

Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)

Oral History Interview

Interviewees: Steve and Liz Liska

Interviewers: Joan Schiebelbein and Gordie Thomas

Date: 9 November 2005

Location: Coleman, Alberta (Crowsnest Pass)

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Q: Tell us where you were born and grew up.

Liz Liska: I was born in Tabor, Alberta. When I was six years old, we moved to Bellevue. I went to school there and lived there until I was 17. Then I got married to Steve Liska and moved to Coleman. Right now, we're married 67 years.

Q: Was your father a miner?

LL: He was a miner in Bellevue, and so was my brother.

Q: You mentioned earlier that your dad was a miner in Tabor?

LL: Yes he was, at first. The mine closed down. There's nothing in Tabor, so they moved to Bellevue. He got a job in the Bellevue mine, and that's where we lived until I got married and moved to Coleman.

Q: How about you, Steve?

Steve Liska: I was born in Broderick, Saskatchewan. Came to Coleman when I was 3 or 4, and been here ever since. Went to school here, lived all my life here.

Q: When did you go to work in the mine?

SL: Oh, I forget the year. It was '21 I guess, when I started in the mine.

Q: And you were born in 1914?

SL: Let's see, how old was I? I was 21 or 22 when I started in the mine. So that would be '30 or '31.

Q: Was that your first job?

SL: Before that I worked for Mahalski down on the ranch here. Ten hours, \$2 a day. It helped pay for dad's grocery bill. People lived on credit at that time. Then I was 16 when I quit school. I was skidding props up on Star Creek. I still have a picture here someplace, cutting props for the mine. A dollar a day, and board. You know what board we had? For the whole week, a slab of bacon and a case of eggs.

Q: How long did you work in the mine?

SL: All my life practically. Underground about 30 or over 30 years. Then after I left underground I went to work as a check weighman. The miners wanted me to be the check weighman. You know what that is? The miners, when they load the cars in the mine, they have these check tabs. When you load a car, there's a hook inside the car and they put a check on there. When it comes out to the scale, they take the tab off, drop it through a

little chute, and you record the weight. That goes to the miners. Two miners worked together always, not one. They all got paid by the coal they got.

Q: Was that the last job that you did, a weighman?

SL: No, then they give me a job as a timekeeper. I did that until I quit when I was 65 years old.

Q: What was the first job you had in the mine?

SL: First job? Bucking coal. The coal comes down a chute. Where it's flat or wet and sticks, you have to get in there with your feet and push the coal down and get it going so they could load it in the bottom.

Q: Can you explain what a rope rider is?

SL: The hoist man has an indicator that shows him exactly to the foot where that cable is at, where the cars are at. Say he comes down to one level, he stops there and you throw the switch, and you go and drop your cars in there, hook up the loads which are there. Usually you unhook it, you ring the bell, and you hook the load. That's how fast they used to go. He's winding the loose cable, because he's got to give you so much slack.

Q: It was all done by a bell system?

SL: By a bell, that's right.

Q: When you worked in the mine, did you ever have horses down there?

SL: Yes. We took one down one day, me and my partner. The level was up a little bit. That horse, when he come to where the ground went up, he thought he was going back outside. He wanted to gallop up there.

Q: How deep were you in some of these mines?

SL: Five level was about 5,500 feet. Down there it used to bump. Just like if you were setting up dynamite in the mine, the whole mine would shake. That's the way it was. One day the miners come down on the trip, they didn't know if they should back out or not. There were about 3 bumps. Shook the whole works.

Q: Was all the mining done with dynamite, or did you do drilling?

SL: No, no, just air picks. Not with dynamite. You blasted rock with dynamite. But any time you blasted the rock, you had to use rock dust. Put a bag of rock dust to kill the coal dust. It would get mixed with the coal dust so it wouldn't explode.

Q: What was Bellevue mine like as a place to work?

SL: Bellevue was the best. McGillivray was the worst. It was full of gas, full of bumps.

LL: It was underneath Crow Mountain.

SL: The further it went that way, the more it used to bump.

Q: Were you ever involved in any accidents or injuries in the mine?

SL: I had no injuries. I was really fortunate. But accidents; one day at four level, there was a lot of dust in there. They had a fault. You wouldn't know what a fault is. Say you've got a seam of coal 10 feet high or 8 feet high. It goes and then it comes together. The rock benches it out. That's what you call a fault. These places all went up to this fault, then they start pillaring the coal out. When they pillar it, they take everything. First they drive roofs up, that's for your own safety. Then they pillar the coal out. From one side they angle in this way, from the other side they angle in the other way. This time they pillared and the fault was holding the roof. When they pillar the coal out, usually it used to cave. This time it didn't. They took so damn much out, like a football field full. When that caved, can you imagine what happens? A concussion of air pressured down.

There was coal dust, rock dust. You see about 100 men running out the mine. This one guy says, 'For Christ sake run kid! It's gonna blow up any minute!' And it just was a miracle it didn't blow up. All the guys ran out of four level that time.

Q: What kind of thoughts were going through your head when he said that?

SL: You've got no time to think, just go.

Q: When there was an accident in the mine, what would happen? Would they ring a bell?

