

Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)

Group Interview

- Date: 10 November 2005
- Location: Coleman, Alberta
- Participants: George MacDonald, Dick Marquardt, Clarence Morrow, Beryl Orr, Remo Quarin, Helen Suca, Mary Suca, Gary Taje, Betty Walmsley
- Index: Coalmining in the Crowsnest Pass; Family histories and living in the Crowsnest Pass; Being the wife of a miner; Teaching in the Crowsnest Pass; Female teachers losing their jobs when they married; Communism in the Crowsnest Pass in the 1920s and 1930s and why people turned to Communism; Tim Buck; Mine accidents and fatalities; Improvements in working conditions and safety; Mine rescue

Gary Taje: I'm Gary Taje. I was born and raised in the Crowsnest Pass, born in Coleman. I started working in the mines in 1971 and worked there until about 7 years ago. In my time I was involved in the labour movement as a shop steward executive member of a local union in BC.

Richard Marquardt: Hi, I'm Richard Marquardt. I moved here in 1963, like everybody else, for the work. Worked in underground all my life. Started when I was 16 up in the Yukon. Worked my way right up to pit boss. The last mine I worked in was Vickery mine owned by Coleman Collieries. The wife and I had three kids, two girls and one boy, and raised them all here in the Pass. All the storekeepers and people in Crowsnest Pass when we moved here were absolutely fantastic to us. You could go to any store and get credit at any time, because you didn't have any money. That's about it. We're still here.

Remo Quarin: Hi I'm Remo Quarin. I was born in Michel, BC. I started working in the mines in December 1, 1955. I started outside as a coupler boy, then underground. I did every job underground, up to continuous miner operator. I was involved in mine rescue for 14 years in Michel and here in Coleman Collieries. Wound up driving truck here at Coleman Collieries. Stayed here till our retirement. We moved here to the Pass in 1966 when we got married. Raised three kids, and they're all over the world now, but that's not important.

Helen Suca: My name's Helen Suca. The reason we came to the Crowsnest Pass is because my father came from Slovakia in 1927. He worked here on the CPR, got enough money to send back to Slovakia to bring my mother and sister over here. So we came here in 1979. We stayed in Burmis for over 30 years before we graduated, going to school in the Pass, and then going out teaching. In the Crowsnest Pass area we taught for 28 years in total. We've lived here most of all our days so far. We enjoy living here, with all its amenities and good people.

Mary Suca: I'm here sister, so she said some of the things that involve me too. I was going to bring up that our only association with the union was with the Alberta Teachers Association. We were teachers, we taught in the Pass here for about 24 of the 28 years we did teach before we retired. Speaking about the CPR, I can remember my dad working for 25 cents an hour, and this is not full time, during the whole week. He worked six days, and then on Sunday he'd have to patrol the track as well. This is for 25 cents an hour, in the '30s. He was a maintenance man. He worked his way up eventually to being a foreman. But there were some lean years between the beginning and the end of that.

Beryl Orr: Hi, I'm Beryl Orr. I wasn't born or raised in Crowsnest Pass. I came here in 1961. My husband had work here. We moved to Coleman, west Coleman. What a shock from Lethbridge. There was coal furnace, no bathrooms, cold water. It took a long time for me to adjust. I'd had all the amenities, and moved into what I thought was black hell. My most vivid memory was washing clothes. The tipple was running. I got up at midnight, I scrubbed my clothesline with SOS pads, I hung out my clothes, set the alarm for 5 o'clock in the morning, and brought my clothes in. Otherwise they were as black as the coal. It was very hard to get used to. After one year of living in Coleman, I said to my husband, if you don't find me a clean place to live, I'm moving back to Lethbridge. Well we moved to Bellevue, and I've been happy as can be since. It's a beautiful little town and a wonderful community. The whole Pass is a wonderful community. I'm very pleased that we lived here. I owned my own business for 20 years. I just sold it in 2000. Now I'm semi-retired. I've raised five children here, and I now have 12 grandchildren and three great grandchildren, and they're all in the Crowsnest Pass.

