. You're not going to get a body up here. It's mostly the ashes. If I want to have my ashes spread on the Cardinal divide, I could do that. But they're not allowed to put a headstone there anymore. So this is what they're doing. I'm coming here. My wife's grandfather is buried just up the road here. Her uncle was killed in the old east mine which was just over here below Mt. Harris in 1922. That was Pete Anderson, somewhere over here. Pilichowskys, I knew the Pilichowskys in Luscar. Peter B. Anderson, fire boss. Then his body was exhumed in Fernie, BC. You learn a lot about Jim Anderson if you go to Fernie.

Q: The town must have been quite isolated.

Yes, it was so isolated, and yet they used the haul and everything, her dad was saying. That thing there to Father Louis, he gave them to help them out. The Spanish flu was here. But we never had a case of polio. We all got mumps and chicken pox and measles.

They came up and we brushed it all, then we got this thing that goes down and finds the warm stuff underneath. This is how they started. Bill Davis did a lot of work here fixing all these up. We had a picket fence around granddad's grave, and then it just all went to pieces. I put a good chain on it, and it disappeared. So we brought some more chain and had to come up and fix it up again. We didn't get up much this summer. Mary Lee, Mary Solser and Joan Waggert, they did two big books. They're in the Hinton library, all about Mount Park and the things from all the families. I have that at home too. I don't know whether you'll get any more, I don't think they have any. This Frank Palmer, he was killed in Luscar. When they had the dedication, I represented him, was here on his behalf for the ceremony. He was killed in Luscar in the mine, 1925, before I even got here. I recognize some of the names. Bill Harrison was killed. You even have a sir here, Humphreys. He was killed in the mine. He was a sir. George Woods, when he came to Luscar the family crest was on the trunk. The remittance man... We had all kinds of people. They were all very close. It was a very close knit area, the whole coal branch. We could go up the road a little ways. This is where the mine area was, just up around the corner there. There's nothing left there anymore. In here right where those fences are, they have a picture of the town. This was put up by Bobby Brackle's wife after Bobby died. His ashes are here. He was in with the oil company and he brought his crew up. He's the one that put all the fences around the graveyard. It's a nice thing, the thing you could go in and take a picture of. The gate is here.

That's the hotel and the store and the annex. It shows more in that one, because it shows the hill back here too.

Q: When did the mine close?

19th of June. They were in Luscar, they drove out to Mountain Park. They went out and by noon Mountain Park was finished. Some went away and others they just got rid of, burnt it. They took them apart and took them away from here. The ones at Luscar that were up where the plant is now, they just cut them in half and put them on trucks and sent them to this side of Edson, Spike Island. There's a cemetery at Cadomin, but it's very small and way back up in. Luscar didn't have one. They were usually buried at Mountain Park or Edson, the people from there. They would have a church service at Luscar, and then the train would come in and the casket would be put on the platform. The minister and president of the union would be there, and they would have a little ceremony there, then into the car and away it would go, to Edson or Edmonton. The guys would sit and talk a few minutes, then go to the bar and have a beer. There'd be no work that day. Next morning it was back down the black hole. The union president was there all the time for the family, to help. Like I say, it was very close knit. We didn't have counselors and that, but all the neighbors were there, that was the big thing.

Q: Did everyone belong to the union?

Oh ya, mostly. All of them that I ever knew were, the miners anyway. I was a member, that's it. I was just young when I went away, and then I come back. I was there for awhile and then I went to foreman. I kept up my union affiliation even though I was foreman. I never went to the meetings, but I kept up my union affiliation. Up until a few years ago, this whole dump out here was burning. You'd come up here and see the flames burning on it, all the slag. It's finally gone out. Long as I could remember. Just stopped a few years ago. That's where all your red shale is. That's about it for here.

[end]