LL: He was morning shift. If you heard the whistle blow at 2 o'clock in the afternoon, you know somebody got killed. You don't know if it's your husband or your friend. A woman's life, you're living in fear all the time while he's underground. Then after, it's hard for the women here. One time there was an accident, and I went out on the road to find out who it was. Two men were killed that day. He said, 'Oh Steve's okay. It's my uncles that got killed.' So I went back home. And they wonder why a woman gets gray hair.

Q: Did you have friends whose husbands were killed in the mine?

LL: Oh yes.

Q: So what would happen to those women and their families?

LL: Just keep living. There was relief through the union.

SL: Relief might be \$8 a month.

LL: And another thing, you could only get certain things. If a miner wanted a smoke, you couldn't buy through the union on that. You had to put down potatoes. It was hard times. The women now are lucky. They've got two jobs, and it's safe. They all work driving great big trucks. You've seen them maybe, in Fernie. Our grandson drives one. And our son worked up there as a millwright. Now he's on pension. And my other son, he

works down here on the pole plant. That was my daughter Betty that phoned. She's a cook in the hospital. So they're all close to us.

Q: When you were paid, Steve, were you paid in money or in a company script?

SL: It was cash. The cash used to be in an envelope in the bank. You go there and they had all the envelopes.

Q: I've heard stories where miners were paid in a company script that was only good in the company store.

SL: That was probably in Corbin. You know I was telling you about that cave-in that time? After it caved, the next day he sent us down there to timber one place. The whole mine was white from grinding rock. Then the carpenter, Johnny ?, any time they pillared the coal out, they sent him to make cradles between the timbers and put rock dust on. So when it caved, it took the rock dust into the air and mixed with the coal dust.

Q: What's rock dust made out of?

SL: Limestone. They used that all over.

Q: When you started at the mine, was there a union here?

SL: Yes we had union.

Q: Do you remember the name of the union?

SL: I think it was Mine Workers of Canada. I got a statement up in the union hall, in the seniors' hall. You'll see my brother-in-law's statement there, Joe Pisciola. He got one day \$4.90: 50 cents for washhouse, \$3 for union, and \$2.40 pay for that day.

Q: So it was United Mine Workers of Canada?

SL: I think it was, yes. They changed it after, because they couldn't get nowhere.

Q: Would you like to expand on the communist influence that was here at the time?

SL: What do you expect? Tim Buck was a communist leader in Canada. Blairmore, in the center boulevard, it was Tim Buck Blvd. What did you expect? When people got nothing, they turned to communism. The same as in France right now, 70% unemployed. People don't care after. Bellevue used to work two days a week, Blairmore one or two days. This was a CPR mine, used to work maybe three days. Bellevue, at one time Saturday, Sunday, that was time for celebrating. They called them out in Bellevue this one Saturday to work one day, nobody went. All week you're at home and they call you on Saturday.

Q: So how would they call you?

SL: Whistle. You went out every day, we used to go here and listen. McGillivray Mine would blow at 6 o'clock. If it blew three whistles, no work. If it blew one whistle, work. International used to blow at 9 o'clock, same way. So did Bellevue and Blairmore.

Q: So you didn't know until the whistle went.

SL: No, you didn't know if there was work or not until the whistle blew. If it blew one, you said, 'Well gotta go to work tomorrow. No hunting.'

Q: Were you working just in one mine?

SL: I was just in the one, yes.

Q: So you would just listen for the Bellevue whistle?

SL: No, Coleman.

LL: McGillivray.

SL: McGillivray Mine. They had a foghorn there from a ship. Her dad could hear it in Bellevue.

LL: He'd come down and visit me; girlfriend, boyfriend. He'd come down and then he'd say, 'I wonder if we're working tomorrow.' My dad would go outside and listen. 'No you're not working. Three whistles.' He could hear it from Coleman to Bellevue, that foghorn.

Q: Your dad and brother worked in Bellevue, and you worked in McGillivray.

SL: Yes. And them bumps, like I was telling you, two guys got killed with a bump. When it bumped the floor up, they got killed. One got killed right away, the other one died in the hospital. Another one, Danny McLellan, he was putting in chute again. The bottom bumped, sheet arch cut him here in the groin. That's the way it was. And that's the way that Sekora across the street got killed. The coal bumped and covered his partner up. He tried to get him out. He couldn't, so he ran across to the neighbors. He went back first. By the time the other guys came, another bump and covered him up. Young man. Lost his life.

Q: What would happen after amongst the workers after an accident like this. What did you do to improve the safety conditions in the mine?

SL: If something happened, usually they'd say, 'Well the inspector is coming. We gotta fix this and that.' I'll tell you an incident that happened to me. I was riding the rope, dropping these cars. The clevis is a thing you hook cars with. It's sparking like crazy and the ? stopped. I went to the phone. A guy by the name of George Birchill was on the phone. I said, 'George, what happened? The clevis was sparking like hell down here.' He says, 'Lightening struck the hoist through and went all the way down the cable four levels.' Next day you know where they were? The bosses were on top grounding the bull wheels so if anything happened again it'll ground itself.

Q: Just imagine if you'd have been handling the clevis.