Betty Walmsley: My name is Betty Walmsley. I was born Betty Olsen, in Blairmore. I've lived here all my life. My family have lived here, came here over 100 years ago. I was brought up by my grandparents. My grandfather was a Communist, very active in the unions. My great grandfather, his father, also was a Communist. I learned to read outside of school. The United Mine Worker, that was the favorite magazine in our house. Uncle Joe was Joe Stalin in our house. My grandfather was very Norwegian, and a pat on the head was as much as you got for affection from him. But two or three times a year, usually in the spring, summer or fall, he would take me by the hand, which was a big deal, and we'd go over to a house. I would sit outside and men would walk in. I would sit outside and play with the people's cat. I think I was his cover for union meetings or Communist meetings, I think that's what it was. Tim Buck came to our house once. My grandmother, a Stafford from Lethbridge, and the Staffords had money and social position. My grandma and grandpa fought all the time about these union guys. Harvey Murphy was another one that came. When Tim Buck came to our house, we went to visit Oliver's, my grandma and I, when he came to our house. Just the once, of course. When election time came, I can remember my grandma taking me with her to vote. She would tell me on the way home, don't you tell your grandfather. I didn't vote CCF, don't you tell your grandfather.

Clarence Morrow: Clarence Morrow. I came here in 1969, sent up here from the government of Regina for a rest. I come up here working with the forestry here for two

years. Then I started up in the ? up there in the camp, running the camp for 5 years. First ? in Michel, then I started in the mine here. I came to Philips Cable for 2 years, then started in the mine in Coleman. I was in the plant and worked my way up to second operator in the plant in Coleman. When they decided they had to close it in 1980, I drained all the tanks at 3 o'clock in the morning. We finished draining the tanks and everything, and then they told me I was through. That was it, game's over, the mine is closed. So I went from there, I was out of work for about 3 months, then I started up in Lyon Creek the mine in BC. I worked up there for 10 years, till I retired.

George MacDonald: George MacDonald. I was born here in 1932. Worked over at International underground, loved it. Couldn't wait until I could get 18 to go to work there. Then I couldn't wait to become 21, to go in the Coleman Hotel and have my first beer. It was nice. They all sang Happy Birthday. Then when the mine shut down I had to leave, because there was no work here. I went to Prince George, and that's where I met my lovely wife. Had four kids, moved back here in '72, supposed to be for two years. Lived in west Coleman. My wife says, holy smokes. A little different than that she said, but... We've lived here ever since, and she doesn't want to move away from here at all. We enjoy it here. That's it.

Q: What are some of the experiences you had in the mine? What were conditions like, and how have they changed?

Remo Quarin: I never worked at the mines here in the past. I worked in the mine in Michel, BC. It was a big mine there. In '55 we got a lot of miners from the Pass coming down that way. When they closed here, I believe '56. I worked on the machines there. I started out outside until I was 18, and then I could go underground. I started out rope riding, timber packing. I ran continuous miner, those machines. I stayed there until 1967 when the mine blew up. I was day shift that day. I was out of the mine 20 minutes before it blew up. Went back in again with the mine rescue, and that was my last day underground. I was fortunate enough to get a job here in the Pass. That's when we moved up here. I drove truck here, and I was treated a lot better here than I ever was elsewhere. I stayed here, drove off Tent Mountain. Worked in a plant at Lime Creek with Mr. Morrow. Ran heavy equipment there at the mines. The conditions were pretty dusty, and they weren't good. I'm talking about the Michel mines, I don't know about these mines. You do a lot of growing up. See a lot of things you wish you wouldn't have seen, but a lot of good times too. Mining is mining. I'm sure Dick can tell us.

Richard Marquardt: I worked in mines all my life. Like a lot of people say, the mines are dangerous. The mines are dangerous only if the management lets them get dangerous. If the right procedures are taken, you go by the Mines Act, everybody does their job according to the Mines Act. Like now this day and age, China, they just had another explosion over there, killed 14 men, gas explosion. Should never be happening, not with the technology. Even these other mines, what happens is everybody gets greedy. Everybody wants to beat the cross shift. So you have a buildup of gas and they figure, okay, maybe we'll get a couple more cars. Then that's what happens. You ignite the gas and the coal dust, and you have a huge explosion. I worked in Coleman Collieries. I

worked from the bottom up to pit boss. When I was pit boss I shut the mine down myself, because we were over the legal limit according to the Mines Act. In fact it didn't even reach there, it was just below it. I just about got fired over that. I shut the mine down, who's going to pay all the wages if we didn't get no coal, stuff like that. Worked all my life in mines, enjoyed it every day. Had some close calls, my own fault. But that's how mining is.

Q: So over the years of your career in the mines, did you see changes in terms of health and safety?

Richard Marquardt: Definitely. Better ventilation, you controlled the buildup of methane gas by better ventilation. You controlled the buildup of coal dust by removing it or by treating it with an inert rock dust. Wash houses were better, traveling to and from work was better. At the end it was pretty good. Coleman Collieries, we had a lot of good people working there. Everybody was as safe as the most dangerous man in the mine. That's the only time it is dangerous, if you get one guy that does something dangerous.

Gary Taje: ? were way behind the mines in BC in terms of safety and working conditions. After the Ulmer North explosion that Remo was involved with, they took their mine safety very seriously, and they ventilated very well. They insured that all the coal dust was treated with rock dust. The mines in BC were white except for where you're working, because the rock dust. In Alberta they're a little more lax. Their Mines Act when I started was the Mines Act that was put in place in 1954. It dealt more with hay in the mine and the keeping of horses than it did with the electrical equipment we were running at the time. The electrical regulations weren't there to safeguard that mine. Fortunately nothing happened there, we were very lucky. One of the things that did happen to me when I was a young miner operator is not really thinking. Machines, if you've seen them, have a cutting head full of chains, goggles for grizzly, and it's put onto a conveyor and out into a shuttle car. Your miner controls were set up that you could run the hydraulic pump and move the thing around, run your conveyor or run the head. There were stops at each stage. The machine I was running didn't have a stop on it. I was roof bolting, supporting the roof, and I was working off the head. I asked one of the guys to turn the machine on, drop me down, and swing me over to put another roof bolt in. He did it, and the head started up. I got half way through the grizzly before I was able to drag myself off. Didn't realize at the time how dangerous that was. After that we put some safeguards in, pins in to stop the head from going. But overall, the mines, because of the number of people who are killed there over the years, and the unions getting involved in safety, became very, very safe. When I finished my mining career they were a very good place to work. Always were a good place to work. Working with other people is always good, and that was the best thing. But working underground, you worked with other people, you dealt with them, you learned to respect them.

Q: Is the mining industry federally regulated, or provincially?

Gary Taje: It's provincially regulated. The federal government does have a Mines Act, and they're only put in place because of Devco in Nova Scotia, which is a federal

company, and that was the only responsibility they had in terms of mines. The rest of them were all done by provincial regulations. BC was head and shoulders above Alberta with their regulations, because of the politics of that province, which were a little bit to the left of Alberta. There was a lot more mining in BC as well. Mining was contained to a few areas of Alberta. Oil and agriculture was big, mining really wasn't. There they took their mining a little more seriously. Not that the men here didn't, the men took their mining here very seriously.

Q: What was it like to be a miner's wife.

Beryl Orr: When Ulmer blew up, we lived in Bellevue. They still had the old Bellevue mine whistle, was still active. I remember sitting in a friend's house, and this whistle blew. I thought, what the deuce is that? I'd never heard it in my life. I still get goose bumps to this day. I phoned a friend, Mrs. Lazarato, her husband has always worked in the mine, Roy. I phoned her and she said, there's been a mine disaster at Ulmer North. So we just all sat around. All us wives got together and sat around and waited and listened and talked back and forth on the phone. It was horrendous. I can still hear that whistle to this day, and hope I never have to hear it again.