SL: If I didn't have rubber boots maybe I'd have got electrocuted. I don't know.

Q: Were you ever trained for rescue work?

SL: No, I used to go to first aid, that's all. The doctor used to teach you at that time. We had doctors, and each one would take a turn on a Sunday and go there and teach you first aid. We got a shirt and tie out of it one time.

LL: You took a test and they got you a first grade. You were first. Shirt and tie.

Q: You said the miners worked with partners. Did you have the same partner all the time?

SL: Yes, same partner. Unless sometime he wants you to change, you'll change.

Q: Did you have the same partner all the time?

SL: Not always, no. The last one I worked with in Vickery there was Fred Hurst. Then the bosses wanted a change. Fred says, 'Okay, I'll split up with Steve if you'll give me my son-in-law.' So he gave him his son-in-law. 'And Steve,' he says, 'I'll give you Zoly ?.' A Hungarian fellow. Nice chap.

Q: When you worked with partners, what was the division of labor?

SL: It was split even. The coal that went out was split between the two of you.

Q: Was somebody digging the coal and another person loading it into the car?

SL: You dug the coal, the two miners. Handling the coal was up to the company to get it down and into the cars. You got it into the chute, and that was their job. We just dug coal, and put timbers up. You got paid for timber and stuff like that. If you shoveled the coal, you were paid 72 cents a ton; 69 cents if you dug it with an air pick.

Q: How did your pay change over time?

SL: It changed quite a bit. When we started I was getting \$4.45 a day, when we got married.

Q: How much coal could you dig in an 8-hour day?

SL: I couldn't tell you really. If a guy made \$100 for two weeks, that was big money. You had to have a pretty good place where the coal was soft sometimes. That's where the bosses used to shine, give you a good place. And if you were a dirty old bugger, go sweat it out there. If you didn't make enough, they used to call it makeup, abnormal conditions. They'd make you up to \$5.40 a day.

Q: So your placement in the mine was dependent on the boss, on whether he liked you or not?

SL: Yes, there was lots of that.

Q: Was there ever a strike?

SL: Yes, for a short while. They went on a meat strike during the war. They didn't want the guys to have meat. They'd give you ration. The miners said, 'We can't work unless we get meat, and that's it.'

Q: What was the outcome of the strike?

SL: They gave them meat right away. They wanted you back at work because it was a national emergency for coal.

Q: And yet they treat you like that.

SL: Yes, national emergency.

Q: So what were you saying, Liz, about getting tokens?

LL: Tokens, yes. If you wanted to get sugar, you had to give so many. If you wanted to get meat, you'd have to give so many tokens. One woman lost hers. I found them. I went

in the store and said, 'I found this.' This woman that was there. She grabbed it. She said, 'Where the hell did you get that?' I said, 'Next time I find anything I'll take it home and burn it. That's all.'

Q: That was the gratitude that you got?

LL: That's terrible. Some people are like that.

Q: Can you describe, other than living in fear all the time, what the life of a miner's wife was like?

LL: Nice. It was okay. Oh heck, I had the three children. They went to school. You didn't have to pay for books or anything. Even in the schools, they used to give them milk, little things of milk. Saturday and Sunday we always made sure we went fishing or we went out. Steve played the accordion. They'd phone him to come at weddings and parties. The people were very friendly. Nobody was trying to beat somebody else.

Q: So there was a real sense of community?

LL: Yes, it was really nice.

SL: People had more fun at that time than they do now.

LL: All they do now is work, ...

SL: That accordion, I don't know how many pants I wore out. I don't know how many pants I wore out with the bellows of that accordion.

Q: Was there a union hall where these dances would take place?

SL: In Bellevue, yes. That was dandy. Bellevue was a wonderful place. All the good looking gals in Bellevue. Good dance, good music.

LL: And good boyfriends.

Q: When you did the interview with Dianne, you talked about delivering milk when you were young?

LL: I don't want that in it.

SL: Everybody had cows back then, and chickens.

LL: We had five cows, and I'm telling you, we had to go from school to Passberg, now where they've got the graveyard, to get the cows. We'd have to chase them home. One day, my teacher was very nice, she said, 'Liz, come here.' She said, 'There's a storm coming up. Do you have to go and get the cows?' 'Yes.' 'Well you'd better pick someone and go and get them now, because there's a big storm coming.' So I got let out of school to go. I sometimes came late to school, because we used to deliver milk to the company houses, all over. You won't believe me, but my mother had a bag and she put quarts and I used to take it on the bicycle. I was a real good bicycle driver. Not anymore. But that's the way my folks were. We had lots of milk and butter. My mother used to make cheese, so we were okay. I think everybody at that time had cows. The kids had to go for cows and the kids all had to do their chores at home. Not like now, they don't do their chores at home. Oh I got this to do and I got that to do. They don't do as we had to. But that's life when you're growing up. We didn't have a washer or a dryer at home. I used to scrub in one tub and my sister would scrub in the other, and then we'd reverse it the next week. And then my mother would rinse them out and hang them out. I was what when I started going with you, 16? When we were getting married? I said, 'Oh boy, I'll get away from the cows.' So help me, my mother then bought a washer and dryer, and they got rid of the cows. So I said, 'Gee, they sure made use of us when we were home.' But that's what it was like growing up in a coalmining town.