George MacDonald: One of the miners who was in that accident was my brother's partner down in the mine, Walter Balsky. Three of us one time in the mine, F level. A big bump was happening in McGillivray at that time. It came through, and we just about got it down there that night. But the funny part about it, you wouldn't believe it when you talk about friendships down in the mine, the three of us run out there and I was driving a dinky at that time. We got on it. We were the only ones on F level. We went out as far as we could go, and stopped because the dust was still there. The three of us jump off the dinky and hugg each other and slap each other on the back because we made it. It's a different feeling when you're down there, it's different.

Richard Marquardt: If you don't know what a dinky is, it's a little engine run by air compression, that pulled the cars in and out of the mines.

Q: They replaced horses?

Richard Marquardt: Ya. And they had charging stations every so often. If you didn't make it to the charging station and you run out of air before you got there, you were in trouble. So you made sure you didn't.

Q: Did it ever happen to you?

George MacDonald: No, but I put it off the track once. You feel cheap for being so stupid. Where I was working it had three chargers, but you could make it out if you watched your air. If you got stuck half ways, I don't know what they'd say to you. It was a mile long, that entry.

Q: What's the story with the derailment?

George MacDonald: I was jiggering around, and it was getting to quitting time. So we had to switch. I hit the frog a little too fast, and plunk. Cheap. You're not supposed to do that. Then at E level, when you talk about the dust and how things have changed in the safety part of it. I was riding a dinky up there too, but on the inside where they were loading, and the air was coming in that way. You couldn't see your hand in front of you. You didn't have no respirators or nothing in them days. You just get used to it, I guess. That's what you did. You come out, and you'd just see your eyes and your teeth white. Everything is black. But you couldn't see your hand. You'd sit there and you'd hear clunk, clunk, and you'd move again a little bit to load the cars. This mine over here is on a slope, a 14 degree pitch. It was on all chutes into the entry, and they loaded the cars out of a chute into the car. So you'd bring in 21 cars, and back them out slowly, as each person had so many cars for each chute. You figured out how much coal was in each chute. The more coal you could get out for the miners that you were working for up there, they knew who you were on the loadout. Payday was pretty good in the bar, I'll tell you. . . . You could go down there with \$2, come home with change. You weren't allowed to buy.

Betty Walmsley: Were you aware that we had the town council made up of union members, the communists? It was in 1934, just a couple years before I was born. My great grandfather was one of the workers of the world unite, repeal section 98, release the 8. Fight reaction, join the communist party. That's the town council. That was in Blairmore.

Q: There were some huge gains that happened here. Do you have any stories about that?

Betty Walmsley: I don't know a lot about that, but I do know that scabs were scabs until my grandparents died. I brought a friend home, they're scabs. The friend wasn't a scab, but as far as my grandfather was concerned, they're scabs. They lived through a strike. There was a big strike in '32. People that went to work were, that's... I've never belonged to a union. I worked in the newspaper business, and it's slavery. I can remember in grade 10 the Social Studies teacher talking about Abraham Lincoln. He said Abraham Lincoln had said, "Government of the people, by the people, for the people." I knew that my grandfather on his dresser had a photograph of Tim Buck. Under that photograph it said, "Government of the people, by the people, for the people." – Tim Buck. So I put my hand up, that's not true, Abraham Lincoln didn't say that. That was one of the most humiliating days of my high school life.

[end of tape]

Gary Taje: What has to be understood about that period is the people that were the communists, that joined the party and their unions, were people that were let down. The companies here were experiencing a time of good profits, and they were doing quite well. The rails were still coal driven, and they were doing well. The workers weren't getting their fair share. They had poor work conditions, they did not have the money they needed to support their families. They didn't share that profit. The American unions, United Mine Workers of America in particular, which was the union in force here, sided with the

companies. They believed that the workers wanted too much. So the Communists saw an opening and came in. The people left the American unions and joined the Canadian Communist Union (Mine Workers Union of Canada) for that fact. They came in and offered something. Because they did, the workers here started making gains. Shortly after, of course, they left that union and went back to United Mine Workers, and United Mine Workers at that time became a responsible union - responsible to the workers not to the company - which they weren't in the '30s. They were more worried about collecting dues than they were about representing their workers. And this time in our history is what turned that around and got the Crowsnest Pass a wealth share and we owe them people a lot of gratitude. They didn't want something for nothing. They worked very hard for what they got, and just wanted their fair share. One of the card carrying communists that kept his card until his dying day and was very proud of it was Bob Sallant. He let his name be known as a communist. He did interviews with the Vancouver Sun and everything else. He was a contract miner, Dick knows him. Very strong, very hardworking man. He was the probably the most successful contract miner we had. Between 1958 and 1960 he bought his wife the very first pair of contact lenses sold in Alberta. At that time he paid \$5,200 for those contact lenses. This is not somebody who wanted something for nothing, this is somebody that actually produced and just wanted his fair share. When his wife wanted them contact lenses, he was able to get them. In Crowsnest Pass at that time you could buy a house for \$2,000. So these are the people that became communists. Another one, John Sanderson, was part of the farmer's union. He was up in the Vegreville area. The miners in Corbin had nothing. They were dependent on the company to eat, so they were very hungry. The farm union, and John with them, formed a wagon train and brought food down from northern Alberta to the workers at Corbin and fed them. John Sanderson stayed here for the rest of his life. As a matter of fact, he was the secretary treasurer of the local here until his death a few years back. Good people.

Richard Marquardt: I first started in the mine, this was in Drumheller when I was 18. Worked about two months ... So I come to work one day and the pit boss, Bill Jones his name was. At that time you didn't go to no building or nothing, you just went to the little window, got your lamp, went to the next window, got your mine check. As soon as I was walking away he hollers at me, Dick, get over here. Oh geez, what did I do? There was always 25 guys standing by the office waiting for your job. I run over there, yes Mr. Jones. He says, whatever the guy's name was wasn't out today, he says, you gotta go driving horse. I said, I don't know nothing about driving horses. I don't know how to harness or anything. He says, go with your brother, your brother will help you harness it, and the horse will show you what to do. And that was it. The horses were smart, they knew exactly what to do. Everything turned out okay.

George MacDonald: You're talking about unions and strikes. A strike was usually two weeks, and there were no picket lines.

Q: Was it a wobble?

George MacDonald: No, it was a strike but there were no picket lines or anything. They'd let us use the washhouses to get washed. We'd go down to the bar, we'd sit there

with the bosses, union and all together. There was never any animosity, no broken windows, no nothing. It was a pretty calm thing. We'd get our 5-1/2 cents an hour or whatever. I've never seen a strike with violence.

?: I've been on a lot of picket lines, and I've never seen violence except with the scabs. The police don't come and help the scabs with their picket line.

Betty Walmsely: The last strike at West Star, I don't know if it was West Star, BC Coal, what they called it then – there was violence there. It even came into the Pass. We had a fire or two and stuff like that.

Clarence Morrow: There were some garages burnt. They never really proved that it was that.

George MacDonald: Ya they did. It was some of the miners that were upset with the strike and how everything was going.

Q: Do you have any thoughts you'd like to share?

Helen Suca: Not really, because we were living in Bermus, which is about five miles east of Bellevue. The only time we'd have contact with our friends whose dads or parent's friends worked in the mine, was just come up once a week to do shopping in Bellevue. We'd hear their stories of what happened or how things were going. When they worked two days a week, people had to make do. One family had to keep chickens, even a pig in their back yard, just off the road by Maple Leaf. So things were pretty tough. Sometimes the provincial government gave this family who had many children some social support, gave them vouchers to buy groceries and clothes for the family. We were living in Bermus. Dad worked for CP, we lived right in Bermus. We didn't live in Bellevue or Blairmore at that time when the miners had a bad time.