SL: When you went to the mine, first you see if your partner is there. Then you read the fire boss's report. He got on there if everything is safe or what you have to do when you go in. If your partner's not there, then you stand and wait or he'll give you somebody who's on spare. That's the way it worked.

Q: I was at Bankhead Mine by Banff. There was some writing there that said the miners would pick up a lamp, and it had a tag on it. They kept one, and one stayed with the lamp. Then when they came back out again, they handed it in, so they'd know who was down and who had come back.

SL: They used to have them tags. But at McGillivray you had your tag when you checked in. Your number was on your lamp. When you come in you ask for your lamp, '148, yes' and it's on the lamp. Something happens to you and they can't find you, or an explosion or something, they got the lamp there. Your number's on that lamp.

Q: Was that an electric lamp?

SL: They used to charge them batteries every day. They were pretty good lights.

Q: Was that something you had to pay for?

SL: No. Never paid nothing for that.

Q: Was anything else provided by the company – like your tools?

SL: No, you had to have your own. You worked on contract. Uou had to buy your own. Unless you're a company worker, then they give you company tools.

Q: Was May Day a big event?

SL: Yes. People don't know what May Day is anymore. ... They celebrate Victoria Day, Labour Day too. That's when I think about 30 or how many thousand people in Chicago went on strike and got an 8-hour day. Otherwise you'd still be working 10 and 12 or 14

hours. Now the crazy miners. I've got a constitution here. The miner's constitution always said, 'Striving for a 7-hour shift.' Now because [sound blank], they work 12 hours. They wouldn't want to work 12 hours in some of those places in the mine, I'll guarantee you.

LL: Well they work four days on and four days off up there.

SL: Yes. The storekeepers wonder why they get no business? They get four days off, they go to Lethbridge. they don't spend their money here.

Q: So, besides the parade, what kinds of celebrations did you have for May Day?

SL: At one time they had a train used to go to Sparwood, for a big picnic there.

LL: All of the kids, parents and all, would go to the station, get on the train, and go to this They had a big celebration. Races and food and prizes. Then at a certain time, they had to all go down to the station. The train would bring you back to where you lived.

Q: You said Sparwood?

SL: Yes. They used to call it Michel Natal before.

LL: That train went to Fernie, because I was on it. Our family, we went on it, that's all I know about it. It went to Fernie, and they had a heck of a celebration there for May Day. I said, now they got nothing. Even at times in Bellevue, they had a club and they'd have dances for recreation. They'd hang chocolate bars up. If one of the guys danced with you, and you pulled one of the chocolate bars down, he had to pay for it. That was in the Ukrainian Hall in Bellevue. They had a club there. My folks always took us. And they had picnics in Bellevue. Here they didn't have as many, Steve said. But in Bellevue they had picnics, down where the graveyard is now, down below, that's where they had a big picnic place.

Q: How long did that tradition carry on for?

LL: Not long. When my children were going to school, there was no May Day anymore.

Q: Because I think that picture says 1932.

SL: Yes. And the other one is the picket line. Did you see? That was in Bellevue, that one. They took the guys from here on a picket line down to Bellevue when they were on strike. On the one you could see the policemen on horses. They had tents in Blairmore. They were afraid, communists here. Sure you're going to be communist. You got nothing to eat, what are you going to be? Fight.

Q: Was your dad and brother in that strike in Bellevue in the '30s?

SL: They were on strike, yes.

LL: A lot of guys were scabs. They would get guys from Coleman and Blairmore to come down and stay on the picket line to stop them. The scabs used to go in trucks, covered up, and the people were throwing rocks at them. I know, because I was there watching them. And the police were there on horses too. This one woman, she wanted to go shopping or something, and the horse was in the way. She kept telling him to move, and he wouldn't. So she hit the horse and it bucked.

SL: They used to picket right across the street from the mine there.

LL: Yes. You could see everything. The guys that used to come to help here, you'd have to take them to your home, two or three, and give them supper. They stuck together.

SL: Frank Slide, that was a relief camp made there. That's when they had relief camps, 20 cents a day. That was R.B. Bennet yet. When he went to London, they made him a lord.

Q: But those conditions in the relief camp all led to the On-to-Ottawa Trek.

SL: That's right.

LL: The boys from there, if they wanted to go to the dance from the relief camp, they used to sell their jackets and trousers to get money to go to the dance. So the government got smart. They put a big orange O on the back of the jackets and on the pants, so they couldn't sell it anymore. So the guy that ran the show, he let the guys in free. He says, 'They're really mean to you guys.' They were nice guys though, a lot of them.

SL: Yes, there was nothing wrong with them.

LL: They were from Nova Scotia.

Q: What were they doing in the relief camp?

SL: Building roads for 20 cents a day. And there was no big equipment. Like I was telling her the other day, when we was working up here, it was \$3.20 a day. You walked from here to get up there, to Sentinel. Then you had this shovel, shoveling gravel. Now at least you get a 10 minute break for coffee. There was no breaks. You worked till dinnertime, and that was it. No coffee breaks. Forget it. People got it made. But this is only going to last so long too, you know. The bubble is going to burst.