Q: When you were in school, did you learn about the people in Canada?

Mary Suca: When we were in school in the elementary grades, we heard about a ? explorer came across Canada, the French, the English, the fellow that came through and ? and whatnot. We didn't hear anything about local history, not even Canadian history. It was all British history. All the kings and when they were in business, that was history.

Q: Can you talk about working conditions as a teacher?

Mary Suca: We weren't involved in any strikes or any major confrontations with anybody, except sometimes with the local board. I remember one case, they thought if a teacher married, a female, she should quit the job, she wasn't entitled to teach anymore. This was from the school board members. And I remember we fought that and he saw the light eventually because nobody went along with his idea.

Q: So what timeframe was this?



Mary Suca: Well we started teaching in...

Helen Suca: ... in the late '40s, but they changed it so married teachers could come back to teaching.

Mary Suca: They didn't have to quit just because they happened to marry. It didn't apply to the men, it was just the women. If the women married, they were out of a job, or supposed to be out of a job in the board members' view. Speaking of classroom size, I have a list here of where I taught and the number of pupils and the grades at the ? school in 1944. I had 25 pupils in a country school, grades 1 to 8. Then I taught out at Beaver Mine, 16 pupils there grades 1 to 9. That was my second school. Later on when we moved and came up here to Bellevue, I had, the Maple Leaf Community Hall had burnt down and hasn't been revitalized. That was our school. I had grades 2, 3 and 4, some years 42 pupils, some years 45, 39, then gradually got down lower. There's a year here when I only 22. But in '58-'59 I've got one grade only this time, and 30 pupils.

Helen Suca: I got the easy end. I had grades 1 and 2. The first year we came up here in '47 I had about ? with grade ?. So Mr. ? the superintendent ? too much for grade 1. So he took about half of my grade 2s and gave them to Mary, so she had grade 2, 3 and 4 to look after for a year or two. But everybody worked out. The parents of the children were very nice and supportive. If they heard the teacher had corrected somebody's behavior, then the parents got after them when they got home, because they heard it through the grapevine. But otherwise it was very wonderful teaching here in the Pass. We had good friends and good colleagues working with everybody around here.

Q: Were you required for after-school extracurricular activities?

Mary Suca: Not in those years. We took it on our own to form little races between Bellevue and Hillcrest schools. There was always a race for first place, and a cup. Bellevue, Hillcrest and Maple Leaf. So every June we performed this up at the Bellevue ball field. It used to be called Dairy Road, because once upon a time there used to be a dairy at the end of the street. It seemed that our pupils seemed to strive harder, so most of the time we got the cup. Bellevue or Hillcrest sometimes won, and ? didn't because of our children that wanted to try harder. The other ones were pretty good too.

Helen Suca: This is a picture of one of my big classes, that would be '47 or '48. Frank Capra might be in that picture. He became leader of the consolidated district municipality after a while. I taught him in grade 3 and 4.

[missing portion]

Betty Walmsely: It was the miner's hospital, and it was in the ...It was for, people didn't come to the hospital for anything like to have a child or tonsils out taken out sitting in a chair. If a miner was hurt in the mine,... I know that when I got married in 19??, we paid

\$2 to the doctor through the union that covered having my daughter in the hospital. \$2 a month is what it cost.

[bad sound]

?: In the hospital there we paid the doctor so much a month. We had socialized benefits long before... but that was just a local thing. If we had to go to Calgary, we'd have to pay a specialist. There was no maternity wards or anything...

...

Gary Taje: There was socialized medicine long before Tommy Douglas even... and it was done by the workers who formed these for hospitals, and devised a way for the municipality to collect taxes to pay for it.