LL: Like I always said, the men worked in the mine, the women stayed home taking care of the kids and everything, and she didn't get no compensation. They didn't realize that you're raising a family. You need some too.

SL: She even tells me now, you should've never got married, that's all.

LL: Yes, that's what I say.

Q: So how did you two meet?

SL: At the dance in Bellevue.

Q: Was he playing the accordion?

LL: No. A bunch of us girls always went together. In Frank they had a nice dance hall, and we all used to, my dad wouldn't let us walk up the main highway. We had to go up the track, because we used to walk to the dances. We made a pact between us, whoever gets a ride home has to take us all. Remember Steve? He'd say, 'Do you want me to take you home?' I'd say, 'Well there's four of us.' 'Okay.' So they were lucky.

SL: That '28 Chevy.

LL: They all got a ride home. He'd say, 'I'm coming down to see you tomorrow.' Oh? I had a heck of a time to tell my folks.

Q: So was it love at first sight, Steve?

SL: 'You can't go by my house.' I says, 'No, I'm not meeting you out on the street. I'm going by your house.' She didn't like the idea much. It worked out. Then she gave me hell for spending more time with the old man than I did with her.

LL: That's right. He didn't come to see me. He came to see my father.

SL: And even the mother said, 'I've never seen Steve drunk yet anyway.'

LL: Well I was too young to go out and drink.

SL: A lot of parties though, god almighty. Oh, yes.

Q: Talk a bit about, with the variety of cultural backgrounds, how you all got along?

LL: We all got along well until the Englishmen come.

SL: Before it was always square heads, bohunks, wops; till they all came together here. And then they started getting married to these square heads and bohunks. Then they changed their melody. They changed their tune completely.

Q: And what happened when the Englishmen came?

SL: They used to downgrade the Slovaks and that. I had one I used to work with. He married a girl from Hillcrest. She's Ukrainian Polish. See how the cards change. He come back from the army, I was working. You know Fred, ... if you'd have come back from the army and said, no, I've got to depend on a Japanese for a living, you would've killed him. There you go, that's how it turned out.

Q: Was your dad put in an internment camp?

SL: No, he got married in Fernie in 1903. He was there when that explosion was in Fernie too.

Q: What explosion was that?

SL: About 128 men got killed that time. Dad was telling us, a couple weeks before that, and he wasn't a b.s.er. 'We were out, and we seen a woman cross the entry - the entry is the main hallway - and walk into this manhole, with a black cap and cloak.' He said, 'I went there and had a look. There was nobody there.' He said, 'Made the hair stand on your neck. Then it was a week or two after,' he says, 'We went to work.' They had their lamps already. Uncle ? says, 'You know what, Joe? The hell with it. We've got half a keg of beer at home. Let's go back home.' They went back home, and the mine blew up. Nobody got out; not one. Dad says even mine rescue that were there got killed.

LL: Tell them about your mother when she went on the train.

SL: I don't know that good enough what happened Lizzie.

LL: Well she couldn't speak, she was saying. She was going on the train to Saskatchewan.

SL: To Saskatchewan, you know, with her sister. They couldn't talk English. This woman was going down there somewhere too. So okay, we'll follow her. They come

down to Lethbridge somewhere, the woman gets off, and they get off. They got off, and that's the time that was the train accident between Lethbridge and Medicine Hat. Crashed, you know. Poor dad was in Fernie. He come down wondering if she got killed or not. No, she went back on another means of transportation to the farm. That's where mother lost all her stuff. She never had a wedding picture or anything. She said everything was there when them trains hit. Close calls. Shall I tell you another one? A couple riding rope. We were going home at quitting time. There's a couple fellows still live up the hill, they could tell you the same story. Jasper Jones is up there and Kubitsa. Maybe a dozen or 15 of us, not a big crew. We were on this man trip. Everybody liked sports, we're going home. All at once, like if you snapped your fingers - it's hard to explain - there wasn't a guy on there. Buckets and men all over the place and everybody scrambling to hide somewhere. They thought the rope broke or something. Nobody knew what happened. What happened, the next level up, you know what a frog is in a railway? In the mine, they used to put wooden cleats so the rope would catch underneath. This one had no cleat on. As he was pulling up, the rope got caught under there, and it was stretching and stretching. It stretched like a violin string, and when it sprung out, the trip was about 200 feet up the slope, and we were all over everywhere. Then that crazy hoistman, he should've known. He said, 'I was wondering why the ant meter was going off so hard.' He was trying to tear all the tracks out.

Q: But nobody was hurt?

SL: Nobody. An old guy by the name of McIsaac got hurt a little bit, but I don't know if he missed any time even. Just fate. Another one up that mountain. I had to grease the bull wheels and the big fan, put oil, and go down the ropeway. There was a level there where

we used to drop the coal down. It was steep! When the boss come, I says, 'Les, are you going to ride down?' He says, 'No bloody way.' It was so steep. So I picked a couple of rocks up from night shift. This guy was there. I said, 'Tou know Mike Shandershack, my partner's not out today.' I said, 'You'll send an extra down, eh?' 'No, the hell, you're the rope rider,' he said. 'And you're the buckler boss. You send the next trip down,' I told him. I had to line my cars out on the bottom, empties for hoist. I went down, dropped in, sent an extra ?. The bloody rope broke on the extra. If it would've broke with me on there, I don't know. You wouldn't make it. We lost a rail once. We used to hook them on the drop bar behind with a spike. We lost one once, it went all the way down to the bottom. That's how steep it was, that rail. And it hit into this coal and went through about 10 feet of school.

LL: And him telling us these stories all the time, that's what made us very frightened when they went to work. You just waited for 4 o'clock for them to get home. The woman lived a very terrifying life.

SL: There was a lot of good parts.

LL: Oh yes, lots of fun and all that, as long as your man was with you.

Q: But there was always that constant fear?

LL: Every time he went to work. He'd come home and tell us about this and this happened, and your hair would stand on end. It just made you worry more. I had to laugh one time, my daughter, the one that just phoned, she was only 12. It was Friday the 13th and she said, 'Daddy, don't go to work today.'

SL: She said, 'Daddy, don't go to work. Don't go to work.' I said, 'Okay, no problem.' Stayed home.

LL: Yes, because it's Friday the 13th, to heck with it.

Q: So did your children understand that fear too?

SL: Oh I don't know. The older one here, he says, 'Dad, I don't know how you ever worked in it that long.'

LL: He worked around the mine, but he was in there once.

SL: He was in there once, he said. Where all the coal is taken out, that's where he went and looked. All you see is timbers, row and row of props standing. They only stand so long, and then the place eventually caves.

Q: So the tunnels of those closed mines have all fallen down?

SL: No, McGillivray Mine, that tunnel you see outside there, that was an 1,800-foot rock tunnel. There they have electric trolley that is used to pull the cars. That used to go to the main slope and pick up all the cars from all the levels and bring them out to the tippie. It was a long tunnel.

[new tape]

LL: ...You used to hang them out in the night, because you couldn't in the daytime.

Spots all over them. I had to laugh. Eddy too, she came with her little daughter when she was small. She had nice white socks on and she went to run around on the grass. 'Mom, look at her socks. They're black.' I says, 'Yes, that's what we got here.'

SL: Snow used to be black.

LL: Oh yes, we never had white snow.

SL: Coal dust. They wouldn't allow that now no more.

LL: We all had wood stoves and we had outside toilets. Not like now, everybody's got real pleasure.

SL: People live in luxury.

LL: And now the trouble is, I'll tell you. Okay, we're married 67 years. Now they get married two, three years, that's it. They're getting a divorce.

[tape stopped]

SL: They can see what a seam of coal looked like. Some places went down 2 feet.

LL: Where was that place that ? had, that I wouldn't go down?

SL: In Champion.

LL: He had a little mine there.

SL: Friend of ours.

LL: And he's, 'C'mon down.' I said, 'Oh no.' You know what? I can't stand to be in an elevator. I feel like ?? And he can't stand heights.

SL: I can't. I'd rather go down this way.

Q: How did a person get a job in a mine?

SL: The mine used to work two or three days. You'd go up there and stand there like a dummy, 30 or 40 of you. The boss would walk around for a while and then he'd come out, 'My god, nothing doing today boys.' And you'd go back home or go down to International. They used to check out a little later. McGillivray would check out at 3:30, and down here, 4 o'clock. You did that every time the mine worked. You know how long I went up there? Two years.

Q: Of standing around, trying to get a job?

SL: Yes. There was no jobs. Like I told you, I worked for 10 hours for \$2 for Melowski, or \$1 a day skidding props up there.

Q: How did you get by?

SL: We weren't married then. I was home at that time. Dad worked on a section for \$2.40 a day. That's all the CPR paid. Isn't that something?

Q: Your dad worked on a section gang for the CPR?

SL: Yes. \$2.40 a day. Isn't that pitiful? Those poor guys came home so tired, absolutely beat.

Q: That was all heavy work.

SL: Sure it was. Then they blame unions. You can't blame unions. Unions got lots, but they start going too far and then they start closing up. That's why BC has a hard time now. You look at anything you pick up now, made in China. Cheap labor. Now the Japanese are putting a factory up in Mexico for building cars. Cheap labor. But without a union, you'd have nothing. When we had holidays first. Nobody had holidays. The only guys got holidays was fire bosses, pit bosses, and managers and that. Then the union got finally holidays, got us holidays. Then if you worked 20 days a month, if you didn't miss any shifts, you got a holiday. They put a sheet up, who was entitled to a holiday for that month. If you brought a doctor's note, you got credit. If you didn't have a doctor's note, you wouldn't get a holiday. That's the way they posted your holidays.

Q: So did you get a lot of holidays?

SL: You got 12, that's all.

Q: And did you always get yours?

SL: I did, yes. I never lost no, I used to go and get a doctor's note, that's all. You get a doctor's note, and then you got your holiday.

Q: Did you get holiday pay, or did you just get the day off?

SL: You got holiday with pay. That's the first time that ever come out. And that was through the unions.

Q: When did the mines start to close?

SL: I couldn't tell you really. The last one that closed was Vickery. We used to ride up there on our own time too. Fifteen miles on the truck. Then we had a bus after, which we had to pay for. Nothing for nothing.