Betty Walmsely: If you went to the doctor's office, and I remember going in the Blairmore hospital to the doctor's office, Dr. Stewart. You needed a salve or ointment or something, he had a big jar there and he'd take a tongue depressor and put it in a little tin with a lid on and he'd write on... If you didn't pay for that...

Q: I'd like to ask Remo before he leaves if he would talk about mine rescue, and also the fact of competitions, which I didn't realize there was such a thing. I think you said you won the national championships.

Remo Quarin: One year, yes we did. My ? it's a team of 6 or 7 men. There's a captain and vice captain, a first aid man. You go through a mock mine disaster every time you have a practice. We ? with a machine. What we were using in the days that we started was a ? breathing apparatus, it's a 2 hour breathing apparatus. It's charged with ? pounds of oxygen, but then it's ? a lower pressure. It regenerates itself. Your carbon dioxide is breathed back into the machine... It mixes the air with the oxygen, that's why we could get 2 hours out of it. ... You learned to do your work with those, and you became pretty good at it. You volunteered for it. You guys were on it as well.

Richard Marquardt: They always came around and asked everybody if we wanted to go in the ? or not. I never thought I'd use it, but we did once. ? apparatus, that's the ones that are hanging in the Bellevue mine.

Q: What was the year that you won the national championship?

Remo Quarin: '72 I think. That was in Edmonton. Across Canada. We were with Coleman Collieries at that time. I'm trying to remember who was on the team. ? was our instructor, Tony Fumigali was the captain, I was #2, 3 was Jean Oswell. Then there was a Jasper Jones. ? was outside the mine, he was our face man...

Q: So you only had to use the breathing apparatus once?

Remo Quarin: Ya, in Michel, the time of the ... That was pretty eerie. You could hear yourself breathing in that mine that day. It was pretty scary.

?: It was a requirement for all mines to have mine rescue, trained... The ? that Remo was talking about was a very difficult machine to wear and use. You had to regulate your breathing, to breath out forcefully and breath in very deeply, and you had to be very slow. If you started to breath fast, you would not get oxygen. I'm sure you've seen a lot of guys fall down because of the machine. They improved over the years, and my last years as a miner's captain, we wore machines that weighed 28 pounds. ... nice cool air, and you could wear them for up to 4 hours. Fortunately I've only had to wear one in the mine under actual conditions once, and that was to go to the backside of a fire and do some tests before they shut down the hydraulic mine in Michelle. The mine had been on fire for a number of years. The company put off sealing it for a very long time. It got very big and they wanted to finish extraction and get out. They were hoping to get away with it, but the last day we went in the mine we took some air samples and had them tested. We had 48% hydrogen in behind the fire, heat, carbon monoxide, a very dangerous condition. We were very lucky that mountain didn't blow the top. A short time before that there was 2 men killed, Martin Ruby from Hillcrest and Don Buzzan from Coleman here were killed in that mine. The investigation came down saying that it was a huge ? that created an air blast that pushed the men against the wall and killed them. An unofficial one from an ex mine manager suggested it was a small explosion. The mine blew up in the one sub, the men were burnt, and it wasn't properly investigated. It was the same mine about 2 years later that they finally shut down. That was the most dangerous ... in the mine.

...

The way I thought of it when I started working the first day, you walk into a different world. Basically that's what it is, it's a different world. You can call it a ? environment, but it's kinda neat.

... Yes, after an accident, after an explosion, you go in and take the test and go to recover the bodies, it's a tough job. Fortunately, in our lifetimes, we haven't had to do it a whole bunch here. The mine operators became pretty responsible in how they manage it, for the most part, so we were fortunate. Of course there was a price paid for our luck.

Q: Would the collieries have a number of mine rescue teams?

Remo Quarin: Yes. The mine I worked at, we had 5 mine rescue teams underground, and then the surface teams as well.

Q: You went in for 2 hours, the length of time of your packs, or shorter time?

Remo Quarin: You never went in for 2 hours, it was always shorter. You made sure you had 20 minutes of air when you got out.

[END]