Q: Liz, do you remember when the mines started closing in this area?

LL: No. He would know more about it than I. He worked there. You notice all the stories he's got? I'm not saying much, because all I did was stay at home and watch the children. They went to school in Coleman.

Q: You said you had a large garden?

LL: Oh yes. And I had chickens. I used to raise my own chickens. I'd look in the thing, if the egg was empty it was no good. If they had a sperm in there, you get a cooker, a chicken that cooks. And you put her in a box and have little chicks. But the trouble was, I should've fumigated the coop first, because the chickens got lice and the little chicks died.

Q: Was all that for your use, or did you sell some of it?

LL: No, for myself, for the children. When I had the big garden, I had lots of carrots that I couldn't use, and lots of beets and everything. I'd give them to my children. Just not

long ago, our grandson came and said, 'Grandma, would you mind if we dug that place up? It's all weeds now.'

Q: Did you retire on a pension from the mines?

SL: Yes, that was a pension from the union.

LL: Three hundred dollars.

SL: A month, yes. Union pension.

Q: When did the pension come into the mines?

SL: Quite a while ago, but they were only paying \$220.

Q: Another benefit of the union.

SL: It was better than a kick in the pants. The union got that, otherwise you'd have nothing. They wouldn't give you anything. No way.

LL: They didn't think much about miners.

SL: There were about 40 guys standing there looking for work every day. Lots of men standing around looking for work, god almighty. And then when the war broke out, there was work for everybody. Isn't that something? Work for everybody then. And they send up a call to the army, you just take your slip and give it to them at the mine, and that's it.

Q: So were miners declared an essential service?

SL: They were exempt.

LL: And the guys that lived here, they worked in the mines, they moved to Vancouver, they shipped them back here when that happened, to work in the mine.

SL: They'd say, anybody who worked in a mine, one foot forward. That's it, back to the mine again. Isn't that something?

Q: I don't know what would've been worse – working in the mine or going to war. It's not much of a choice.

SL: A lot of guys that worked up there joined the army to get away from the mines. They did. It was so damn dangerous. Very dangerous. Mind you, there were a lot of good places to work there too. Some places you enjoyed going to work. And lots were bad. Like our neighbor here, Slug's boy. He went to work spare. When you're on spare, they ? This other guy, he passed away already. Very bad place, he says, I'm not going to bloody work. It was very dangerous. So he said this to young Slug, and he got killed. The place started to cave and there was nowhere to go. Two of them got killed.

Q: How old was he?

SL: He wasn't very old. He was in his 20s.

Q: There must be records kept as to how many fatalities over the years.

SL: Oh yes. I got one here from the paper for the explosion in McGillivray.

Q: Over at the union hall here, at the seniors' drop-in center, they have your brother-in-law's pay slip. What other things do they have there?

SL: They got one of hers there. A nice verse: When you're 80 if you wish for this, and 81, 82. Ya, that one in McGillivray Mine, when it blew up that time, it wouldn't quit exploding. Just one after another. So they flooded the mine for about three months. After that, they pumped the water out. I think there was two guys left, ? killed all together and two was left in there. I think they had a horse there too. The guy I worked with, old man Fabro, he said, 'Boy, they had to have somebody go and chop them horses up and get them out.' He says, 'What a job.' You pay them, not much I don't think. He said, that was a dirty job, getting that horse out. The mine was flooded for three months.

Q: So did you not work during those three months then?

SL: I wasn't working then. That was in 1926.

LL: A lot of guys didn't know that there was an explosion in that mine, Steve.

SL: No, they didn't know. They hadn't got a record even. Another guy was killed down the street, another one ? dad. You've got the names there on a paper.

Q: How were mines ventilated?

SL: They had to have so much air going in there for each man. Big fans. That thing blows, I'll tell you. I used to go and grease that one on the mountain, and boy you had to hold your cap or it would take it right in.

Q: Where were they situated?

SL: Outside. Blow air down the tunnel, then they distributed, or say you worked in a place somewhere where there was gas, in a room. They had braddish again. You'd get the air from the entry, you put the braddish up and into your room, and it would clean it out, keep the air going.

Q: How did they make sure the air got to all the areas?

SL: The pit boss, they had planners and surveyors. They were always surveying. They kept track of where the air had to go, how it had to be directed into different places.

Q: How was the air exhausted?

SL: They had an exhaust fan, pulling out. There was a lot of air pushed down there. The pit boss used to go out in a narrow place. He'd have a little indictor how much cubic feet of what was going in.

Q: What would happen if the fan broke down?

SL: They'd send everybody out.

Q: How was that communicated?

SL: Telephone.

Q: How did you check for gas in the mine?

SL: With a safety lamp. You'll see them down there. They had two different ways of measuring it. You put that light right down. The fire boss, that was his job, on night shift or whenever. He'd report to you how your place was. You lit that light up slowly, if you see it going up like this, you know there's gas in there.

Q: So it was a hurricane lamp, with a wick?

SL: Wolf, it was a wolf lamp. You just put it up and the flame would start going up, so you'd bring it down slowly.

Q: It seems a rather dangerous way to be checking for gas, with an open flame.

SL: Not open. It's got gauze outside that wire mesh. Didn't you ever see one? You'll see one if you go down to Bellevue. It's got that wire mesh around, two or three layers. That's why you go up and you bring it down slowly. I had a fire boss come in one time and he tested gas. Lots of gas. Test it again. I said, 'What the hell you trying to do? Blow the place up?' Because if you keep doing it, the mesh gets hot.

LL: And it'll explode.

SL: They had another system there at McGillivray, where they used to suck the air in, and they had an indicator used to tell them how much gas there was. But that wolf lamp was about the best. They used to work by that at one time. Little wee light like that, and they used to work by it. I think you've got a picture there of that safety lamp, on that picture there. In the front row, have a look. Have a look where the miners are there. I think old man Lilia's got one that they used to work by.

Q: Is there anything else you wanted to tell us?

SL: We were talking about gas. You know where I found them fossils? They had our machine, and we were coming in afternoon shift. He says, 'Steve, the machine is up on the counter.' We used to call it a counter. You had one entry and then up above about 90 feet you had a counter used to run all the way through. He said, 'The machine is up there.' I went up there to get the machine. I'm taking this machine. Here the fire boss down below says, 'Get the hell out of there. What are you doing up in there? This place is full of gas.' He said it was full of gas. And all the coal inside where the mine, where you had gas at all, was taken out with the compressed motors; binkies they called them. They used to have to have a charge every so often. You had to make sure you got on a charger or you'd never move that thing no more. Charge it up to 650 lbs. They had a lot of power. If it was too tough, they'd have two double decker going. They come outside, they were just white with frost from that compressed air chugging through.

LL: Now we've raised our children. Now we should have it nice for the golden years, but they're not golden years. They're rotten years. They're terrible.

SL: And pay used to be \$30, \$32 for two weeks.

LL: Well we were young, and it didn't bother us. We went out fishing. We'd go mushroom picking, and berry picking, always something. Right now we can't do nothing. We sit in the house here.

SL: People now they got no time anyway to go anywhere. They're busy making money. I told a woman the other day, what the hell do you do with all that money? Pay bills. At that time people lived different. You didn't want to get ahead of the next guy. You were

all in the same boat. And Saturdays come, they had a real good time everybody. Get a dozen beer and ? and got a party going. Whoop it up.

SL: The food was cheaper too. You could buy hamburger 10 or 15 cents a pound. Now it's a dollar something. That's why people now have to have two paychecks come in to meet the ends. They raise the gas, they raise the taxes, you got nothing left.

Q: But the one thing that they don't raise is the wages.

LL: That is bad for the ones that really, you know they're always talking about those guys on the street, begging this and that. I think they're doing better than the ones that are trying to work. Like the ones in Calgary, it showed them. They seemed to be, they got a bundle of stuff, and they beg on the street. If the police don't catch them, they do better than the person that drives to work.

SL: In a way the unions were good. But they come to a point, every time you raise your wages, somebody's gotta come of his pocket. And it's not going to be the company. So they're going to raise the price of whatever they're selling. Like they say in them car factories, they start with \$20 something a day. There you go.

LL: That's why they're not selling cars now.

SL: They guy come here one day to fix the fridge. I said, 'What is that anyway?' He said, 'For pensioners we charge \$30 an hour, but otherwise it's \$40 an hour.' He works at the gas plant. I says, 'How much in the hell are you making up there anyway?' \$37....

LL: Ya, and we went and we got that, and the fridge didn't work good. We had to get a new one.

SL: Wages start going up, they take it out of somebody. They're not going to give you stuff for nothing. The company's going to raise their product price. Like cars, you could

buy a car for \$950, a Ford. You could buy that Chev like dad had, was around \$1000 in '28. But it was cheap wages. But now the difference is, a guy working for minimum wage, there's too much discrepancy between the wages. One guy's getting good wage, and the other guy's getting beans. That's the trouble. If you work minimum wage, \$6 an hour. Now say they paid him \$10, they pay him \$10, up go your groceries.

Q: After your experience, would you recommend coalmining to anybody?

SL: No, I wouldn't recommend it to nobody.

LL: And I always said to him, a coalminer should never get married.

SL: Not underground anyway, no. A dangerous occupation.

LL: The man goes to work, the woman suffers too. But still, you live. You don't know that there's a better life coming. Well we did for a while, until we got old.

SL: A lot of places you worked with water dripping on your back. You put in eight hours like that. I seen miners come from down on the truck, their pants all froze. Got to wait till they thaw out to get them off in the washhouse to have a bath.

Q: And there's black lung, and all the diseases associated with coalmining.

SL: Now they look after people. Like the guy told me, my ears ring always, you never get rid of it. You work by loud noises? Yes. When they're drilling rock, they had two machines and an iron bar like that across. There's so much noise. You just cannot imagine how much noise that is. Your ears are ringing all the time. The guy in Lethbridge said, 'No, you can't get rid of that.' Now they give earmuffs, they give you everything. You don't need to work under them conditions now. Or in four level, they used to load coal. They couldn't see how much coal was in the car. That shows you how much dust there was. And you wonder why you got no lungs?

[END]